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Contents

The West as Nineveh: How Does Nahum's Message of Judgment Apply Today?

Julie Woods

Introducing the Athenians to God: Paul's Failed Apologetic in Acts 17?

Bruce M. Winter

The Lost Message of the Lost Message of Jesus

Stephen E. Witmer

Review Article: The Story of Israel

Charles L. Echols

The Last Word: Killing the Messenger

Robbie F. Castleman

The West as Nineveh: How Does Nahum's Message of Judgement Apply to Today?

Julie Woods, who is doing her PhD in Durham, is fascinated with the so-called 'hard' passages of the Bible, particularly the oracles of judgement, and how we handle them as Christian Scripture today. Nahum 'won her sympathy vote ... because the church seems to ignore him'.

Introduction

'All Scripture is inspired by God – but maybe with the exception of Nahum, we think'.¹ Along with Obadiah and Haggai, it has no place in the three-year lectionary and is rarely preached. The book of Nahum is brutal and bloody, callous and cruel and 'we often wish Nahum were not in the canon'² for God is the one who incites and executes terrible judgement upon Assyria. These punishments are 'not softened by constantly remembering how mean the Assyrians were',³ yet softening is the approach taken by many who do write or preach on Nahum.

Along with espousing the wickedness of Assyria, many commentators are at pains to point out that the oracle is 'full of comfort'⁴ for Judah, that Nahum must be read alongside the more forgiving book of Jonah, balanced with the rest of the Book of the Twelve,⁵ and taken in context with the rest of Scripture. 'If Nahum's words seem harsh, then it is because he must use appropriate literary convention to express the seriousness of

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- 1 Achtemeier, E. *Preaching from the Old Testament* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 127.
 - 2 Achtemeier, E. *Interpretation: Nahum – Malachi* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), 5.
 - 3 O'Brien, J. Myers *Nahum* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 13.
 - 4 Lehrman, S.M. 'Nahum' in Cohen A. (ed.) *The Twelve Prophets* (London: The Soncino Press, 1948), 194, Baker, D.W. *Tyndale OT Commentaries: Nahum, Habbakkuk and Zephaniah* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 21.
 - 5 Emerson, G. *Nahum to Malachi* (Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 1998), 14.

the situation'.⁶ Only when the caveats are in place and Nahum has been satisfactorily muzzled is he allowed to mutter in muffled tones his bold, crude prophecy.

The book's most redeeming feature is that it is regarded by many as the 'top most rung of sublime literature'⁷ and with the discovery in the late nineteenth century of the incomplete and broken acrostic hymn found in the first chapter,⁸ much ink has been spilt on Nahum's literary qualities. It has sometimes been treated as 'a bad book written well'.⁹ As this paper will reveal, a number of commentators of Nahum do give it the fair hearing any book within the canon of Scriptures deserves.

The first part of this article will examine the theological context of the relationship between Israel and the nations within the broader framework of the Hebrew Bible. The hypothesis is that the Hebrew Bible is as missiologically focused as the NT. Although this is not an exegetical work on the book of Nahum, this first section will primarily discuss the relevant exegetical issues.

The second section of the essay will discuss God's judgement of Nineveh (the capital city of Assyria) and seek to answer why Assyria was judged. This will be achieved by critically assessing the sins of Assyria (from both Scriptural and non-canonical sources) which culminated in God's outpouring of his wrath and searching for underlying universal moral principles.

Having analysed the framework of Israel and the nations in relation to God's overall plan for both, the third section will concentrate on the hermeneutical application of Nahum to the contemporary Western world. 'Nahum's message has become the prototype of the destruction of all evil – from that of Nineveh to Nazi Germany to the final end of all evil like that of Babylon in Revelation 18.'¹⁰ To apply the message in Nahum to inhumane oppressors such as Hitler and Stalin may give more validity to the LORD's violent judgements, but is it sound hermeneutics to 'substitute

⁶ Meier quoted in Barker, K.L. and Bailey, W. *The New American Commentary: Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 143.

⁷ Lehrman, S.M. 'Nahum' in Cohen A. (ed.) *The Twelve Prophets* (London: The Soncino Press, 1948), 192.

⁸ Kohlenberger, J.R. (III) *Everyman's Bible Commentary: Jonah and Nahum* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 81.

⁹ O'Brien *Nahum* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 104.

¹⁰ Barker, K.L. and Bailey, W. *The New American Commentary: Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 137.

“Assyria” with the oppressor of your choice’?¹¹ This section will begin with a summary of the hermeneutical principles that I am using and conclude with a survey of the various missiological responses to Nahum.

Finally, I will draw together the results and give my concluding comments.

The terms ‘Hebrew Bible’ and ‘Old Testament’ (OT) will be used interchangeably. Since I do not refer to the northern kingdom of Israel, the term ‘Israel’ is used to refer to the whole of Israel, both northern and southern kingdoms. The term ‘Judah’, naturally, designates the southern kingdom.

Nahum in its Hermeneutical and Missiological Context

Book of Nahum

There is remarkably little dispute over the authorship, date and state of the text of Nahum (which, according to Jewish tradition, follows Jonah in the canon¹²). The authorship remains unchallenged, in part, because not much is known about the man Nahum, or about Elkosh, the district from where he came. Almost all commentators agree that Nahum was written somewhere between 663 BCE when Thebes fell, (since the fall of Thebes is referred to in Nahum 3:10), and 612 BCE when Nineveh fell. Some maintain that it was written soon after the fall of Nineveh. Even so, this only extends the date from 612 to 608 BCE.¹³ Since Nahum does not mention the sins of Judah, some have speculated that it was written at the beginning of Josiah’s reforms in 621 BCE.¹⁴

Relatively recent discoveries of scrolls of Nahum have shown no significant textual variations. These works include the Peshier of Nahum (4QpNah) found in Qumran, the Hebrew Scroll of the Minor Prophets from *Wâdi Murabbâ ât* (Mur 88) and the Greek fragments of the Minor Prophets from *Nahal Hever* (8 Hev XIIgr).¹⁵

Although ‘an oracle concerning Nineveh’ (Nah. 1:1), the book has

¹¹ O’Brien *Nahum* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 116.

¹² Lehrman, S.M. ‘Nahum’ in Cohen A. (ed.) *The Twelve Prophets* (London: The Soncino Press, 1948), 192.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Cathcart, K.J. ‘Nahum’, *Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. 4 K–N (London: Doubleday, 1992), 1000.

always been part of the Jewish Scriptures. This raises the question, was Nahum intended for Judah or Nineveh? Nahum (meaning 'comfort') was never part of the oral tradition but, unusually, was delivered as a book (Nah. 1:1). Commentators have concluded, therefore, that the knowledge that God would avenge Judah and bring an end to her suffering under Assyria was probably intended to comfort Judah.¹⁶

Most commentators subscribe to a single authorship of the oracle and ascribe to the author a distinct literary style. This style includes use of metaphors (e.g. 2:11ff., 3:4ff.; 3:11, 12, 13; 2:15ff.), an ambiguous use of 'you' (after 1:1 Nineveh is not mentioned by name again in the Hebrew until 2:9) and mixed use of gender. In the 1900s attempts were made to show that Nahum was composed for various festivals but these were largely rejected. The theory receiving most interest was that of J. Watts (1975) who said that it was part of a 'Day of the LORD' liturgical expression.¹⁷

The book begins benignly and although the oracle opens with the words, 'The LORD is a jealous and avenging God ... and is filled with wrath' (Nah. 1:2), it is impersonal and general until 1:8. Myers O'Brien refers to this section as a hymn to the Divine Warrior.¹⁸ The rest of chapter one continues on the theme of judgement, juxtaposed with salvation for Judah. Chapter two is a striking and detailed vision of Nineveh's destruction, which is followed by taunts, insults and woe oracles that continue into chapter three. The prophecy ends with the assertion that everyone who hears of Nineveh's fall will clap their hands, 'for who has not felt your endless cruelty?' (Nah. 3:19). Jonah is the only other book of the Bible to end with a rhetorical question.¹⁹

The Book of the Twelve and the Day of the LORD

House and others are keen to take the Book of the Twelve as a single unit, noting that it has been seen as such for a long time.²⁰ (Indeed this was the original view and the first references to the minor prophets is of a single

¹⁶ O'Brien *Nahum* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 116.

¹⁷ Christensen, D.L. 'Nahum, Book of', in Hayes, J.H. (ed.) *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation K-Z* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 200.

¹⁸ O'Brien *Nahum* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 60.

¹⁹ Longman, T. (III) 'Nahum' in McComiskey, T.E. (ed.), *An Exegetical and Expository Commentary: The Minor Prophets Vol. II* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 829.

²⁰ House, P.R. *The Unity of the Twelve* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 9.

book of twelve.²¹) Although it is 'nonsense to speak of twelve books displaying unity in any comprehensive sense',²² they assert that to read one of the Twelve out of context is to misunderstand it.²³

The idea of reading several books as a cohesive whole began with the Pentateuch, followed by the Psalter and then the Book of the Twelve.²⁴

Ball considers Nahum to be the missing oracle in Isaiah that speaks of the final demise of Assyria, and Christensen's work shows the 'densely intertextual character' of Nahum with Isaiah.²⁵ O'Brien shows textual links to Jeremiah²⁶ whilst others deem Nahum and Habakkuk to be two halves of the same oracle.²⁷ The more usual stance, however, is that Nahum belongs firmly to the Book of the Twelve.

The common theme running through the Book of the Twelve is that of the Day of YHWH and its eschatological implication.²⁸ The Day of YHWH is only referred to implicitly in Nahum so that, even in works dedicated to expounding the Book of the Twelve, Nahum is once again relegated to receiving comparatively little mention.²⁹ 'Its role and position in the Twelve ... has been overlooked.'³⁰

For this reason, although it is important to remember that Nahum is part of a larger work, I prefer to deal with Nahum separately. I will return later, to the theme of the Day of YHWH. Similarly, the idea of God as a Divine Warrior runs throughout Scripture, particularly in the prophets

21 Rendtorff, R. 'Alas for the Day! The 'Day of the LORD' in the Book of the Twelve', in Linafelt, T. and Beal, T.K. (eds), *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 186.

22 House, P.R. *The Unity of the Twelve* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 24.

23 Harverson, J.S. *Exploring the Missiological Coherence of the Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets: A Thematic Approach* (Unpublished ANCC MA: 2001), 1.

24 Rendtorff, R. 'Alas for the Day! The 'Day of the LORD' in the Book of the Twelve', in Linafelt, T. and Beal, T.K. (eds), *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 186.

25 Ball, E. "'When the Towers Fall": Interpreting Nahum as Christian Scripture', *JSOTS* 300, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 223–224.

26 O'Brien *Nahum* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 131.

27 Cathcart, K.J. 'Nahum', *Anchor Bible Dictionary Vol. 4 K–N* (London: Doubleday, 1992), 1046.

28 Rendtorff, R. 'Alas for the Day! The 'Day of the LORD' in the Book of the Twelve', in Linafelt, T. and Beal, T.K. (eds), *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 186.

29 For instance, Rendtorff, R. 'Alas for the Day! The 'Day of the LORD' in the Book of the Twelve', in Linafelt, 1998.

30 House, P.R. *The Unity of the Twelve* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 143.

(including The Book of the Twelve) and I will return to this idea in due course.

The Missiological Basis of the Hebrew Bible

Having briefly overviewed Nahum, it is imperative to set it in the framework of the rest of the Hebrew Bible. Bosch may agree with Rzepkowski's assertion that, 'The decisive difference between the Old and the New Testament is mission'³¹ (although he maintains that the OT is fundamental to understanding the new³²), but various OT scholars have refuted this. In the *missio Dei* understanding of mission, mission (an attribute of God) is a 'movement from God to the world',³³ rather than an activity conducted by humans. If one accepts the concept of *missio Dei* then one can agree with Wright and others that the whole framework of the OT is that of mission, particularly that of the covenant.

In the covenant God made with Abram, he promised that Abram would be a great nation, that God would personally bless him, that his name would be great and that he would be a blessing for all the people on earth (Gen. 12:3).³⁴ In Gen. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4 and 28:14 the promise that all nations would be blessed through Abram's seed was repeated.

From the start there was universality in God's purpose, for his vision included the whole earth. There was also particularity for he chose one man through whom a nation would spring and this nation, Israel, was to be his means to carry out his purpose.³⁵

Israel was to be a light to the nations (Is. 42:6 and 49:6) and although God did not send Israel out into the nations³⁶ her role was threefold. She was to be a unique testimony to God's revelation and redemption as his special people; she was to be ethically different and separate as a holy nation. She was also to be a kingdom of kings and priests.³⁷ The other nations were under a curse and Israel was to be a blessing to them,³⁸ in

31 Bosch, D.J. *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 17.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 390.

34 Kaiser, W.C. Davids, P.H., Bruce F.F., Brauch, M.T. 'Nahum', in *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 17.

35 Wright, Chris J. 'Old Testament Theology of Mission', in Moreau, A.S. (main ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 707.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid and Kaiser, W.C., Davids, P.H., Bruce F.F., Brauch, M.T. 'Nahum', in *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 22.

38 Brueggemann, W. 'The Nations as Yahweh's Partner', in *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 498.

what some have defined as 'centripetal' mission;³⁹ by attracting the nations to her. When God blessed Israel, the nations would look and fear him (Ps. 67:7), that is, put their trust in him.⁴⁰ Thus the election of Israel was not the rejection of the nations, but the means of their salvation.⁴¹

The Eschatological Vision

The idea of Israel being a light to the nations is one that runs right through the Bible, NT included, and it is a theme with an eschatological perspective.⁴² The Servant of the LORD in Isaiah 40–55 was to bring both light and salvation to the nations and glory and restoration to Israel. He was to be a combination of justice, gentleness and liberation (Is. 42:1–9), but shrouded in rejection and apparent failure (Is. 49:4; 50:6–8).⁴³ In time the Servant of the LORD (and fulfilment of the seed of Abraham⁴⁴) was made manifest in Christ, who was the light to the nations (Matt. 4:15–16 quoting Is. 9:1–2)⁴⁵ until the day when they would walk by the light of the Lamb in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:24–26).⁴⁶ Brueggemann notes that the ultimate promise to the nations is the end of hostility and complete shared shalom in him;⁴⁷ an eschatological hope found in Psalms 47, 87 and 96 and in other prophetic passages.⁴⁸

Since Christ was the fulfilment of the seed of Abraham and, himself, became a light to the nations, most commentators conclude that the relationship between Israel and the nations does not exist in the way that

³⁹ Kaiser, W.C., Davids, P.H., Bruce F.F., Brauch, M.T. 'Nahum', in *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 335.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 33

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 22

⁴² Wright, Chris J. 'Old Testament Theology of Mission', in Moreau, A.S. (main ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 708.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 709.

⁴⁴ Kaiser, W.C., Davids, P.H., Bruce F.F., Brauch, M.T. 'Nahum', in *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 18.

⁴⁵ Filbeck, D. *Yes, God of the Gentiles, Too* (Wheaton College: Billy Graham Center, 1994), 151.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁴⁷ Brueggemann, W. 'The Nations as Yahweh's Partner', in *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 521.

⁴⁸ Amos 9:12, Isaiah 19:23–25; 49:6; 56:1–8; 60:1–3; 66:19–21 and Zechariah 2:1
Wright, Chris J. 'Truth with a Mission: Towards a Missiological Hermeneutic of the Bible', *Missiologic*, No. 2, (November 2001), 6.

it did in the OT (some believe that the church has replaced Israel).⁴⁹ The nations, therefore, are no longer used to chastise Israel. It is outside the remit of this essay to explore this further, suffice to say, I have accepted this assertion.

