

# themelios

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## DESCRIPTION

*Themelios* is an international, evangelical, peer-reviewed theological journal that expounds and defends the historic Christian faith. Its primary audience is theological students and pastors, though scholars read it as well. *Themelios* began in 1975 and was operated by RTSF/UCCF in the UK, and it became a digital journal operated by The Gospel Coalition in 2008. The editorial team draws participants from across the globe as editors, essayists, and reviewers. *Themelios* is published three times a year online at The Gospel Coalition website in PDF and HTML, and may be purchased in digital format with Logos Bible Software and in print with Wipf and Stock. *Themelios* is copyrighted by The Gospel Coalition. Readers are free to use it and circulate it in digital form without further permission, but they must acknowledge the source and may not change the content.

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## REVIEWS

The book review editors generally select individuals for book reviews, but potential reviewers may contact them about reviewing specific books. As part of arranging book reviews, the book review editors will supply book review guidelines to reviewers.

EDITORIAL

# Comments on New Testament Commentaries

— Brian J. Tabb —

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“Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.”  
(Eccl 12:12)

“When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.” (2 Tim 4:13)

Pastors and theological students have long prized commentaries. Charles Spurgeon called biblical commentators “a glorious army ... whose acquaintance will be your delight and profit.”<sup>1</sup> The English preacher remarked that Matthew Henry’s work should be “chained in the vestry for anybody and everybody to read” and considered John Trapp “my especial companion and treasure.”<sup>2</sup> While pastors today still read Henry, Calvin, and other classics from centuries past, numerous commentary series and stand-alone volumes published in recent years offer students of the Scriptures a wide range of options—and opinions! To borrow the words of the ancient Preacher, “Of making many commentaries there is no end.”

This article offers my own reflections about the purpose, value, and limits of biblical commentaries, followed by specific commentary recommendations for each NT book. *Themelios* has regularly published reviews of biblical commentaries since its inception. The first issue in 1975 included Richard Bauckham’s review of Beasley-Murray’s work on Revelation,<sup>3</sup> and subsequent issues have featured a NT literature survey around the turn of the millennium<sup>4</sup> and overviews

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<sup>1</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries: Two Lectures Addressed to the Students of The Pastors’ College, Metropolitan Tabernacle* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1890), 6. Available online at <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/comment>.

<sup>2</sup> Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries*, 7, 11. Cf. Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of All the Books of the Old and New Testaments*, 3rd. ed. (London: J. Clark, 1721); John Trapp, *Annotations upon the Old and New Testaments*, 5 vols. (Gloucestershire: Weston-upon-Avon, 1662).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Bauckham, “Review of *The Book of Revelation* by G. R. Beasley-Murray,” *Themelios* 1.1 (1975): 28–29.

<sup>4</sup> Alistair I. Wilson, “New Testament Literature Survey—2000,” *Themelios* 27.1 (2001): 22–31.

of studies on Luke, John, Colossians, and the Pastoral Epistles,<sup>5</sup> not to mention book reviews of many major commentaries published in English. Additionally, longtime *Themelios* editor D. A. Carson has published the *New Testament Commentary Survey* (now in its seventh edition), and additional books and online lists offer recommendations about the “best commentaries” available.<sup>6</sup>

Here I seek to provide an up-to-date, focused treatment of NT commentaries. Rather than simply providing long lists of resources, I offer an introductory paragraph highlighting representative critical and conservative commentaries on each NT book<sup>7</sup> followed by three shortlist recommendations for pastors and theological students. For every shortlisted commentary, I provide a link to a published *Themelios* review (where available) as well as a paragraph summarizing the commentary’s strengths or benefits with pastors and theological students particularly in mind. Most of the shortlist volumes are written by established evangelical scholars and published in the past thirty years. Before offering specific commentary recommendations, let’s first consider the history and purpose of commentaries and reflect on the best ways to use these important resources.

### *1. The Purpose of Commentaries*

The practice of commenting on important works goes back to ancient Athens and was advanced by literary scholars in Alexandria.<sup>8</sup> Antiquity’s most prolific commentator, Didymus of Alexandria, wrote between 3,500 and 4,000 works.<sup>9</sup> Early Christian commentators include Hippolytus of Rome (on Daniel) and Origen (on