The Interdependency of Israel, the Nations and Judgement

From what has been discussed so far one could be mistaken in concluding that the nations have a passive role in God's plan.⁵⁰ Some have argued for a passive role and, whilst the nations were not bound to YHWH in a covenantal way, 'against their will, in spite of themselves, they [were] used by God to accomplish God's purposes'.⁵¹ Frequently, they were used as tools to chastise a recalcitrant Israel as Judges and the prophets declare.⁵² When Israel's light grew dim, those who were supposed to be beneficiaries of that light were used by God to discipline Israel to make that light shine more brightly.⁵³ Assyria was one such tool that was used (Is. 10:5, 15; Nah. 1:12) and although Hedlund regards them as 'his unknowing (unbelieving) instruments',⁵⁴ the nations were not helpless pawns in God's game of chess. As Brueggemann notes, God punished them when 'in arrogant boasting and haughty pride' they went beyond the remit set by God and tried to destroy Israel.⁵⁵ It was never God's plan that Israel be annihilated and he held the nations accountable for not acknowledging that his anger has limits.⁵⁶ Isaiah 36–37 seems to imply that Assyria acted on her own accord and in opposition to God in oppressing Judah.⁵⁷

During her time of discipline, the fact that Israel had been defiled in the eyes of the nations was supposed to shame her into returning to her God (Ezek. 22:15–16). The nations, therefore, had a dual purpose: they were the rod of God's wrath and the shaming element. It pained YHWH to discipline his people because the lack of prosperity in Israel and her

⁴⁹ See Brueggemann, W. 'The Nations as Yahweh's Partner', in *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 449.

⁵⁰ Brueggemann, W. 'The Nations as Yahweh's Partner', in *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 500.

⁵¹ Hedlund, R.E. *God and the Nations* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 64.

⁵² For instance. Judg. 2:13–14; 3:8, 12–13; 4:2; 6:1; 10:7; 13:1, Is. 10:5–6; Jer. 5:15, 17 Hedlund, R.E. *God and the Nations* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 65.

⁵³ Hedlund, R.E. *God and the Nations* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 66.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁵ Brueggemann, W. 'The Nations as Yahweh's Partner', in *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 507.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 507–508.

dispersion pointed to an inept and inadequate God. Although God was 'prepared to see his name profaned in the sight of the nations in order to purify Israel for himself',⁵⁸ in Ezekiel 36:20ff it was concern for his holy name that led him to gather Judah back from exile into her own land. This act demonstrated to both Judah and the nations that YHWH is the covenant God of Israel, a fact that should have caused all to turn and fear him.

Brueggemann purports that God's dealings with the nations were not always in relation to Israel but as a way of exercising his sovereignty and kingship in the world.⁵⁹ He suggests that the oracles against the nations, of which Nahum is one, normally concerned themselves with this type of direct disciplining of the nations.⁶⁰ These oracles are addressed to the superpowers and whilst God is not opposed to superpowers, he punishes those who 'disregard the mandate of heaven'⁶¹ by being brutal and oppressive.⁶²

On the one hand, from Isaiah 10, it appears that Assyria has been used to chasten Israel but on the other hand, according to Brueggemann, it seems in Nahum as if Assyria is being chastised purely on the grounds of political brutality and oppression. Perhaps the two are not mutually exclusive and at this point it is worth considering the sins of Assyria.

Judgement of Assyria's Sin

Assyria's Sin

Nahum lists some of Nineveh's sins: plotting against God (1:9, 11); idolatry (1:14); vile behaviour (1:14); shedding blood, lying and plundering (3:1); enslaving nations (3:4); presumption (3:8); and cruelty (3:19).⁶³ Imperial greed, which displayed itself in theft and other sins, can also be added to

⁵⁸ Williams, D.A. *Then They will Know That I am the LORD: The Missiological Significance of Ezekiel's Concern for the Nations as Evident in the Use of the Recognition Formula* (Unpublished ANCC MA: 1998), 55-56.

⁵⁹ Brueggemann, W. 'The Nations as Yahweh's Partner', in *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 502.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 502-509.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 513.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 509.

⁶³ House, P.R. *The Unity of the Twelve* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 214.

the list.⁶⁴ Assyria lured weaker nations (3:4) to their ruin; to be carried as prey into the lion's den (2:12).⁶⁵ Calvin suggests Nineveh's greatest sin was that she oppressed God's people and that by doing so she outraged God himself.⁶⁶

Nahum, itself is not as explicit as the boasts of Assyria herself, as extant Assyrian reliefs and written records demonstrate. These reliefs show bodies impaled on sticks, tongues being cut out, people being led by lip rings, heads being carried and piled up, dismembered bodies with scattered limbs and severed heads serving as ornamental decoration on walls and structures and totem poles made of human heads.⁶⁷ As gruesome as it may seem to Western readers of the 21st century, it was the custom for kings and political powers to wildly exaggerate their claims of success in order to increase their fame⁶⁸ and, according to von Soden, 'to induce their enemies to yield the more readily.'⁶⁹

It is very easy to demonise the enemy, especially when the enemy has provided the written and pictorial record to do so and particularly when doing so makes the bitter pill of God's bloody vengeance in Nahum slightly easier to swallow. In attempting to demonstrate that God's punishment fits the crime, there has, perhaps, been a tendency to rely too heavily on these exaggerated records. 'Shall those whose eyes you have gouged out shed tears at your death? Shall those whose ears and nose you have cut off lament now? Shall the tongues you have chopped off recite your praises?'⁷⁰ Compare this with Nahum 3:19.

The Reason for Nineveh's Judgement

With the debate over the literal interpretation of the Assyrian boasts, it seems sensible (for this paper at least) to restrict the discussion of her sins

⁶⁴ Kaiser, W.C., Davids, P.H., Bruce F.F., Brauch, M.T. 'Nahum', in *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 339.

⁶⁵ Lehrman, S.M. 'Nahum' in Cohen A. (ed.) *The Twelve Prophets* (London: The Soncino Press, 1948), 203.

⁶⁶ Calvin, J. *Jonah, Micah and Nahum* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 414.

⁶⁷ Bleibtreu, E. 'Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death', *Biblical Archaeology Review* Vol. XVII No 1, (Jan./Feb. 1991), 52-64.

⁶⁸ Magee ('Historical Dating' of 'Ask_Why' website) and Burns (quoted in 'The Assyrian Empire' website).

⁶⁹ Magee ('To Tiglath-pileser I' section of 'Ask_Why' website).

⁷⁰ Barker, K.L. and Bailey, W. *The New American Commentary: Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 242.

to those itemised in Nahum. It is, however, possible to say with confidence that Assyria oppressed her enemies and the Assyrian records confirm the severity of this oppression. Therefore, it is possible that Nahum's message of judgement was directed at Nineveh, irrespective of her treatment of Judah, because, in Brueggemann's terms, 'emotive aversion to brutality is located in the heart of [YHWH]'.⁷¹

However, Judah's salvation is too closely linked to Assyria's downfall for the message of judgement to be completely independent of their relationship. There are four judgement oracles in Nahum (1:12–15; 2:1–13; 3:1–7, 8–13), each one bringing salvation to Judah⁷² and sometimes judgement and salvation are very closely dovetailed, e.g.

- Judgement (1:9–11)
- Salvation (1:12–13)
- Judgement (1:14)
- Salvation (1:15)
- Judgement (2:1)
- Salvation (2:2)⁷³

The jealous covenantal God is pledged to Israel and must execute the terms of the covenant in righteousness.⁷⁴ Jealousy and anger are closely linked in the Hebrew Bible as expressions of God's holiness⁷⁵ and, indeed, an assertion of God's jealousy is how the book of Nahum starts. Eichrodt agrees with Hänel's premise that the Eiferheiligkeit (literally 'jealousy–holiness') is 'the basic element in the whole OT idea of God.'⁷⁶ Pawson defines jealousy as wanting something that is rightfully yours, as opposed to envy, which is wanting something that is not yours.⁷⁷

71 Brueggemann, W. 'The Nations as Yahweh's Partner', in *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 509.

72 Achtemeier, E. *Interpretation: Nahum – Malachi* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), 6–7.

73 Longman, T. (III) 'Nahum' in McComiskey, T.E. (ed.), *An Exegetical and Expository Commentary: The Minor Prophets Vol. II* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 769.

74 Brinsmead, R.D. 'The Doctrine of Judgment in the Old and New Testaments', *Verdict* Vol. 4 No. 1, (January 1981), (California: Verdict Publications, 1981), 6–8.

75 Kaiser, W.C., Davids, P.H., Bruce F.F., Brauch, M.T. 'Nahum', in *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 338.

76 Eichrodt, W. *Theology of the Old Testament: Vol. I* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1961), 210 [note 1].

77 Pawson, D. *Unlocking the Bible: Old Testament 4: Decline and Fall of an Empire* (London: Marshall Pickering, 2000) Part VI, 'Nahum', 108.

Maier decides that Nineveh is 'doubly doomed' because YHWH twice declares, 'I am against you' (Nah. 2:13 and 3:5-7). I would propose that Nineveh is doubly doomed because she has been judged according to her atrocities aside of her relationship with Judah (the genre of 'oracle against the nations' adding textual support to this conclusion⁷⁸) but also because she has insulted Judah's jealous covenantal God by not limiting her abuse of power. Whether singularly or doubly doomed, it is worth remembering that prophetic oracles of judgement were avoidable if the people repented (cf. Jonah); in Nahum Nineveh did not.⁷⁹

It is also worth remembering, as Brueggemann does, that great kingdoms rise and fall with no other explanation than divine governance.⁸⁰

Underlying Principle of Social Justice

The ethic of doing good deeds and performing acts of social justice stems from the Hebrew Bible itself. Jeremiah 22:16 reads "'He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?" declares the LORD.' The foreigner, the orphan and the widow were well provided for under Israelite covenant law and to do judgement (shaphat) was not only to decide between right and wrong but also to choose to do right; 'in Hebrew, "to judge" and "to help" are parallel ideas'.⁸¹ When God judges one party, it is often for the deliverance of another.

Osborne warns against turning the prophets into social reformers, for whilst they condemned social injustices, it was only as a part of their overall message of God.⁸² Although Osborne may be correct in his assertion that the prophets were not social workers, many authors would assert that justice, including social justice is 'fundamental to the holiness of God'.⁸³ Indeed, it is the foundational basis of liberation theology, but many authors, not necessarily calling themselves liberation theologians quote many different verses and passages in support of the argument that social justice is a key element in the Bible (e.g. Is. 1:13-17,⁸⁴ 1 John

⁷⁸ Brueggemann, W. 'The Nations as Yahweh's Partner', in *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 502.

⁷⁹ Klein, G.L. (ed.) *Reclaiming the Prophetic Mantle: Preaching the Old Testament Faithfully* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 99.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 519.

⁸¹ Quoted in Morris, L. *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment* (London: Tyndale Press, 1960), 18

⁸² Osborne, G.R. *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 207.

⁸³ Haughen, G.A. *Good News About Injustice* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 70.

⁸⁴ Wright, Chris J. *Living as the People of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 37.

3:17–18,⁸⁵ Deut. 23:7,⁸⁶ Prov. 21:13,⁸⁷ Ps. 35:10⁸⁸). If one accepts as normative the plethora of verses decrying social injustice, then Nineveh was not judged on an *ad hoc* basis but according to an underlying universal principle that God is concerned with social justice.

Having considered why Assyria is being punished, it is now prudent to discover how she is punished.

The Divine Warrior and the Day of the LORD

As was stated earlier, the Book of the Twelve appears concerned specifically with the Day of the LORD and the Divine Warrior. Although the Day of YHWH is only implicit in Nahum, the language is similar to those passages that speak of it explicitly.⁸⁹ R.H. Charles defined the Day of YHWH as 'essentially the day on which [YHWH] manifests Himself in victory over his foes.'⁹⁰

The Divine Warrior was also linked closely with the eschatological Day of YHWH and the OT prophets looked forward to this day with eager expectation when a mighty deliverer would deliver Israel from her enemies (Zech. 14).⁹¹

This Divine Warrior would not fight with spears and swords but by the might of his word⁹² (cf. Nah. 1:14). He was often portrayed as riding on clouds (see Nah. 1:3b) – possibly to surpass Baal who was believed to be a cloud rider⁹³ – whose coming would tear nature apart (see Nah. 1:4–6).⁹⁴ In the majority of cases, the Divine Warrior (who did not need human agents) fought against Israel's enemies,⁹⁵ for he was first and foremost the

⁸⁵ Kreider, C. *The Rich and the Poor* (Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1987), 10.

⁸⁶ Taylor, J.B. *Preaching on God's Justice* (London: Mowbray, 1994), 30.

⁸⁷ B of, L. and Elizondo, V. *Option for the Poor: Challenge to the Rich Countries* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd., 1986), 29.

⁸⁸ Haughen, G.A. *Good News About Injustice* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 154.

⁸⁹ See Appendix B.

⁹⁰ Cathcart, K.J. 'Nahum', *Anchor Bible Dictionary Vol. 4 K–N* (London: Doubleday, 1992), 1000.

⁹¹ Longman, T. (III) 'Nahum' in McComiskey, T.E. (ed.), *An Exegetical and Expository Commentary: The Minor Prophets Vol. II* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 777.

⁹² De Ridder, R.R. *Disciplining the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), 56.

⁹³ Longman, T. (III) 'Nahum' in McComiskey, T.E. (ed.), *An Exegetical and Expository Commentary: The Minor Prophets Vol. II* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 789.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 790.

⁹⁵ Lind, M.C. *Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1980), 23.

Sovereign LORD who avenged his covenant people.⁹⁶

Longman asserts that although the Divine Warrior image is not the key theme in the Bible, it is, nevertheless, a theme that runs through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.⁹⁷ In the NT, Jesus Christ, the Divine Warrior, becomes the eschatological Judge of the world who presides over the final judgement (Jude 14).⁹⁸

Given the clear themes of the Day of the LORD and the Divine Warrior in Nahum, some have questioned whether the judgement referred to in Nahum (especially considering its severity) takes place on earth or (metaphorically or literally) refers to the final judgement.⁹⁹ Nahum may well refer to the final judgement, given the context of the Day of YHWH, but most probably primarily it refers to the fall of Nineveh in 612 BCE. Either interpretation acknowledges that God is sovereign over history and the nations are his tools.

Assyria may have acted out of selfish ambition and greed in oppressing the surrounding vassal states but God used her to afflict Judah. In Nahum, the rule of this great superpower reached an end, for God used the Medes to overthrow her.¹⁰⁰

Having considered the exegetical issues of Nineveh and her judgement from God, it is now time to turn to the hermeneutical application.

How Does Nahum Apply to Today?

Hermeneutical Principles

In the seventh century, Julian of Toledo interpreted the destruction of Nineveh allegorically, mystically and morally.¹⁰¹ It would be wise, therefore,

⁹⁶ Chisholm, R.B., Jr. *Interpreting the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 179–81.

⁹⁷ Longman, T. (III) 'The Divine Warrior: The New Testament Use of an Old Testament Motif', *The Westminster Theological Journal*, Fall 1982 (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary), 305.

⁹⁸ Brinsmead, R.D. 'The Doctrine of Judgment in the Old and New Testaments', *Verdict* Vol. 4 No. 1, (January 1981) (California: Verdict Publications, 1981), 11ff.

⁹⁹ Wright, Carol 'The Theme of Judgment: A Comparative Study in Isaiah and the Quran', *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, Vol. 2 No. 4, (October 1985), 343.

¹⁰⁰ Longman, T. (III) 'Nahum' in McComiskey, T.E. (ed.), *An Exegetical and Expository Commentary: The Minor Prophets Vol. II* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 768.

¹⁰¹ Ball, E. "'When the Towers Fall": Interpreting Nahum as Christian Scripture', *JSOTS* 300, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 212.

if at this stage the hermeneutical boundaries that I am using were set out.

Kaiser warns against four ways of interpreting the Bible,¹⁰² but all these can be summarised into one: do not apply the passage within a modern context without having first established a firm foundation in the form of strong exegesis.

Osborne's guide to interpretation is as follows:

- Determine the surface message
- Determine the deep structure principle behind message
- Note the original situation
- Discover the parallel situation in the modern context
- Decide whether to contextualise at the general or specific level.¹⁰³

The first two sections have covered the first three steps and it is now time to embark upon the fourth and fifth. As difficult as it might be to know how free one is to draw parallels between the text and the contemporary context 'the fact that we must do so is inescapable'.¹⁰⁴

It has been demonstrated that the 'missional basis of the Bible'¹⁰⁵ originates in the OT and that, as part of this focus, one of the underlying principles is that of maintaining justice. Having considered Nineveh's sins and ascertained that she was judged, in part, because she acted in opposition to this underlying principle, it is now time to turn to consider the West as Nineveh. The missiological implications and possible appropriate responses that result from this contemplation will then be discussed.

The West as Bloodthirsty Nineveh

To boast of bloodthirsty exploits (real or imagined) is not the culture of the Western world, which in contrast, prefers to perceive herself in benevolent terms. Atrocities such as torture hit the headlines precisely because they do offend the Westerner. The scandal of the Iraqi war photographs¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Kaiser in Osborne, G.R. *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 217.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 336.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 318.

¹⁰⁵ Wright, Chris J. 'Truth with a Mission: Towards a Missiological Hermeneutic of the Bible', *Missiologic*, No. 2, (November 2001), 1.

¹⁰⁶ BBC News and Washington Post websites

demonstrates the ambiguity of the West. On one hand, the photographs show tortures exacted by the hand of the Western military forces on a powerless people, but on the other hand, the public outrage that followed the publication of the photographs (by the Western media) shows that such brutal behaviour is an anathema to Western culture. Perhaps the disparity reflects the attitudes and behaviour of the 'common man' in opposition to 'the rulers' or the 'military power'.

The Bible does not give us a socio-political breakdown of Nineveh, but it is generally considered that the whole of Nahum's message is addressed to the king of Assyria (3:18). O'Brien notes that it is only in the preceding verse that real people in Assyria are named; guards, merchants and scribes, and with the mention of the king, 'he' (1:2; 1:13; 1:14; 2:12–14) is finally identified.¹⁰⁷ O'Brien goes further in asserting that, at this point (3:18), Nineveh becomes the victim and no longer the guilty party for she is unprotected by her king.¹⁰⁸ Whilst this requires a paradigm shift that may or may not be justified, O'Brien draws attention to an obvious element; not all the individuals in Assyria would have been oppressors and some would have been oppressed. Yet Nineveh was judged.

The fact that Nahum does not talk to an individual till the end of the book, but to a nation, may well indicate that God is concerned with nations, not individuals. Atrocities committed in the name of a nation appear to bring judgement on the whole nation. This may be concerning for those in any nation, but perhaps more so for those in nations who have been, or are deemed to be, superpowers or colonial powers; nations of which the West is comprised.

The West as Oppressive Nineveh

Abuse of power and injustice does not always take the form of brutal murders and tortures.

'The wealthiest fifth of nations dispose of 84.7 per cent of the world's combined GNP; its citizens account for 84.2 per cent of world trade and possess 85.5 per cent of savings in domestic accounts.'¹⁰⁹ In the 1960s there was general optimism that poverty could be eliminated with the correct agricultural programmes, but since 1960 the gap between the richest and the poorest fifth of nations has more than doubled.¹¹⁰ The

¹⁰⁷ O'Brien *Nahum* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 71.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ 'From Third World to One World' on 'World Socialism' website.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

United Nations' Development Programme (UNDP) reports (1996) that over the past three decades, only fifteen countries enjoyed high growth whilst 89 countries are worse off than they were ten or more years ago. In 70 developing countries, the present income levels are less than they were in the 1960s and 70s.¹¹¹

'If we were to examine honestly what has led to this state of affairs, we would have to conclude that it can be summed up in two words – power and greed'¹¹² (see Eccl. 4:1).

Developing countries drown in debt to the richer nations whilst those richer countries exploit them further. One well-known example of this is the coffee farmers around the world who are forced into a cycle of poverty and debt because they are paid less than the costs of production.¹¹³ Many of the less developed countries are small and are thus at a great disadvantage when dealing with the Western superpowers.¹¹⁴

Bof and Elizondo detail the means by which a country becomes rich; through colonial empires or oppressive control of both land and people, through slave labour and harsh working conditions.¹¹⁵ They argue that the West became rich because of her oppressive, unethical practices and that the foundation of her wealth is that of greed and abuse of power. Whether or not one agrees with this analysis, one cannot dismiss the irony easily behind Britain's boasting of the 1903 Assyrian archaeological finds and Britain seeing it as good for her nationalism to have these finds in her museums.¹¹⁶

The West as Nineveh in Opposition to God's People

Nineveh persecuted the people of God. Most commentators speak of the people of God in the NT and later as 'the church' so the obvious parallel question is to ask whether the West persecutes the people of God, that is, the church. The issue of the treatment of the Jewish people is another question.

Although, historically, committed Christians have been killed by the

¹¹¹ Khor, M. 'Facing up to Power and Greed – The Challenge of the Next Century', *Echoes: Justice, Peace and Creation News* 14, 1998, 32.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ 'Coffee and Fair Trade' at Fair Trade Federation website

¹¹⁴ Kreider, C. *The Rich and the Poor* (Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1987), 121.

¹¹⁵ B of, L. and Elizondo, V. *Option for the Poor: Challenge to the Rich Countries* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd., 1986), 4–7.

¹¹⁶ O'Brien *Nahum* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 16.

West, in colonial times and more recently, the West has been rather more tolerant of Christians than have many other nations.¹¹⁷ Instead (and tragically), many of her sins have been committed under the banner of Christianity.

The West as Nineveh: Conclusions

Having considered the West in various ways it is possible to say that the West and Nineveh have similarities. The West may not persecute the Church and she may not be as intentionally cruel as Nineveh but her oppressive cruelty has reached more people than Nineveh's ever did.

I would propose that instead of considering whether a nation parallels Nineveh, it would be more helpful to look at the underlying reasons of why Nineveh was judged and then consider whether the nation in question is guilty of those same sins. Since injustice is at the root of Nineveh's evil and underlies Western economic and political practices, I conclude that the West can consider itself under God's judgement.

This being so, Christian Westerners need to respond to Nahum's message of judgement and in the following sub-sections I will consider various appropriate responses (particularly missiological ones); responses gleaned largely from commentators on Nahum.

The Call to Repentance

Some commentators write that once the West has been seen to be under God's judgement then 'Nahum becomes more than anything else a great call to repentance.'¹¹⁸ Repenting on behalf of nations has canonical support, for many of the prophets did just that. It can be argued, therefore, that Western Christians should be crying out to God for repentance on behalf of their nations, even if they personally have not been guilty of oppression. However, very few individuals in the West are completely exempt from the sins of her nation. An action as simple as buying a non-Fair Trade jar of coffee may contribute in a small way to oppression, for indigenous workers on coffee plantations are often kept in abject poverty by the underpayment of coffee manufacturers who are more concerned with keeping coffee prices low for their Western

¹¹⁷ Johnstone, P. and Mandryk, J. (eds) *Operation World: 21st Century Edition* (Cumbria: Paternoster Lifestyle, 2001), 13.

¹¹⁸ Barker, K.L. and Bailey, W. *The New American Commentary: Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 243.

consumers. Therefore, personal repentance is needed along with practical efforts to help redress the balance of equality between the West and other nations.

The Call to Social Action

A common response of commentators to Nahum is to call Christians to show solidarity with the oppressed. This demands more than an empathetic or sympathetic emotional response. It requires people to speak out actively and to act on behalf of the oppressed.¹¹⁹

'The oppressor knows that the primary reason we do nothing is because we have lost any hope of making a difference.'¹²⁰ When one is part of the powerful oppressor then it could be argued, one should shout all the louder. The ways in which Christians can make tangible differences is a complex issue. It is not one that can be addressed here but Kreider and others give examples of what one can do beyond buying the occasional jar of Fair Trade coffee.

The Call to Preach

When God judges one nation, he often delivers another and this is the two-fold message that some propose should be preached.¹²¹ It is, in fact, the message of Nahum. Both victim and perpetrator are addressed with this approach.

There is a deep-seated sense of justice within most humans and Travis purports that, 'if God's just dealings with mankind are not ultimately to be demonstrated, they would think it necessary to give up faith in God's justice altogether.'¹²²

Amidst the pluralism of the Western modern age, passages like Nahum are a reassurance to the oppressed that consequences always follow sin,¹²³ for this is not an amoral universe, argue Barker and Bailey. The unchangeable God will execute both justice and mercy; his righteousness, faithfulness and steadfast love are never compromised. 'God will be this

¹¹⁹ Kreider, C. *The Rich and the Poor* (Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1987), 139 ff.

¹²⁰ Haughen, G.A. *Good News About Injustice* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 67.

¹²¹ Barnes Lampman, L. (ed.) *God and the Victim* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999), xi.

¹²² Travis, S.H. 'The Problem of Judgment', *Themelios* Vol. 11 No. 2, (January 1986), 53.

¹²³ Barker, K.L. and Bailey, W. *The New American Commentary: Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 226.

kind of God wherever God is being God'.¹²⁴

O'Brien, on the other hand, takes a different approach. She candidly tackles her response to the violence in Nahum; the shaming of the harlot (3:5) and the infants who are dashed to pieces in the street (3:10). 'Who will mourn for her?' (3:7) asks Nahum, and O'Brien instinctively answers, 'I will.'¹²⁵

Organisations such as Prison Fellowship would probably assert that O'Brien has raised an important missiological issue, for empathy and sympathy for the perpetrator under God's judgement is as necessary as for the victim. In contrast to Nahum, the book of Jonah demonstrates that God's care and forgiveness extends to the oppressor, Nineveh.

Nahum presents the oppressed as having deserved judgement in the past and the oppressor as needing deliverance in the future. Undoubtedly, nations are too complex to pigeonhole simply as 'good' or 'bad'. Surely Nahum's mixed message of judgement and deliverance is needed by both oppressors and oppressed. One hopes that the oppressors might repent; delivering both themselves and those who suffer under them.

The Call Not to Silence the Oppressed

Counsellors and those who work with suffering people, such as Howard Zehr, report:

They speak words we do not often hear in polite company, certainly not in church settings, for several reasons. Our society is organised around the pursuit of happiness. Suffering is to be avoided; pain is a bad thing. For Christians, moreover, pain often represents failure: a failure of faith, a failure of God's presumed control over the world. And the anger in these voices seems a failure to love and forgive, a contradiction of Christ's commands. So we try not to listen to these voices.¹²⁶

However distasteful it may be to (mostly Western) theologians and the church as a whole, there are some who resonate with the violent

¹²⁴ Fretheim, T.E. and Froelich, K. *The Bible as Word of God in a Postmodern Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 122.

¹²⁵ O'Brien *Nahum* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 126.

¹²⁶ Wolterstorff, N. 'The Contours of Justice: An Ancient Call' in Barnes Lampman, L. (ed.) *God and the Victim* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999), 138.

outpouring of God's wrath on the oppressors in the book of Nahum. For these people Nahum is the answer to their anguished cry of pain, 'How long, Sovereign LORD, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?' (Rev. 6:10).

As Westerners who have been more used to the position of power than of the oppressed, maybe we should learn to be silent ourselves and allow those who are suffering to express their pain and their anger, however strong the language.

Acknowledgement that God is Sovereign

Nevertheless, as Achtemeier and others point out, Nahum is primarily a book about God, not human justice, vengeance and war. 'God's hot anger burns against the evildoer'¹²⁷ in Nahum but it is God who is delivering the message of judgement and God alone is the avenger; Nahum is merely the vehicle through which it is delivered.¹²⁸

God is sovereign and one way he displays this is by judging the nations. Judgement a necessary part of the whole order of salvation history. That the total wrath of God (of which Nahum depicts a part) fell on Christ at the cross, demonstrates that, although judgement is necessary, God, himself, provided a substitute. The Suffering Servant took the wrath so that those who repent may escape eschatological judgement. Conservative commentators, especially, concentrate on this aspect of God's sovereignty.

Above all, God is sovereign ... in the end it will be God's will that counts ... The essence of wisdom, therefore, is to accept this ultimately incomprehensible truth and to seek God's guidance in the humility of commitment and obedience.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Barker, K.L. and Bailey, W. *The New American Commentary: Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 171.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹²⁹ Wright, Chris J. *Living as the People of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 203.

Conclusion

Nahum may well have broken half a century of prophetic silence¹³⁰ but when he did, he delivered the most graphic account of warfare in the Hebrew Bible. For this reason R.A. Mason asks, 'will any of us ever have the courage to admit in a popular commentary that the book really is rather a disgrace to the two religious communities of whose canonical Scriptures it forms so unwelcome a part?'¹³¹ Hopefully, this essay has helped to show that Nahum's message of judgement can apply to today without 'using the text to promote patriarchal and other wrong-headed interpretations of God'¹³².

It has been shown that God used Israel to be a light to the nations and the nations to chastise Israel. Conversely, God judged the nations when they carried his chastisement too far and this judgement proved to Israel (and the nations) that God is Israel's covenantal God. The ultimate reason for the interdependent relationship between Israel and the nations was that God might be glorified and worshipped by all.

Brueggemann's work highlights God's direct dealings with the nations, independently of their relationship with Israel.¹³³ Thus Nineveh (representing Assyria) was judged not only because she unleashed unlimited and excessive oppression on Judah but also because of her oppressive and wicked treatment of others she oppressed. This latter sin contravened God's underlying and universal principle of justice.

Nahum has eschatological overtones, especially when seen as part of the Book of the Twelve, whose major theme is the Day of the LORD. Nineveh is a picture of the ultimate evil that will be destroyed in a final time. The Divine Warrior may be seen as an earthly figure and an eschatological one, but his presence shows that YHWH is indeed God, for nations rise and fall at his command. 'If this great Gentile nation can fall', House asks, 'is any nation safe from the power of God's wrath?'¹³⁴.

¹³⁰ Barker, K.L. and Bailey, W. *The New American Commentary: Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 142.

¹³¹ Quoted in Ball (1999), 219–20.

¹³² Fretheim, T.E. and Froelich, K. *The Bible as Word of God in a Postmodern Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 123.

¹³³ Brueggemann, W. 'The Nations as Yahweh's Partner', in *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 513.

¹³⁴ House, P.R. *The Unity of the Twelve* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 143.

To ask whether 'The West' is Nineveh is asking the wrong question and to substitute 'The West' (or any other nation) in place of Nineveh is hermeneutically unsound. It is better to consider the underlying issues with Nineveh and to see if the nation in question echoes any of those sins. Both past and most recent history of the West indicate that the West employs injustice and therefore is under God's judgement. It is questionable whether there is any nation that is not indicted by Nahum's message. Most nations oppress nations that are weaker than themselves and sometimes even the weaker members of their own nation. Therefore, to some extent, all nations are Nineveh.

Given that 'The West' is guilty of injustice and oppression, the challenge to Western Christians is how to respond. Primarily, nations need to repent and for that to happen, there needs to be those who preach Nahum's message to the nations. The church, as the people of God, needs to repent of her own behaviour and attitudes and also to repent on behalf of its leaders and those in power who perpetuate injustice. The church also needs to speak out on behalf of the oppressed and to become practically involved in striving for justice. As well as this she should allow those who are oppressed to express their suffering, but in the context of knowing that vengeance is God's alone. Mission extends to both the oppressor and the oppressed but, ultimately, God is sovereign. Humbly acknowledging this fact is the first step to take when responding to Nahum's message of judgement.

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Appendix A

Assyrian Reliefs

'Shalmanesar III and Assyrian Cruelty' section of following webpage;

http://images.google.co.uk/imgres?imgurl=www.bible-history.com/assyria_archaeology/sennacherib_murder_nabonidus_marduk.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.bible-history.com/assyria_archaeology/archaeology_of_ancient_assyria_archaeological_discoveries.html&h=522&w=300&sz=78&tbnid=U0KUNwq6b7EJ:&tbnh=128&tbnw=74&start=2&prev=/images%3Fq%3DAssyria%2Barchaeology%2Bpictures%26hl%3Den%26lr%3D%26ie%3DUTF-8%26sa%3DN

Figure 1: Bronze band from the gates of the palace of Shalmaneser III (852 BC)¹³⁵

The website for the following picture:

http://images.google.co.uk/imgres?imgurl=www.bible-history.com/destruction_of_israel/assyria-prisoners.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.bible-history.com/destruction_of_israel/destruction_of_israel_the_eighth_century_b_c_.html&h=446&w=300&sz=90&tbnid=IOAK6AmWUDYJ:&tbnh=123&tbnw=83&start=5&prev=/images%3Fq%3DAssyria%26hl%3Den%26lr%3D%26ie%3DUTF-8%26sa%3DG

The website for Asshurizirpal Inscription:

http://www.bible-history.com/quotes/asshurizirpal_%20inscription_1.html

'Their men, young and old, I took as prisoners. Of some I cut off the feet and hands; of others I cut off the noses, ears, and lips; of the young men's ears I made a heap; of the old men's heads I built a minaret.'¹³⁶

(King Asshurizirpal who began his reign in 883¹³⁷)

¹³⁵ 'Archaeological Discoveries' at 'Bible History' website, 2004

¹³⁶ 'The Eighth Century BC' section at 'Bible History' website, 2004

¹³⁷ 'Asshurizirpal Inscription'

Appendix B

The Similarities Between the Implicit 'Day of the LORD' in Nahum and the Explicit Mentions in the Other Minor Prophets

Nahum 1:10 cf. Joel 2:5, Obadiah 18; Malachi 3:19

Nahum 2:5 cf. Jeremiah 46:9; Joel 2:9; Amos 5:16

Nahum 2:9 cf. Jeremiah 46:5, 21

Nahum 2:10 cf. Isaiah 2:7

Nahum 2:11 cf. Isaiah 13:7–18; Joel 2:6

Nahum 3:2 cf. Joel 2:5

Nahum 3:10 cf. Isaiah 13:16; Joel 4:2; Obadiah 11¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Cathcart, K.J. 'Nahum', Anchor Bible Dictionary Vol. 4 K–N (London: Doubleday, 1992), 1000.

Introducing the Athenians to God: Paul's failed apologetic in Acts 17?

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When an early twentieth-century Archbishop of Canterbury heard that Anglicans and Methodists had joined together in a service of Holy Communion in East Africa, he declared that, 'It was highly pleasing to Almighty God, but never to be done again.' Luke's succinct summary of Paul's Areopagus address has sometimes been judged in a similar way. As such, it is seen as a one-off, valiant attempt at philosophical discussion concerned with *Providence (de Providentia)* and *The Nature of the Gods (de natura Deorum)* in the sophisticated field of apologetics in the late Roman Republic and early Empire.

It is acknowledged that Paul's speech was sufficient for some of those who heard to believe and to identify with him and his gospel message. Among them was a distinguished Athenian, Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus Council, and a woman, Damaris. The former would have been a leading citizen of Athens because of his membership of its very ancient and distinguished ruling body. The woman had rank and status, and presumably was a patroness because the description of 'others who were with them both'. In view of his rank as an Areopagite, Dionysius would have had clients accompanying him.

The Areopagus address, however, is regarded in some Christian circles as a well-meaning, innovative experiment, 'highly pleasing to Almighty God' – after all it resulted in the conversion of the two distinguished Athenians and their entourage – but it was 'never to be done again'. It has to be concluded, therefore, that Acts 17 provides no paradigm today for Christian apologetics which are an essential prerequisite to evangelism.

Those who believe that this address was, in effect, a failure, support

their contention by arguing that Paul, himself, subsequently resolved never again to attempt this approach in his ministry. They argue that, of his evangelistic endeavours at his next port of call, Paul 'determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Cor. 2:2) in that culturally sophisticated city of Corinth.

It is concluded that even though there were converts on the day, Paul put the Areopagus style of evangelism behind him. He expected that others would never attempt to imitate his Athenian foray into the field of apologetics. This view of Acts 17 provides no paradigm for contemporary presentations of the Christian gospel. If that is the case it also has to be concluded that the address was recorded in Scripture simply as an interesting museum piece in the intellectual heartland of Athens and Greek culture.

The purpose of this essay is to refute any such suggestion of failure on Paul's part in Athens, or that Acts 17 provides no biblical pattern for our contemporary interactions with the philosophical or religious views of others for gospel presentations. A biblical approach to Christian engagement with the non-Christian world requires a number of clear elements.

It is proposed to explore (I) Paul's important point of contact with the Athenian audience; (II) his correction of their misconception about introducing his God to Athens; (III) his conversing with the religious views of his hearers; (IV) his critique of their compromise with worship in temples, and (V) his call for them to repent. It will be argued that Paul's approach, presents a paradigm for evangelists, preachers and teachers alike in their task to herald the kingdom and the call to repentance for this generation as the alternative to facing Jesus' judgement for unrighteous conduct.

I Connecting with the Athenians situation, Acts 17:19–20

First: what did the Athenians perceive Paul to be doing as he 'dialogued' with Jews, god-fearers and 'those who chanced to be there' in the Greek civic centre or Agora (17)? Luke indicates that some hearers felt he was 'a charlatan'.¹ Others said, 'He appears to be a herald of foreign deities'.

¹ He was a rag-bag collector of scraps of learning.

Luke explains their justification for the latter perception in the following statement – ‘because he was proclaiming Jesus and ‘the resurrection’ (*ten anastasin*) (18).²

In the time of Augustus the term ‘herald’ (*katangeleus*) was used of a priest of the imperial cult and also of the herald of the Areopagus who appeared on the archon-list and held the official seal of the city Athens.³ In addition, it had long been used to describe the person who announced to the Athenians the existence of a new divinity.

The task of the heralds of new divinities

R. Garland in his book *Introducing New Gods: The Politics of Athenian Religion* indicates what the divinity’s herald needed to secure his god’s recognition.

A convenient forum in which to advertise the benefits of a new god and hence to drum up popular support would have been a public meeting place such as the Agora, the civic, administrative and commercial heart of the city and a popular venue for all those who wished to exchange ideas.⁴

Following this comment Garland refers to Acts 17:17 and notes in passing that ‘Paul argued ... in the Agora every day ... Subsequently the apostle was invited to present his case more formally on the hill known as the Areopagus – or alternatively before the administrative body of that

² F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester and Grand Rapids: IVP and Eerdmans, 1990, ³), 377 ‘they might have thought that Anastasis was a new-fangled goddess’. *Contra* K.L. McKay, ‘Foreign Gods identified in Acts 17:18?’ *TynB.* 45.2 (1994), 411 who argued that ‘Paul would not have introduced the idea of resurrection ... by means of the abstract noun, *anastasis*’ on the grounds that he does not use it thus elsewhere in his letters and that he was unlikely to have used in an abstract form here’. It is difficult however to escape the implications of the reference to foreign ‘gods’ followed as it is by ‘because’ (*hoti*).

³ On the use of this term, see OGIS 456 which is a Mytilenean decree in honour of divine Augustus and discussion in D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987) I.1, 172. On the herald of the Areopagus see IG ii/iv ² 83 and discussion in D.J. Geagan, *The Athenian Constitution after Sulla*, *Hesperia Supplement* xii (Princeton: American School at Athens, 1967), xiif., 24ff.

⁴ R. Garland, *Introducing New Gods: The Politics of Athenian Religion* (London: Duckworth, 1992), 18–19.

name.⁵ Because the period covered by Garland ends with evidence up to 399 BC with the trial of Socrates who was accused of introducing new deities to that city, he does not pursue the implications of Paul heralding 'Jesus and "Resurrection"' as 'foreign gods' in Athens. He does, however, link it with the long-established convention.

One of the long-established tasks of the Council of the Areopagites was to examine the proofs that a herald might offer in support of his claim that a new deity existed. That role continued into the Roman period. If the Council were so persuaded, then the god or goddess would be admitted to the Parthenon. A dedicated temple would be built to the divinity, an annual feast day endowed and included in the Athenians' religious calendar. Furthermore, in this 'land most dear to the gods'⁶ the approval or disapproval of a new god in Athens set the precedent for other Greek cities well beyond Athens' imperial period and into Roman times.⁷

There is evidence of a number of 'foreign' divinities who made it up to the Parthenon in the period covered by Garland's book.⁸ In the first century BC significant politico-religious changes occurred in Athens with its conquest by the Romans. 'The Panathenaia was renamed Antonaia and dedicated to him [Mark Anthony] as God.'⁹ After Julius Caesar's assassination the imperial cult in the East grew rapidly from the time of Augustus onwards. Not only were deceased emperors deified but reigning ones as well. Sometimes their wives and members of their families were also deified. In Athens, itself, during Tiberius' reign c. AD 18–37, Antonia Augusta, the living grandmother of the future emperor, Claudius, was declared the 'goddess, Antonia'.¹⁰

While still alive, Nero and Messallina his wife were added to the 'traditional gods' in cities in the East.¹¹ An inscription records Nero's speech delivered at Corinth on 29th November, AD 67. As a result of privileges conferred on Greece, the decree was made by 'the magistrates and councillors and the people ... to erect statues of Nero Zeus the Liberator and the goddess Augusta Messallina ... to share with our

⁵ Garland, *Introducing New Gods*, 19.

⁶ Aeschylus, *Eumeniaes* 869.

⁷ Garland, *Introducing New Gods*, 8.

⁸ Garland, *Introducing New Gods*, chs. 1–7.

⁹ D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987), I, 48.

¹⁰ *IG*, II/III, 2, 5095, N. Kokkinos, *Antonia Augusta: Portrait of a Great Roman Lady* (London: Routledge, 1992), 98.

¹¹ *SIG*, 3, 814.

ancestral gods' in the city of Acraephia.¹² The formal resolution had been put forward by Epaminondas, a priest of Augustus, to 'the Council' for this new god and goddess to share the temple of Ptoian Apollo which housed that city's traditional divinities.

Introducing Imperial Gods and Goddesses and the Areopagus

An Athenian inscription in the same period reads:

Tiberius Claudius Herodes of Marathon, priest and high-priest of Nero Caesar Augustus for life, made this dedication to Dionysius [Zeus] the Liberator and Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus and the Council of the Areopagus and the Council of the 600 and the people of Athenians from his own resources when Tiberius Claudius Novius was general of the hoplites for the seventh time.¹³

This dedication to Nero by the high-priest of the imperial cult was linked to the divine Dionysius, the Liberator.¹⁴ It was also dedicated to the Council of the Areopagus. Another Athenian inscription links the imperial goddess with the traditional instruments of government in Athens, 'Julia divine Augusta Providence; the Council of the Areopagus and the Council of the 600 and the People dedicated [it]'.¹⁵

It is the same in the case of 'Julia Augusta Bouleae mother of Tiberius Augustus, the council of the Areopagus [dedicated it]'.¹⁶ This statue, located near the Council chamber, was of the deceased Livia, his mother in her guise as Julia Augusta. Erected after AD 40, it shows that yet another goddess has been 'added' to those in Athens. For S. Alcock this is another example of assimilation.¹⁷ T.D. Barnes concludes that – the Areopagus seems to be the effective government of Roman Athens and its chief court. As such, like the imperial Senate in Rome, it could interfere in any aspect of corporate life – education, philosophical lectures, public

¹² *SIG*, 3, 814 ll. 29–30, 44–51 (28 Nov., AD 67).

¹³ *IG*, III/III, 2, 3182. J.H. Oliver, *The Athenian Expounders of the Sacred and Ancestral Law* (1950), 82–83.

¹⁴ In Athens another inscription designates Nero as the 'New Apollo'. 'To Emperor Nero Caesar Augustus, New Apollo', *IG* III/III, 2, 3278.

¹⁵ *IG* III/III, 2, 3238.

¹⁶ *L'Année épigraphique*, 1938, 83.

¹⁷ S.E. Alcock, *Graecia Capta: The Landscapes of Roman Greece* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 195.

morality, *foreign cults* [including the imperial cult].¹⁸

He then surprisingly comments, 'Hence there is no need to suppose that the Areopagus had special "surveillance over the introduction of foreign divinities" in order to interest itself in Paul.' He adds in a footnote, 'As appears to be implied by Geagan'. His citing of Geagan is somewhat misleading, for he himself stated categorically, 'The account of Paul's speech before the Areopagus illustrates its surveillance over the introduction of foreign divinities.'¹⁹

Athens had its own particular instruments of government – first-century official inscriptions refer to 'The Council of the Areopagus and the Council of the 600 and the People'.²⁰ The 'chief magistrate'²¹ together with the Council, would have been responsible for bringing forward the name of the member of the imperial family whose divinity was to be recognised on the agenda of the assembly for approval by the People.

The Areopagus and the introduction of Paul's God

The Areopagus as was the initial legal instrument in the process of the admission of new imperial gods and goddesses. The imperial high-priest may have been the person who moved the motion, as was the case in the city of Acraephia. However, the Council of the Areopagus was the body responsible for initiating action to assimilate yet another new god into the Pantheon. The view that the Areopagus had no interest in Paul's role as a herald of new gods is in conflict with evidence from the official inscriptions of Athens. The statement in 17:19 that 'they brought him to the Areopagus' relates to this legal instrument and not an Athenian location. While it has become customary among NT scholars to see this body having very little power, evidence from official Athenian inscriptions testifies to the fact that, in the first century, it had a very substantial role in the civic and religious affairs of Athens.²²

¹⁸ T.D. Barnes, 'An Apostle on Trial' *JTS* XX (1969), 413.

¹⁹ Geagan, *The Athenian Constitution after Sulla*, citation 50. Barnes noted, and indeed used; Geagan's work as an important treatment of the constitution of Athens after Sulla (138–78 BC).

²⁰ E.g. *OGIS*, 428, *SEG* xxi, 742, *IG*, II/III, 2, 3182.

²¹ On role of Areopagus and the *archōn* see D.J. Geagan, *The Athenian Constitution after Sulla*, *Hesperia Supplement* xii (Princeton: American School at Athens, 1967), xiif., 24ff.

²² On its earlier role see R.W. Wallace, *The Areopagus Council to 307 BC* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985) and D.W.J. Gill, 'Achaia' in eds. D.W.J. Gill and C. Gempf *The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting* (Grand Rapids and Carlisle: Paternoster and Eerdmans, 1994), 447.

What action did these Athenians take on the basis of their perception of Paul as a divine herald? Acts 17:19a records that 'they [some of the Stoics and Epicureans] took him to [the Council of] the Areopagus' (17:19a). The next sentence is usually translated, 'they [the members of the Areopagus] said, "May we know what this new doctrine is that you are propounding?"'. However another rendering of the Greek is more accurate when key words in this sentence are translated in the semantic domain of legal language. Paul was not simply being asked to provide an explanation, but rather the Council was informing him of its long-standing responsibility 'we possess a legal right to judge what this new teaching is that is being spoken by you'.²³

In the next verse the members of the Areopagus Council explain their reason for making their assessment of the message he has been proclaiming in the Greek Agora. The normal translation is, 'for you are bringing certain strange things to our ears: we would therefore know what these things mean'. The reference to 'certain strange things' is to 'foreign deities'. On the basis of the meaning of *gnōnai* in legal language in verse 19, the sentence can read, 'We therefore wish to make a judgement on what you claim these things are'.²⁴

The tone of the sentences is polite, for this was no prosecution but a preliminary meeting of Council members with Paul after it was reported that he appeared to be heralding new divinities in the Agora. They knew that if he gained popular support in Athens, they could be persuaded to give a rightful place to his deities in the Athenian Pantheon.

Their courteous approach was in keeping with the fact that the herald would normally be a person of status. He would also need to be a man of considerable financial means to buy a site, construct a temple with an altar for sacrifices and provide a substantial benefaction for a least an annual dinner to honour the deity. It might involve provision for support for any cultic officials.

The initial hearing in Acts 17 as a whole reflects sensitivity to an issue that is not merely of religious but also of political import, indeed such a

²³ Cf. Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 14:24 'we shall not be able to judge (*dunhsometha gnōnai*) between the free man and the slave', although in this case it relates more to a matter of outward appearance.

²⁴ For linguistic evidence see my 'On introducing Gods to Athens: An alternative reading of Acts 17:18-20', *Tyndale Bulletin*, 47.1, (May, 1996), 81-83.

distinction could never be made validly in Athens.²⁵ This was no court case. It was one that sought to ascertain whether there really had been an epiphany of the divinity or divinities; if so, what official recognition should be given, what divine honours and statues would be appropriate and when would be the annual official feast day be. Paul's God had to be 'properly' introduced to Athens, if he was going to be properly worshipped.

Correcting Athenian misconceptions

First, Paul's 'introduction' (*exordium*) in verse 23a to his formal presentation before a properly convened meeting of the Areopagus Council brought an unexpected element into the hearing. Paul indicates that he was not there to prove the existence of any 'new' divinity in Athens. The fact was that they had recognised the existence of this divinity in Athens, for they had already erected an altar to him, 'the unknown God' (*agnōstō theō*).²⁶

First: the argument among NT scholars as to whether there was or was not an actual inscription in the singular term 'God' is misplaced. Those among the hearers who were Stoics and Epicureans would have no difficulty with the use of the singular for 'God' or 'gods'. In a single sentence they could use the singular and plural interchangeably. Diogenes Laertius records that 'worshippers of God ... have acquaintance with the rites of the gods ... how to serve the gods'.²⁷ What would take them by surprise would not be the inscription on the altar but rather Paul's affirmation that he was not proclaiming a new divinity for the Athenians.²⁸ Rather, he reminds them that he was going to tell them what this God whom 'you [officially] venerate (*eusebeite*) as unknown' is like.

Second: there would be no need for a parcel of land to be secured by

²⁵ Barnes, 'An Apostle on Trial' 407–19; 419 suggested that Paul seems to have been put on trial in Athens, suggesting that this theory 'possesses intrinsic plausibility', but he felt that it was a 'clearly impossible task of providing proof positive'.

²⁶ For Athenian altar-inscriptions see *IG II, III*. 4960–5020, and literary evidence see Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I.1.4, 'altars to gods called "unknown"' (*agnōstōn*), Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, vi.3.5, and Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Philosophers*, I.110.

²⁷ Diogenes Laertius, *Zeno VII*, 119. Paul was not, as Barnes 'An Apostle on Trial' *JTS* XX (1969), 418, suggested 'using the sophisticated trick of slightly misrepresenting the evidence in his own favour'.

²⁸ Barnes 'An Apostle on Trial' *JTS* XX (1969), 418 'Paul replies that his audience already acknowledges his God'.

the herald to erect a temple dedicated to this divinity as Athenian custom requires because Paul asserts that this God 'does not dwell in sanctuaries (*vaoi*) made with hands' (24b).

Third: there will be no obligatory feast day required for him in the Athenian's annual religious calendar with the offering up of animal sacrifices. Paul asserts 'he has no need of anything, because it is he who gives life and breath and all things to all of his creation' (25). The 'unknown' God does not need anything from the Athenians because he provides everything the Athenians need, including their life and the sustenance, and not only for them but for all of the created order. He is indeed the 'Lord of heaven and earth'.

Fourth: it would have come as a shock to all present to be told that the proud Athenians were not superior to the rest of mankind. As has been noted, they were 'the only Greeks on the European mainland who had a tradition that their ancestors had come from Greece' for they were 'autochthonous' – 'sprung from the soil of their native Attica'.²⁹ This deity, however, was the creator of all and he ruled in the nations of the earth and blessed them. Athenians had no special prerogatives nor were they racially superior. Their seasons and boundaries had been set by God, as had all the nations of the earth – possibly a reminder of their past empire and its present reluctant incorporation into Rome's vast empire by conquest.³⁰

Fifth: the formal apologetic provided information about the imminence of this new divinity for whom approval was to be sought for admission to the Athenian pantheon by the People on the recommendation of this Council. 'He is not far from each one of us', a statement that was confirmed by their divinely inspired poets: 'in him we live and move and have our being', wrote Epimenides, the Cretan (27). Furthermore, because the poets were seen to speak definitively, the citation 'For we are also his offspring',³¹ rules out any inanimate configuration of this living and life-giving deity replicated in 'gold or silver, graven by art and device of man' (28–29). Idol worship was incompatible with this belief.

Sixth: Paul's God did not now need to be formally introduced and

29 F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (London and Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1962), 357, n. 44.

30 See edd. M.C. Hoff and S.I. Rotroff, *The Romanization of Athens* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1997).

31 Cf. Aratus, *Phainomena* 5 and Cleanthes, *Hymn to Zeus* 4.

added to the Pantheon of Athens, for his existence was already acknowledged by the People of Athens. In fact this divinity was not looking for authorisation from the assembled gathering. Rather, he was seeking the repentance of all, having already fixed the day of the assize, determined the ground rules on which it would be conducted, and had already appointed the judge for that purpose (30–31).

Seventh: what further proof was being offered that this would happen? There was not an epiphany of the God that was usually sought. Paul did not provide evidence of his own encounter, i.e., his epiphany on the road to Damascus in Acts 9:5–6, which he repeated in Acts 22:6–16 and 26:9–16. He cites, instead, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as the 'proof' (*pistis*) given by this deity to all mankind (31b). That they mocked him at this point is explicable. The august Council of the Areopagites had been founded on these words: 'When a man dies, the earth drinks up his blood. There is no resurrection (*anastasis*).'³² Here, Paul contradicted the very principle on which this ruling body of Athens had been established to judge those guilty of crimes. They believed that offenders could not be left for judgement in the afterlife because there was no resurrection from the dead. Judgement, therefore, had to be passed before the death of the accused. This had been the traditional remit of the Areopagus until the coming of Rome when matters of a criminal nature were transferred to the jurisdiction of the governor of the province. Little wonder they mocked (32).

The Athenian audience who had cast Paul in the role of a herald seeking to introduce new deities to Athens would have realised at this point in the speech that it was neither he nor his 'God' were seeking to secure their official *imprimatur*. Rather, Paul was announcing that a judicial role which they had traditionally fulfilled was suddenly reversed. God in his mercy was now seeking their repentance so that they could avoid the future, predetermined day of judgement by the resurrected and designated judge, Jesus, before whom personal 'righteousness' would be the standard of judgement. When he died, the earth did not drink up his blood. Now they had to decide whether they would stand in the dock one day. Paul and his God were not under scrutiny – but they would be unless they repented.

³² Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 647–48.

II Conversing with the theological framework of the hearers

In Acts 17 there are five important affirmations about this 'knowable' God. First: on the subject of God and the created order: God 'made the world and everything in it, being himself Lord of heaven and earth ... gives life and breath and all things to all his creation' (24–25).

Second: on God and the nations: God 'determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their [the nations'] habitations and 'the times of ignorance (of all the nations) therefore God overlooked' (26, 30).

Third: on God and general revelation: In the Athenian speech there is also the signal from God (cf. Ps. 19) that they should 'seek after God, if haply they might feel after him, and find him' (27).

Fourth: on God and religious pluralism: The pluralistic perception of divinity is criticised by means of an argument based on their own poets – "For we are also his offspring". Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the godhead is like gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and device of man' (28–29).

Fifth: on God and repentance: the judge, the day and the standard of judgement are all fixed. In his great mercy God calls all people everywhere to repent because that is the only way to avoid that day, and the proof that is coming is the resurrection of Jesus from among the dead (31–32).

Paul's audience in Athens consisted of representatives of two philosophical schools, the Stoics and the Epicureans (18). Luke intended to signal to his readers that Paul was engaging the minds of an audience whose religious beliefs were articulated on the basis of their philosophical theism, as the following discussion will show.

In the case of the Stoics, Paul addresses them in their heartland. It was in this very same Agora where he was now speaking that Zeno (335–263 BC), its founder, established his school in the south-west Stoa. Recent essays have sought to argue that Paul is actually presenting orthodox Stoicism in the Athenian speech.³³ Indeed, it has been suggested that he is arguing for the legitimate tradition of this philosophy, and doing so in

³³ A.J. Malherbe, "'Not in a Corner": Early Christian Apologetic in Acts 26:26' Paul and the Popular Philosophers (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 152 and D.L. Balch, 'The Areopagus Speech: An Appeal to the Stoic *Historica Posidonius* against Later Stoics and the Epicureans' D.L. Balch, E. Ferguson and W. Meeks edd. *Greeks, Romans and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), ch. 4.

the face of contemporary Stoics who were in the audience. Their interest in 'new things' had resulted from a *rapprochement* with popular religion in the development of post-Posidonius Stoicism (c. 135 – c. 51–52 BC). It included a 'defence of temples and explanation of religious images and temples' – Dio Chrysostom's Olympian oration, 'On Man's First Conception of God' delivered before an ancient statue of Zeus c. AD 101 provides such an example.³⁴

The Natural Theology of Stoicism

In seeking to understand the nature of Paul's bridge-building with his audience as well as his refutation of their practices as critical points, five aspects need to be noted about Stoicism.

First: his speech may have consciously followed sections of the standard presentation of the nature of divinity used by the Stoics. Balbus' debate with opposing schools of philosophy c. 77–78 BC presents a standard Stoic *apologia* on the nature of the gods – (*De natura deorum*). He stated that there was an established sequence in the presentation of their case.

First they prove that the gods exist; next they explain their nature; then they show that the world is governed by them; and lastly, that they care for the fortunes of mankind.³⁵

The summary in Acts 17 assumes their belief in God's existences and his role as the creator of the world who is Lord of heaven and earth (24a). It affirms that he gives life and all things to all his creation (25b). His providential care is intrinsically bound up with the needs of all mankind (26). Paul developed his theme on the nature of the known God in this way. Traditional Christian apologetics has continued this approach just as Greek 'natural theology' did then.

Second: the Stoics would not have been concerned that Paul used the term 'God' and not 'gods'. As has been remarked recently, there is 'a curious feature of the language in which Cicero [who records the debate of Balbus] expressed the Stoic position, namely the shifting back and forth from talk about 'God' to 'gods' – a common feature as other sources

³⁴ Or. 12, Balch, 'The Areopagus Speech', 71, 79.

³⁵ Cicero, *De natura deorum* II.3

record. 'God is one but called by many popular names'.³⁶ Cleanthes, who succeeded Zeno as head of the Stoic school, wrote his hymn to Zeus which likewise expressed this interchangeable use of the terms.

Of gods most glorious, known by many names,
Power supreme, O Lord of Nature's changes,
Law-giving pilot of the universe,
I hail you, Zeus, with whom there is no man
Forbidden converse: we are of your race;
Of all the beasts that live and walk the earth
Only we have a semblance of thy reason.³⁷

Balbus also presents the Stoic's view on the existence of the God/gods without any *apologia* – 'the main issue is agreed among all men of all nations, inasmuch as all have engraved in the minds an innate belief that the gods exist'. He cites with approval Cleanthes' and Chrysippus' arguments for God's existence and the latter's conclusion 'therefore God exists'.³⁸

While the Stoics were comfortable with the inter-changeable use of the terms 'God' and 'gods', Paul would not have been. An ambiguity had already arisen in the minds of his hearers in the Agora in Athens when he was perceived by his audience to be proclaiming 'foreign deities', viz. 'Jesus and Anastasis' (18). His communication of his message could only be undertaken by discussing specifically the nature of God.

Third: the Stoic perception concerning the nature of 'God' did not necessarily make him personal, but rather pantheistic. Cleanthes, Chrysippus and Posidonius declared with Zeno, 'the substance of God to be the whole world and the heavens'.³⁹

Fourth: in the Athenian speech there are important resonances with the Stoic view of providence. This may well have been Paul's most important

36 Cicero, *De natura deorum* II.2, L.P. Gerson, *Gods and Greek Philosophy*: (London: Routledge, 1990), 154–66, see p. 155. Cf. Diogenes Laertius, 'Zeno', *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, VII, 119 'worshippers of God; for they have acquaintance with the rites of the gods ... how to serve the gods'.

37 *SVF*, I, 537.

38 Cicero, *De natura deorum* II, 13, 16.

39 Diogenes Laertius, 'Zeno', *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* VII, 14, Cicero, *De natura deorum* 1.39. God is said by some to be 'breath' (*pneuma*), i.e., a mixture of air and fire, and sometimes the whole world is called 'God', F.H. Sandback, *The Stoics* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975), 35.

bridge with that segment of his audience. Balbus sets out what he sees as the Stoic thesis that 'the world is ruled by divine providence ... of the gods', 'only familiarity blinds us to nature's marvels'. For him providential government of the world can be inferred firstly, from divine wisdom and power, secondly, from the nature of the world, thirdly, from a detailed review of the wonders of nature, and fourthly, from the care of man.⁴⁰

The providential care of men is based on the thesis that 'all the things in this world ... have been created and provided for the sake of men' and 'the things that it contains were provided and contrived for the enjoyment of men'. The sun and moon are seen to contribute to the 'maintenance and structure of the world and the seasons and the bounty of the earth have, been given for him'. Balbus argues, 'Why should I speak of the teeming swarm of delicious fish ... which affords us so much pleasure that our Stoic Providence appears to have been a disciple of Epicurus?' And then he states that 'an abundance of commodities were created for men's use and which men alone discover'.⁴¹

The Stoic doctrine was not restricted to mankind in general, but applied as much to individuals.

Nor is the care and providence of the immortal gods bestowed only upon the human race in its entirety, but is also wont to be extended to individuals. We may narrow down the entirety of the human race and bring it gradually down to smaller and smaller groups, and finally to single individuals.⁴²

Seneca the Younger, (c. AD 1–65) who was a contemporary of Paul and brother of Gallio, develops this point in an important discussion in *De Providentia*, written during Claudius' reign. This work which is Stoic in essence, but tempered by his experience of life and mellowed by eclecticism, seeks to answer a question raised by a friend, Lucilius, who was a procurator of Sicily – 'why, if a Providence rules the world, it still happens that many evils befall good men?' Seneca makes it clear that he would prefer to place this question within a more coherent framework. That would be the traditional Stoic treatment of the nature of God proving 'that a Providence does preside over the universe, and that God concerns

⁴⁰ Cicero, *De natura deorum* II. 95, 76–80, 81–97, 98–153, 162.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 154, 156, 162

⁴² *Ibid.*, 164

himself with us'. He continues with an immediate reference to 'gods' and uses the terms inter-changeably in this letter in true Stoic tradition.⁴³

Not only does he argue that the sufferings of the just are consistent with Providence, but he also speaks of God as 'father' – like a teacher who tests just men with hardship. It would be easy to draw the conclusion that Seneca believes in a personal God and therefore represents normative first-century Stoicism. He dealt with subjects such as God, prayer, divine justice and immortality and was able 'to invest with emotions ideas and concepts which are in themselves [for Stoics] impersonal and unexciting'.⁴⁴ It, however, has been shown that Seneca's characteristic method was to work from the premise of the recipient of his letter and to develop a more orthodox Stoic view as he proceeded.⁴⁵

After a careful analysis of the basic contrast between Paul and Seneca on this point, it has been concluded rightly that, 'Seneca is in the last resort not serious when he speaks of the personal god'.⁴⁶ However, there would have been sufficient common ground to provide the necessary bridge in his Athenian topic had Paul met Seneca.⁴⁷

The impact of Stoicism then, is to be found not only in the general structure of Paul's presentation, but also in the discussion on providence. 'God who made the world and things in it'. He has made from one all the nations of earth to dwell on all the face of the earth ... He himself gives life and breath and all things to all ... having determined their appointed seasons and the bounds of their habitation (24a, 25–26a).

It must be noted that when the Stoics discussed God's providence it tended to be 'impersonal'. Gerson warns that 'Virtually all of the Stoic theological language must be transposed to take account of their physics. Divine providence is here just the contribution of particular laws and parts of the cosmos to the whole'.⁴⁸ There was a crucial difference between Paul's doctrine of God's providence and that of the Stoics.

Fifth: the theme of judgement found common ground between Paul and his Stoic audience.

⁴³ Seneca the Younger, *De Providentia*, 1

⁴⁴ J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 115.

⁴⁵ J.R.G. Wright, 'Form and Content in the Moral Essay' in C.D.N. Costa ed. *Seneca Medea* (Oxford: OUP, 1973), 48–49.

⁴⁶ J.N. Sevenster, *Paul and Seneca*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1961), 37.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of the spurious letter from Seneca to Paul see, Sevenster, *Paul and Seneca*, 11 ff.

⁴⁸ Gerson, *Gods and Greek Philosophy*, 166.

It can be concluded, that Paul, followed the Stoics' traditional outline on their apologetic on the existence and nature of God.

Providence provided an important link and it was here that he was able to find significant common ground as he moved to his thesis on the knowable God and Jesus and his resurrection. Paul carefully presents his argument on the issue of idols not overtly from the Old Testament, but by using citations from their own poets against them. The theme of judgement was part of Stoic philosophy. However, they were being called upon to repent because the Stoics had compromised their beliefs by tolerating idolatry.

The Natural Theology of the Epicureans

This speech also addressed the adherents of Epicurean philosophy whose 'code of behaviour', dealing with happiness, was spelt out in the forty famous epitomes of its founder.⁴⁹

First: the cardinal truth which Epicurus declared in a letter to Menoecus was 'First believe that God is living, immortal and blessed'. He proceeded to encourage his reader to believe this and that they were 'not to affirm anything that is foreign to his immortality or that agrees not with blessedness, but believe about him whatever upholds both his blessedness and immortality'.⁵⁰ As Paul uses all these terms elsewhere of God, viz, he is a living God (1 Thess. 1:9), he is immortal (Rom. 1:23) and he is 'the blessed God' (1 Tim. 1:11), there would have been an agreement by the Epicureans in the audience with what Paul said.

Second: Epicurus believed that the knowledge of the divinity was clear to all. He said that it was 'according to the notion of God indicated by the common sense of mankind. For there are gods, and the knowledge of them is manifest'.⁵¹ Although, just as with the Stoics, there was the interchange of terminology of 'God' and 'gods', there would again have been a starting point with the Epicureans when Paul declared that the character of the unknown God could be known.

Third: there would have been a consensus between Paul and the Epicureans that God does not live in man-made temples. For the latter, the dwelling place of God or the gods was not this earth – divinity was far removed from it and lived in perfection. The Epicureans were notionally

⁴⁹ Diogenes Laertius, 'Epicurus', X. 139–54.

⁵⁰ Diogenes Laertius, 'Epicurus', X. 123.

⁵¹ 'The gods exist, the knowledge which we have of them is clear vision', *Epicurus*, Epistles III, 123.

opposed to all forms of superstition. They discussed 'the interior psychological effects of improper belief and demeaning practice, which characterize what they consider to be superstition'.⁵²

Fourth: both they and Paul would have been in full agreement that God has no need of anything (25a), because the Epicureans also held that 'God had no need of human resources'.⁵³

There were, however, clear philosophical and practical departure points for Paul with the Epicureans. They denied that 'God's providential relationship with the world entertains a just judgement of mortality, especially a judgement that takes place after death, where rewards and punishments are allotted'.⁵⁴ Epicurus in his 'catechism' affirmed that 'Death is nothing to us; for the body, when it has been resolved into its elements, has no feeling and that which has no feelings is nothing to us'. Elsewhere he taught, 'Accustom yourself to believe that death is nothing to us'.⁵⁵

While Paul may have had far greater areas of agreement with the Stoics, consensus on four doctrines is sufficient to reject Neyrey's thesis that Luke has Paul siding with the Stoics against his stereotype Epicureans.⁵⁶

III Convicting the Stoics and Epicureans of their compromise

Their attitude to popular cults was pragmatic, for it did not follow from their philosophical teaching. It has been argued that early Stoicism was opposed to the worship of idols and the erection of temples, but that in the post-Posidonius period, and certainly by the early Roman empire, it had assimilated the practices of popular piety.⁵⁷ It is questionable whether this is correct. Both pagan and Christian apologists drew attention to

52 A.N.R.W. Attridge, II.16.1, 'The Philosophical Critique of Religion under the Early Empire', (1978) 64.

53 Philodemus, *On Piety*, fr. 38.

54 Diogenes Laertius, *Epicurus*, X.139, 124.

55 J.H. Neyrey, 'Acts 17, Epicureans and Theodicy: A Study of Stereotypes', edd. D.L. Balch, E. Ferguson and W. Meeks, *Greeks, Romans and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 129ff.

56 Neyrey, 'Acts 17, Epicureans and Theodicy: A Study of Stereotypes', 129ff.

57 D.L. Balch, 'The Areopagus Speech: An Appeal to the Stoic Historica Posidonius against Later Stoics and Epicureans' eds. D.L. Balch, E. Ferguson and W. Meeks, *Greeks, Romans and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 71.

Zeno's comments on popular piety.

Plutarch (AD c. 50 – c. 120) declared that Zeno's teaching was not to construct temples 'because a temple not worth much is also sacred and no work of builders and mechanics is worth much'. Clement of Alexandria, a second century Christian apologist also refers to this, citing Zeno's *Republic* as the source: 'we ought to make neither temples nor images; for that no work is worthy of the gods.'⁵⁸

Diogenes Laertius notes that Zeno in the *Republic* 'at line 200 prohibits the building of temples, law courts and gymnasia in cities'.⁵⁹ Attridge, commenting on these texts, suggests that 'there is some evidence that this was done in the early years of the school, although the classical Stoic position was one of accommodation to ordinary cult and beliefs', citing Balbus in *De natura deorum II* in support of the latter.⁶⁰

Balch cites a comment of Posidonius found in Strabo in support of the view that he, like the founder of the Stoic school, also believed that 'the Greeks were wrong in modelling gods in human form'.⁶¹ However, as Balch himself points out, this citation comes from Posidonius' *History* in which he describes Jewish views on idolatry. He rightly comments, 'In this text, Posidonius's opposition to images of the gods may be reflected in his description of Moses.'⁶² There do not seem to be grounds from the extant citations of Posidonius to support the view that Paul represented Zeno's 'orthodoxy' on the issue of images. His contemporary, Balbus, who incidentally cites Posidonius, provides an apology for Stoic participation in the popular religion:

though we repudiate these myths with contempt, we shall nevertheless be able to understand the personality and the nature of the divinities pervading the substance of the several elements, Ceres permeating earth, Neptune the sea and so on; and it is our duty to revere and worship these gods under the names which custom has bestowed upon them.⁶³

⁵⁸ Plutarch, 'Stoic Self-contradictions' *Moralia* 1034B and Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata* V.xi.

⁵⁹ Diogenes Laertius, VII. 33

⁶⁰ Attridge, 'The Philosophical Critique of Religion under the Early Empire', 66 and citing Balbus, Cicero, *De natura deorum*, II. 59–70, 147–68.

⁶¹ Balch, 'The Areopagus Speech', p. 69 citing Strabo, *Geography*, 16.2.35–39.

⁶² Balch, 'The Areopagus Speech', 69–70.

⁶³ Cicero, *De natura deorum*, II. 72.

The Stoic self-contradiction, as Plutarch pointed out, was that they 'attend the mysteries in the temples, go up to the Acropolis, do reverence to statues, and place wreaths upon the shrines, though these were the works of builders and mechanics'.⁶⁴

Epicurus himself had believed that popular piety was not correct – 'For the utterances of the multitude about the gods are not true preconceptions but false assumptions'.⁶⁵ In spite of this commonly held conviction among Epicureans, there was no endeavour to dissociate their adherents from the popular cultic activities. While a mid-first century AD Epicurean treatise declares that the proof of piety could not be measured by offering up sacrifices, one was free to do so.

It is of course open to you to offer sacrifices to the gods ... you conform in some sense to religious traditions. Only be careful that you do not permit any admixture of fear of the gods or of the supposition that in acting as you do you are winning the favour of the gods.⁶⁶

There certainly are no grounds for affirming that Paul appealed to 'Posidinius' tradition' on the matter of images.⁶⁷ It would seem that the compromise with the popular cult was established at the time of Posidonius and Balbus who were contemporaries. Paul's argument was not, in fact, based on such an appeal, but rather on the poetic sentiment, 'For we are also his offspring' (28). Given that his audience conceded the premise of their poets Paul deduced, 'Being therefore the offspring of God we are compelled not to think that the Deity is like gold'.

Both philosophical schools adopted the principle of the accommodation of their beliefs with popular religion for their followers with contemporary religious traditions. The notional caveats they provided for their adherents enabled the latter to participate in cultic activities. They show the uneasy, but necessary, compromise that they felt they had to reach with it. Stoicism and Epicureanism in the imperial period had to endorse religious pluralism if they were to maintain their following, given participation in

⁶⁴ Plutarch, *Moralia*, 1034 BC.

⁶⁵ Epicurus, *Epistle* III, 124.

⁶⁶ *P.Oxy.* 215, and the discussion in Attridge, 'The Philosophical Critique of Religion under the Early Empire', 45–47, and A.J. Festugière, *Epicurus and His Gods* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955), 64–65.

⁶⁷ Balch, 'The Areopagus Speech', 72.

the imperial cult as one of the ways of affirming their loyalty to the empire.

Paul's affirmations about the activity of God in creation and his providence in the Athenian speech were clearly taught in the OT. For example, Isaiah 40:12, states that this God is 'the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth'. It is he who 'has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance' (cf., 28 and 15, 22, 26). There is a ready resonance if not a direct connection with Jeremiah 5:24 – 'Let us now fear the Lord our God, who gives rain for the former and the latter, in its season; who reserves for us the appointed weeks of the harvest.' Psalm 50:9–12 declares that God owns all his creation.⁶⁸

Paul had found important common ground between certain beliefs in Stoicism and the OT in his speech. He was not borrowing his theology from the philosophical schools for pragmatic purposes. His knowledge of their belief systems enabled him to see where there was a confluence with the oracles of God.

IV Confronting the Athenian audience

To declare, as Paul did, that God had previously 'overlooked' their idolatry 'but now called upon all men everywhere to repent' (30–31), had political ramifications for this philosophically orientated audience in Athens. Paul explained that the 'now' was because God had appointed a day of judgement, a judge, and the canon of judgement. Escape from it involved repentance, including the renunciation of the worship of idols and the pluralism which that implied.

To have declared this would signal an inevitable confrontation with Athenian policy on imperial religion. From the death of Julius Caesar onwards the incorporation of living and deceased emperors into the pantheon and their veneration became part of the imperial political strategy.⁶⁹ In the city of Aphrodisias, the magnificent Sebasteion of the emperors leading to the temple of Aphrodite, who, as Venus, was said to be the mother of the imperial family, shows how loyalty to the emperors

⁶⁸ B. Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation* (Uppsala: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1955), 86–87.

⁶⁹ Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West*, 1.1.

was closely linked with religious pluralism; and Athens was no different.⁷⁰

Did the herald's defence of the existence and nature of this divinity meet the expectations of the Areopagus Council? Those who came as the assessors suddenly found that they were being confronted with having to face the fact that there will be a divine assessment of their lives. It was a speech that so engaged the minds of the hearers that 'some mocked', because of the foundational dictum of the Areopagite Council that when a man dies the earth drinks up his blood, there is no resurrection.⁷¹ Others were not so dismissive and left saying, 'We will hear you again about this' (32b). Others believed (34).

V Summary and implications

The strategies Paul adopted in Acts 17 provide the paradigm for contemporary Christian interactions with the minds of non-Christians. Connecting with the hearers, correcting their misconceptions, conversing with the theological or ideological framework, convicting them of their compromises with their own consciences in the light of their intellectual commitment are critical steps. It is also necessary to confront them with their need of repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ because of the coming day of judgement. These are all essential features of an apologetic that is distinctly Christian and biblical.

However, what is to be said about Paul's determination in 1 Corinthians 2:2 'to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified'? There, he confronts the convention in Roman colonies where the orator who was speaking in that city was required to speak on the topic nominated from the audience in order to gain acceptance as part of his 'coming' as teacher, orator, politician and spokesman on embassies. That presentation was to be a model of sophisticated oratory and erudite wisdom and had to contain the three proofs laid down by Aristotle, namely, acting out the part he was playing, playing on the emotions of the audience and providing the rhetorical proofs justifying any claims. Paul, of course, rejected this as he did not want the hearers' faith to be placed in the wisdom of the speaker

⁷⁰ A.J.S. Spawforth, 'The early reception of the Imperial Cult in Athens: Problems and Ambiguities', eds M.C. Hoff and S.I. Rotroff, *The Romanization of Athens*, 183–201.

⁷¹ Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 647–48.

but in the power of God; hence his comment in 2:2 and 5.1.⁷² There is no conflict between Paul's gospel of repentance or judgement by Jesus and the Corinthian gospel of Jesus and him crucified.

Paul's address to the Athenians was highly pleasing to Almighty God. These essential elements are to be repeated if we are to engage the hearts and minds of our contemporaries and remove misunderstandings that hinder their embracing the gospel, just as Paul did with Dionisius and Damaris, and others who were with them.

⁷² On 'Paul's anti-sophistic coming: 1 Corinthians 2.1-5', see my *Philo and Paul among the Sophists: Alexandrian and Corinthian Responses to a Julio-Claudian Movement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, 2.), 143-64.

The Lost Message of *The Lost Message of Jesus*

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Although it was published in 2003, Steve Chalke and Alan Mann's *The Lost Message of Jesus* continues to provoke controversy, particularly in British evangelical circles, due to the authors' comments regarding the penal substitution view of the atonement. Many in the debate refer to these comments, but few seem to have interacted with the entire book. Therefore, a closer look at the book as a whole seems helpful.

On the cover of my copy of the book there is a picture of a corked glass bottle containing a scrap of paper. The implication seems to be that Jesus' teaching which was lost for many years, has now been discovered and is revealed within the book. That this claim is being made is confirmed in the first few pages. 'Our task is to reclaim the true but lost message of Jesus' (15). According to Chalke and Mann, the core of Jesus' message was this: '*The Kingdom, the in-breaking shalom of God, is available now to everyone through me*' (16), (italics in the original). The authors wish to reclaim this message for the world, which has largely ignored it, and for the church, which has largely obscured and misunderstood it.

In my judgement there is much of value in the book. The 'message in the bottle' certainly contains material that has been underemphasised by many within the church. In particular, I find the central position given to Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God is valuable. The writings of the NT constantly emphasise God's climactic action in Jesus' death and resurrection, and then draw out the ethical implications of these events. Too many churches have lost this way of thinking and living. The excitement and the tension of living in the 'time in between the times', between the resurrection and the last day, has been replaced by an emphasis on abstract and timeless theological propositions. *The Lost Message of Jesus* has called us back to a more biblical way of thinking in

this area. Another helpful point is the book's emphasis on the importance of presenting the beauty and desirability of life in the Kingdom to those who do not believe (118f).

Even when one does not agree with the conclusions that Chalke and Mann reach, it cannot be doubted that they have tried to reflect rigorously and consistently on the words of Jesus. For example, though their case for non-violence at a national level is not argued convincingly (125–37), it is clearly an attempt to apply the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:38–48 to important and controversial questions.

Despite these strengths, however, there is a deep irony at the heart of the book: *The Lost Message of Jesus* has omitted a crucial component of the message of Jesus. The bottle has been opened, but the message not read in its entirety. What has been lost in *The Lost Message of Jesus*, and what pervades the true message of Jesus and the authors of our NT, is the proclamation that God will one day set the world to rights by judging it, and that this coming divine judgement should affect the way humans live now.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus begins his public ministry with the call: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (4:17). Comparison with John the Baptist's identical call (3:2, 10–12) makes it clear that Jesus' words are a call to repent *in the face of coming divine judgement*. Even a cursory reading of the Gospels reveals how frequently Jesus speaks of hell and the coming judgement of God (e.g. Matthew 7:26–27; 11:20–24; 13:40–43; 23:29–36; 25:31–46; Mark 9:38–50; Luke 13:1–5; John 5:14, 28–29). It is astonishing, then, that this major theme of Jesus' preaching is overlooked by Chalke and Mann. In the NT, God's righteous anger at sin is a reason for repentance (Matt. 4:17) and for sober, joyful worship (Rom. 9:22–23; 11:33–36). In *The Lost Message of Jesus*, it is virtually ignored.

Virtually – but not totally – ignored. On page 62, Chalke and Mann rightly affirm that, 'although God is love, this doesn't exclude the possibility of him eventually acting in judgement', and suggest that God's anger 'is a legitimate, indeed intrinsic, expression of [his] love'. This affirmation is refreshing in a book that tends to draw false dichotomies. (Just a few pages later the authors imply that God is either strong, stern, tough, and demanding, or that he is generous, gracious, forgiving and loving. If the pejorative language were dropped, perhaps we could affirm both sides of that false dichotomy). However, while the authors' recognition of God's anger and judgement upon sin is welcome, it is the

only such recognition in the book. Throughout *The Lost Message of Jesus*, Chalke and Mann seem very uncomfortable with the idea that God is angered by sin and judges it. Rather than affirming the reality of hell, they appear to distance themselves from it in several places, for example, they disassociate themselves from those who 'still believe' that the Christian God is 'a God of power, law, judgement, hell-fire and damnation' (56).

On pages 14–15, Chalke and Mann describe the many disparate messages that are bombarding contemporary Christians, and include the following example: 'We are taught that God is love, but no-one explains how this teaching coheres with the reality of those whom we know, love and respect but who don't know Christ and so, as the preacher tells us, are bound for eternal torment in hell.' Now, this is a crucial issue to address! But the authors do not address it. Rather, they affirm that God is love and then they virtually ignore the existence of divine judgement and hell throughout the rest of the book. This seems to be because they have created an implicit false dichotomy (notwithstanding their remarks on pages 62–63): either God is loving or he is angered by sin and judges it. This false dichotomy manifests itself most clearly, as will be seen below, in the authors' understanding of the atonement.

What is lost when God's justice, wrath, and judgement are so underemphasised? What are the consequences of affirming these divine attributes briefly and half-heartedly, but mostly omitting them from one's recovery of Jesus' 'lost message'? In my opinion, Chalke and Mann's discomfort with God's wrath and judgement is largely responsible for three significant problems within the book:

- Its interpretation of the OT
- Its view of evangelism and
- Its misunderstanding of the cross and the nature of the atonement.

Each of these warrants examination.

I The Lost Message's interpretation of the OT

On page 49 Chalke and Mann assert that God's 'unwillingness to distance himself from the people of Israel and their actions meant that at times he was implicated in the excessive acts of war that we see in some of the

books of the Old Testament'. That is, God was always involved with Israel in order to demonstrate *his* love, but Israel (it is implied) sometimes used God to 'justify cruel acts of revenge'. This is the authors' explanation for why certain verses and stories in the OT make God seem like a 'vengeful despot'.

This is an extremely problematic assertion, because it is often the inspired writers of the canonical documents who assert that God is responsible for the total destruction of certain peoples. For example, the catalogue of southern Palestinian cities taken and completely destroyed by Israel in Joshua 10:29–43 ends with the claim that Joshua 'left no survivor, but he utterly destroyed all who breathed, *just as the Lord, the God of Israel, had commanded* ... Joshua captured all these kings and their lands at one time, *because the Lord, the God of Israel, fought for Israel*' (my emphasis). In Joshua's farewell address at the end of the book, he says to Israel, 'And you have seen all that the Lord your God has done to all these nations because of you, for the Lord your God is he who has been fighting for you' (23:3). God's action in driving out the other nations is not seen by the author of Joshua as a necessary bit of dirty work in which God is unhappily 'implicated'. Rather, it is the basis upon which Israel is called to love and serve him (23:8–11).

In 1 Samuel 15, the Lord rejects Saul as king not because he utterly destroys Amalek, but because he is disobedient in *not* utterly destroying Amalek. The Lord's purpose is to 'punish' Amalek by destroying it (15:2), but Saul disobeys. The distaste of Chalke and Mann for God's judgement and anger leads them to deny what the authors of Scripture plainly affirm.

A similar distaste leads Chalke and Mann to a rather bizarre interpretation of Exodus 33:20, which reads, 'You cannot see my face, for no man can see me and live!' They argue against the common view that Moses cannot see God because of his sinfulness and God's holiness. Instead, they suggest that it is because God suffers more than anyone and is therefore 'hiding the immeasurable suffering caused by that love. No-one could bear to see a face wrung with such infinite pain and live' (59). No evidence from the context of Exodus 33 is given in support of this view. Instead, the conclusion is arrived at by citing the personal experience of one of the authors and the work of philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff. Again, however, the evidence of the OT itself points in a different direction. Exodus 19:21 is a close parallel to Exodus 33:20. Here, the Lord suggests that if the people 'gaze' upon him, they will die. The emphasis in

Exodus 19 is on purity restrictions and the need for the people and the priests to consecrate themselves (19:10–15, 22–25; cf. 20:18–21). This suggests that God's holiness and purity are the reasons men and women cannot look upon him and live. This is confirmed elsewhere in the OT by Isaiah's reaction upon seeing God (Is. 6:1–7).

II The Lost Message's view of evangelism

Clear views of God's power, justice and wrath have often unleashed powerful impulses for evangelism in the course of church history. Jonathan Edwards' sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* is a good example of this. It was preached in 1741 and it played a significant role in New England's Great Awakening (the sermon is quoted disparagingly on pages 55–56). It is not surprising that a book that downplays God's wrath at sin will adopt a different approach to evangelism.

Chalke and Mann leave little doubt that they disapprove of approaches to evangelism that make clear God's wrath at sin and call people to repent of such sin. These approaches are caricatured as: telling people off (97), frightening people into following Jesus (97), 'sin management' techniques (97), 'nagging and yelling at people' (97), pushing, forcing, bludgeoning, beating, coercing, cajoling, manhandling, and bullying people (97), 'condemnation and judgement' (98), 'rubbing in the guilt' (116) and 'nagging' (117).

One particularly revealing section of the book is the part that tells the story of John Diamond, the *London Times* journalist, who wrote columns during a four-year battle with throat cancer until his death in 2001. The authors describe the responses of various Christians to Diamond's columns. Many wrote to him and told him that if he would repent and ask God for forgiveness he could be saved. Some sent him tracts and booklets with the 'step-by-step procedure' for being saved. Some suggested that his cancer was the result of his 'godless and immoral lifestyle'. Chalke and Mann relate the response of a friend who heard about the letters these Christians had sent: 'How could people be so insensitive? ... all that these "representatives of Jesus" could do was condemn [Diamond]'. The friend wrote to Diamond sharing his own experience of suffering and suggested that he would like to chat with Diamond in order to gain help on his own journey. The authors conclude that the friend's letter, 'no doubt did far more than the judgemental and condemnatory tone of most of the

correspondence [Diamond] had received from Christians until this point' (151).

What is amazing about this story and the authors' assessment of it is that the responses of the various Christians are lumped together. The Christians who suggested that Diamond could be saved through repentance and asking forgiveness are not distinguished from those who suggested that his cancer was a judgement for a godless lifestyle. All alike are labelled as 'insensitive' and 'condemning' and 'judgemental'.

Chalke and Mann seem to suggest evangelism is a calling to something 'rather than' a calling away from something (118–19). But why not both? Does not Jesus call his hearers away from a sinful, godless life and into a new life? Does repentance have nothing to do with giving up sinful ways (118)? What is problematic here is *not* the authors' emphasis on sounding a positive note in evangelism. Jesus clearly modelled openness and inclusion in his interactions with sinners. Rather, the problem is in the caricature of evangelistic efforts that carefully and sensitively present the plight of human beings under God's judgement.

It is not wrong to make people feel guilty if they really are guilty. If someone who does not trust in Christ is in fact a 'child of wrath' (Eph. 2:3) and 'dead in transgressions' (Eph. 2:5), then it is not unloving to tell them so. It is precisely the loving thing to do. A doctor who tells the patient with stomach cancer that he has a stomach-ache is not loving. It is better to tell the truth and seek treatment for the patient.

What is so troubling about *The Lost Message of Jesus* is its discomfort with the NT passages (cited above) that speak of divine judgement, as evidenced by its omission of all such passages. One cannot help feeling that part of Jesus' message is being suppressed. Such suppression inevitably will lead to a kind of one-sided evangelism (rightly calling people to something, but not warning them away from something) that differs significantly from Jesus' own example.

III The Lost Message's misunderstanding of the cross and the nature of the atonement

The recent controversies swirling around *The Lost Message of Jesus* in British evangelical circles have focused mainly on the provocative comments made on pages 182–83. Here, Chalke and Mann suggest that 'the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse – a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed'. The reason this cannot

be what happens on the cross is that:

such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement "God is love". If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.

What has generally been lacking in response to these assertions is a recognition that they are in fact part of a larger problem. Chalke and Mann deny that God punishes Jesus on the cross because (as has been seen above) they are uncomfortable with the thought that God punishes anyone. Is it a coincidence that a book rejecting penal substitution has only a couple passing references to God's judgement of sin and no clear teaching on hell? Probably not. I suspect that there is a closer link between one's view of penal substitution and one's view of God's judgement than has often been recognised. It is not surprising that those uncomfortable with the latter will often be uncomfortable with the former. In the case of this book, the former is denied and the latter is virtually ignored.

As noted above, one of the fundamental problems here is the implicit false dichotomy created between God's love on the one hand and his anger at, and judgement of sin on the other. The Bible holds God's love and his justice together. This is something that Chalke and Mann appear to want to do on pages 62–63, but their attempt collapses in practice. God's love is upheld. God's judgement of sin is denied (in the case of the cross) or ignored (in the case of hell and final judgement).

Chalke's and Mann's denial that God is punishing Jesus on the cross is accompanied by a significantly different understanding of the cross. They suggest that: 'Just as a lightning-conductor soaks up powerful and destructive bolts of electricity, so Jesus, as he hung on that cross, soaked up all the forces of hate, rejection, pain and alienation all around him' (179). Chalke and Mann tell the story of a woman named Carol whose husband was unfaithful to her. Just before the divorce settlement was finalised, Carol wrote to her husband and explained that she would be willing to forget and forgive all the pain and suffering he had caused if he would return to the marriage. This, according to Chalke and Mann, is the model for Jesus' suffering on the cross: 'he absorbed all the pain, all the suffering caused by the breakdown in our relationship with God and in

doing so demonstrated the lengths to which a God who is love will go to restore it' (181).

One basic problem with this understanding of the cross is that it does not explain the need for Jesus to *die* on the cross. Carol didn't need to die in order to 'absorb' the pain and suffering caused by her husband. Similarly, Jesus wouldn't have needed to die if his purpose on the cross was simply to 'absorb' sin. The Biblical version of events presents a different story – one that explains the need for Jesus' *death*. Jesus died as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). He died to propitiate the wrath of God 'in his blood' (Rom. 3:25). Jesus died because sin needed punishing if God was to be both 'just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus' (Rom. 3:26). The idea of a penal substitution accounts for Jesus' *death*, but the 'absorption' theory of the authors fails to do so (the *Christus Victor* view suffers from the same problem).

In conclusion, I would suggest that the title of *The Lost Message of Jesus* unfortunately describes the contents of the book, for the book has lost something that Jesus' message contained. Chalke and Mann have read only part of the note in the bottle, and without the other half, the message they have found is not as 'joined-up' and 'seamless' as they suggest. In fact, it is sometimes incoherent and confusing. It leads to misreadings of OT texts, unhelpful approaches to evangelism, and a mistaken denial of the penal substitution view of the atonement. Despite a number of positive contributions, the book therefore remains significantly flawed.

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The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology – *A Review Article*

C. Marvin Pate, J. Scott Duvall, J. Daniel Hays, E. Randolph Richards, W. Dennis Tucker Jr., and Preben Vang. Leicester: Apollos, 2004, 320 pages, £14.99, ISBN: 0-84474-055-2

In the preface, the authors state that the purpose of the book is 'to produce an overarching biblical theology that stresses large connecting motifs, a theology that attempts to step back from the trees for a moment and look at the forest as a whole' (9). The introductory chapter (Pate) restates the purpose more boldly, asserting that there is, in fact, a prevailing theme which unifies the OT and NT. It acknowledges that the claim is controversial, and is chiefly a question for biblical theology. As a result it reviews the two major periods in modern scholarship which responded to the discipline of biblical theology. The first period (1787 – 1878) followed a rationalist approach, which emphasised the diversity of Scripture and therefore rejected the discipline. The second period (post WWII – 1960s) rejected rationalism and upheld biblical theology for reasons including a belief in the unity of the Bible and its uniqueness in the ancient Near East. Although these tenets were criticised in the 1960s, and the movement declined somewhat, it nevertheless enjoys contemporary support from various related fields (e.g., canonical criticism). Pate follows the work of O.H. Steck (1967), who argued that the literature of Second Temple Judaism was dominated by the Deuteronomistic perspective of the history of Israel, which had five aspects: 'Israel's perpetual disobedience to God', 'Israel and the prophets', 'Israel's rejection of the prophets', 'Israel and the Deuteronomic curses', and 'The restoration of Israel and the Deuteronomic blessings' (Pate, 20–21, summarising Steck). Steck qualified that not all five needed to be present for a text to be considered Deuteronomistic, so that the perspective has bearing on the NT. Pate thus claims that story of Israel 'qualif[ies] to be characterized as a biblical theology in its own right' (23). He reduces Steck's five aspects to an

overarching pattern of sin, exile and restoration, and the rest of the book details how the pattern appears in the major units of the Bible.

The first unit is the Pentateuch (ch. 2, Tucker), where the theme first appears in Genesis 3–11, in which sin led to ‘expulsion and wandering’ (33). Genesis 12–50, however, presents an instance of restoration through Abraham, who is blessed by Yahweh, and thus becomes the conveyor of blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:1–3). With the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20–23), Yahweh makes the Israelites his people. As such they are to adhere to the laws that are stipulated in the covenant, with the promise of blessing for obedience and curse for disobedience. The blessing/curse theme continues in Leviticus 26. However, it adds the restoration component: should Israel go into exile from persistent disobedience, Yahweh will bring restoration if the nation confesses its sins. According to Tucker, Deuteronomy provides ‘the hermeneutical key to the entire Pentateuch’ (42), since it both emphasises the need for obedience and articulates most extensively the restoration dimension (Deut. 30:1–10).

The next section (ch. 3, Hays) covers the historical books (Josh. – 2 Kgs). Theologically and thematically these books show a strong connection with Deuteronomy, so much so that Deuteronomy through to 2 Kings are commonly referred to as the ‘Deuteronomistic history’. The unit begins positively: in Joshua, God’s promise of the land to Abraham is fulfilled with the seizure of Canaan. We also find an instance of the blessing/curse pattern in Rahab, a Canaanite, who is blessed for heeding the request for sanctuary by Joshua’s two spies (Josh. 6:17, 25). Another instance of this pattern can be found in Achan, an Israelite, who is cursed for disobeying Joshua’s instructions regarding the spoil (Josh. 7). This example is especially significant since Rahab’s incorporation into the Israelite community (Josh. 6:25) conveys the theological idea – based on God’s promise to bless the nations through Abraham (Gen. 12:3) – that the true Israelite is ultimately determined by “faith in God’s promises” rather than by ethnicity (54). Although things begin well, the book of Joshua contains ‘certain hints of foreboding [which] foreshadow the disastrous future’, e.g. for instance, Joshua 13:13 (55). Despite God’s promise of blessing, the nation persistently disobeys; and although instances of restoration arise (e.g., Ruth, Samuel, David), the sin–exile aspects predominate the remainder of the unit.

Chapter 4 (Tucker) considers the Psalms and Wisdom literature. On the former, the historical psalms contain references to all three aspects of the

overarching theme: sin (e.g., Pss. 78:10–11, 40; 106:14, 28), exile (e.g., Pss. 78:58–59, 60; 106:41) and restoration (e.g., Ps. 136:23–24). Although Tucker concedes that ‘very little of the story of Israel can be found in much of the Wisdom literature’ (76), he maintains that this corpus is relevant on the individual rather than the corporate level vis-à-vis Deuteronomistic theology, i.e. obedience leads to prosperity, while disobedience results in disaster. Proverbs 3:1–12 and 6:20–35, for example, reflect Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and 5:6–18/6:4–9, respectively.

The prophets (ch. 5, Hays) are divided into pre-exilic and exilic prophets. The former functioned as ‘Yahweh’s prosecuting attorneys’ (93), who charged Israel with disobedience to Mosaic law in three general areas: sin (idolatry), social injustice and religious ritualism. They warned that, according to the Mosaic covenant, failure to repent would bring judgement and, ultimately, exile. Yet both the pre- and post-exilic prophets looked to a future, messianic/eschatological restoration that is based on the unconditional Abrahamic and Davidic covenants as well as the new covenant which is written on the heart rather than stone. Hays remarks that the amount of prophetic material which pertains to restoration is small compared with that on sin and exile. Nevertheless, it is this material which is emphasised by NT writers as connecting with their witness. Hence, the prophetic material pertaining to restoration is critical to the unity of the two Testaments.

A chapter on Second Temple Judaism (Pate) follows the thesis of N.T. Wright that ‘Jewish intertestamental literature’ centred on the question of how ‘Israel could be “restored” to her land but still remain in exile’ (106). According to Pate (106), the Deuteronomistic tradition (which he equates with the sin–exile–restoration theme, 105) is expressed through four types of Second Temple literature: ‘theocratic’ (e.g., 1 Maccabees, Sirach), ‘apocalyptic’ (e.g., 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch), apologetic (e.g., The Wisdom of Solomon, 4 Maccabees) and ‘sectarian apocalyptic’ (e.g., 1 Enoch, Jubilees). All four are marked by nomism and particularism, which are incongruent with the prophets’ admonition against ritualism and the Abrahamic covenant’s inclusion of the nations.

The Gospels are addressed in two chapters: the Synoptic Gospels (ch. 7, Vang) and the Gospel of John (ch. 8, Richards). The Synoptics evince Israel’s misunderstanding of God’s involvement with its history. Using Mark as the basis for discussion, Vang traces several aspects of Israel’s story. As an example of restoration, the arrival of Jesus the Messiah

indicates the return of the presence of God among his people. Jesus is also recognised as the suffering servant of Isaiah, through whom the nations will be reached. However, the Synoptics understand that disbelieving Jews remain in exile. In Jesus' confrontations with the Jewish leaders, for example, they indicate that the leadership misinterpreted the law as well as the identity and role of the Messiah. Moreover, the parable of the fig tree reveals God's rejection of Israel's worship (149). The resurrection of Jesus, furthermore, validates Jesus' teachings, terminates the exile and initiates the new age. The Gospel of John, while strikingly different from the Synoptics, nevertheless shares a number of key motifs (e.g., Jewish leadership's misperception of Jesus). The major themes in John (e.g., the Book of Signs, 1:19 – 12:50) all contribute to the central purpose of demonstrating that Jesus offers restoration to Israel and to the nations.

Although the treatment of the Acts of the Apostles (ch. 9, Vang) focuses on the first nine chapters, Luke, throughout Acts, 'use[s] historical events as a vehicle for teaching without losing the integrity of the historical events themselves' (178). Indeed, Luke uses the same methodology in his gospel. God's 'eternal purpose' had been for Israel to be a light to the nations; but because Israel had misunderstood, he would now use 'the new Israel, Jesus' disciples, who are empowered by the presence of God's spirit' (186). This idea is embodied in Stephen's speech (Acts 7), which, in 'condemning the Jewish leadership for disobeying the law (7:53), and (according to Vang) implying that the new covenant includes Jews and Gentiles, stands as 'the climactic center pole in Acts' (198).

The Pauline corpus is considered in chapter 10 (Pate). Whereas the gospels understand the crucifixion as Jesus receiving the Deuteronomistic curse so that his followers could receive the Deuteronomic blessing, Paul argues that even attempting to follow the law results in curse, whereas placing faith in Jesus brings blessing. For support, Pate draws upon Romans 1:16 – 3:31; 2 Corinthians 3:1 – 4:6; Galatians 3:10–14; Ephesians; Colossians; and 1 Thessalonians 2:15–16. Galatians 3:10–14, for example, explains the idea through a structural syllogism: transgressing the law leads to curse, no one can keep the law, therefore all who seek justification through keeping the law are cursed. By dying on a tree, Christ – who kept the law perfectly – took on our curse, so that we may receive the Abrahamic blessing through faith. Hence, the Deuteronomic curse is reversed. Since the law brings death and condemned the innocent Jesus, it is flawed and to be replaced by Christ as the vehicle of God's revelation.

Neither 1, 2 Peter, James, Jude, nor Hebrews address the entire story of Israel (chapter ch. 11, Richards), but 'most use one aspect' (252). James and 1 Peter, for example, write from a context of living in exile and waiting for restoration.

The Revelation to John (ch. 12, Duvall) 'draws together in spectacular fashion the central elements of the story of Israel – sin, exile, and restoration' (255). Written at a time when Christians experienced pressure to worship false gods, Revelation reassures believers that the Creator of the cosmos will bring it to its conclusion and remains worthy of sole adoration. Duvall observes many parallels between Revelation and the OT, for instance, keeping God's commandments (cf. Deut.; Rev. 1:3) and the fulfilment of OT prophecies such as the blessing of the nations through Abraham (cf. Gen. 12:1–3; Rev. 7:9–12). Moreover, Revelation portends the ultimate exile for God's enemies (e.g., Rev. 6:1 – 8:1) and the restoration of his people. On the latter, Revelation 21–22 has many allusions to the reverse of the curse in Genesis 3 and the downward spiral in Genesis 4–11.

A final chapter (Duvall) concludes that one or more aspects of the sin–exile–restoration pattern occur in each of the main sections of the Bible, which validates the authors' thesis that the story of Israel is a theme which spans Scripture.

The preface of the book states: 'Our prayer for this work is that it will become an important tool of study for students, professors and ministers as well as for informed laity as they come to understand their own faith in light of the fulfilment of Israel's story in Jesus the Messiah' (9). As a guide to biblical study, the book is well-suited to students and informed laypersons since it provides a useful overview of most of the books of the Bible and highlights some of the critical issues. Moreover, each chapter concludes with sections of suggested further reading and study questions. The latter generally pertain to the main points of the chapter, but occasionally probe further. The suggested readings, however, are restricted to entries from the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (InterVarsity Press) – the exception being chapter 8, which also refers to the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (InterVarsity Press). The omission of other basic reference works such as the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Doubleday) is also regrettable. These factors plus the explanations of basic historical events (e.g., Babylon's double invasion of Judah, 91, n. 6) and the definitions of standard terms (e.g., 'Deuteronomic history', 18, n. 21; 'Apocrypha', 105,

n. 1; 'inclusio', 248, n. 56) indicate that the book will leave scholars wanting. As a means of nurturing faith through seeing 'the fulfilment of Israel's story in Jesus', however, the book will be beneficial to each member of its targeted audience.

One problem with the book is the insufficient attention to the change in what constitutes 'Israel' with the advent of the NT, i.e. the shift from ethnic to spiritual Israel. It is inadequate, for example, to distinguish between the Jewish people and the Jewish leadership (e.g., 195–96), since it was not only Israel's leaders who rejected Jesus. To be sure, the authors certainly distinguish between old and new Israel in several places (e.g., 186, 194, 204, 246), but readers would benefit from a section specifically devoted to this important topic. A second difficulty is the fact that some biblical material is largely irrelevant to the book's theme. The section on Wisdom literature is a case in point (cf. also the book's index), where Tucker acknowledges that little of these texts applies directly to the story of Israel (76).

These problems lead to a third difficulty: namely, the use of the Deuteronomistic history in the definition of the story of Israel. The authors claim that 'the story of Israel, conceived in a particular way, is a prevailing pattern in Scripture' (12). As mentioned, the introduction appears to associate the 'particular way' with the five aspects of the Deuteronomistic history as identified by Steck. The 'particular way' is then reduced to 'the pattern of sin–exile–restoration' (22), with the qualification that a text need not 'contain all five elements in order for it to be framed by the Deuteronomistic perspective' (23). The Deuteronomistic history is thus equivalent to the pattern of sin–exile–restoration, a predominate pattern in the OT and NT (23). The question is why the book labours to identify the patterns of sin–exile–restoration pattern and blessing/curse with the Deuteronomistic history, when both appear in places which are not, strictly speaking, Deuteronomistic.

The authors' task would be much simpler by claiming that the sin–exile–pattern is ubiquitous in Scripture, and that the blessing/curse pattern likewise occurs outside the Deuteronomistic history. This would allow the patterns to be discussed sequentially in the canon without having to associate each occurrence with the Deuteronomistic history. For example, the first complete instance of the sin–exile–restoration pattern occurs in the Flood narrative (Gen. 6:1 – 9:19), which is well before the Deuteronomistic history. Similarly, the Promised Land, while one of the

'Deuteronomic' blessings (44), has its provenance in the Abrahamic covenant, as does the incorporation of the Gentiles into the people of God (Gen. 15, 17) – a prominent theme in Acts, and indeed in the NT.

A more general view of the sin–exile–restoration pattern would also facilitate the distinction between the historical and figurative senses of 'exile', which the book presupposes. The Flood, for instance, is not a literal exile (cf. 2 Kgs. 17:6, 25:20–21); nor is a literal exile intended by Pate (e.g., 106), when he affirms N.T. Wright's thesis that inter-testamental literature was primarily interested in how the Jews could remain in exile, despite having been restored to the land.

These criticisms do not undermine the book's thesis, but rather refine it. The authors have successfully demonstrated successfully that the story of Israel applies to enough of the Biblical material to be justified as a theme by which the Bible can be viewed comprehensively. As the field of biblical studies continues to diverge into ever-narrower specialisations, it has become increasingly difficult for OT and NT scholars to converse; and, indeed, the question of whether the discontinuity between the OT and NT is so great as to preclude any meaningful connection remains on the table for many scholars. The authors have, therefore, made a significant contribution by demonstrating that there is an organic unity to the Bible, and we are grateful to view the forest.

Charles L. Echols

Stapleford

The Last Word

Killing the Messenger

Robbie F. Castleman, National Director for RTSF/USA and Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies and Theology at John Brown University

A beautiful and vibrant woman in her mid thirties looked at a small piece of plastic held between her thumb and her index finger and got the surprise of her life. This over-the-counter soothsayer told her she was pregnant. Well, that explained a lot, she thought, but it also raised many questions – the biggest question being, ‘How do I tell my husband?’ They had been madly in love for most of their adult lives, faithful in their marriage and had enjoyed each other’s company from their first meeting, including a good laugh over dinner last night. But children were not, and never had been a consideration. The proof of ‘99% effective’ was held between her fingertips and the reality of surprise began to have a name. If it’s a girl...

She was in the middle of working through her good news, with all its wonder, gifts and demands when she heard her husband’s footsteps thundering down the stairs. (He’ll have to walk more softly once the baby is here to sleep!) As she turned to face him, her thought through movie-script-with-soundtrack was forgotten in the reality of the moment and she just blurted, ‘We’re going to have a baby!’

He stopped dead in his tracks, looked at the small plastic herald she was waving, took her in his arms and said, ‘Sweetheart, you know how much I love you, but, no we are not going to have a baby. This was not a part of our happiness, our envisioned future. Babies are costly, messy, demanding, life-threatening sometimes, and just not a part of what I signed on for when I fell in love with you. I love you, but I refuse to accept what you have just said. If this is a part of our lives, our relationship will no longer be fun, exciting or fulfilling for me and I may have to call it quits or, at least, distance myself from this whole thing.’

I pictured this scene when I reflected on a statement I read in a letter I received from one of my students who is on a two-year mission with Word Made Flesh in Bolivia. He wrote, ‘While Jesus both proclaims and embodies the Kingdom, we’ve become less concerned with reopening the message

of Jesus, in his terms, than with proclaiming the significance of Jesus himself. We've embraced the messenger and torn up the message.'

Something rang true when I read this as his cultural critique of much North American comfortable, popular, Dove-awarded, and really exciting evangelicalism. We love our Sweetheart Jesus, croon valentine-hymns in 'worship', envision a happy, fulfilling and blessed future for our lives (it's a 'personal relationship' don't forget!). We really show our faithfulness by the bumper stickers on our cars, the message on our T-shirts and the things we don't do. But, when Jesus surprises us with news we hadn't thought through (the small print in the NT), we find it quite acceptable to ignore the message, dismiss it as fine for other people, or demand that it disappears because of who we are, what we need or the mood we're in.

The fictional scenario that began this piece sounds outrageous to us. This husband is a real jerk! The couple has been incredibly self-serving and selfish. Even though this woman seems willing to accept the reality of this 'surprise', will she abort this baby in the light of her husband's reaction to the news? There is not a Christian reading this who doesn't see that what the couple thinks is 'love' isn't love at all. The man can't love the messenger if he doesn't love the message. It's a part of her. And him. Does she really love her husband if she destroys the unexpected and demanding gift of their relationship? No.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer pointed out that Jesus makes it quite clear that he brings the Good News of the Kingdom as both a free gift and a costly demand. Jesus did not, and does not give us the option of 'embracing the messenger and tearing up the message'. Jesus is both Messenger and Message. He is the Kingdom. He is Justice. He is Righteousness. He is the Way. He is Truth. He is What He Says. What Jesus says is: 'You cannot love God and mammon'; 'You can't serve two masters'; 'Love your enemies'; 'Love one another'; 'Turn the other cheek'; 'Give your coat, too'; 'Lose your life to find it'; 'Follow me'; 'Choose the narrow gate, walk the small way, travel with the few'.

Every time we think we can say, 'I love you, Jesus', but I just can't do that now – it's not in my plans, it's too costly, it's inconvenient, others wouldn't understand, I don't understand, it's not what I need right now' – we are that jerk of a husband above. *Every time* God still says to us, as he did to David, 'You are that man!' The initial step of David's repentance was not tearing up the message. He heard it and he wept. David heard the Lion of Judah growl. David learned in that moment of confrontation what C.S.

Lewis reflects in Mr Beaver's description of the Christ-Lion of Aslan, 'Who said anything about safe? Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.'

The King of the Kingdom is good, the Lion of Judah is demanding and we need to hear the Lion growl when we try to pet him like a house cat, tame him by our own life-styles, domesticate his transcendence by our comfort zones or ignore his immanence by the insertion of our own priorities. Who is it we really hold in our embrace if we are embracing a messenger while tearing up the message? I often quote F.F. Bruce in an opening lecture for my NT classes in this regard. 'The character of Jesus can only be known through the New Testament records.' Not our wishful thinking, not our self-serving imaginations, not our most fervent hope or desperate need.

Jesus is the Word. Jesus is what he says he is. We evangelicals need recognise in our own sin, the other side of the same sinful coin of theological liberals who have, in many ways, celebrated the message while dismissing the Messenger. We love it when the Lion growls at 'them' while we sit in self-sanctified safety listening to our house cat purr.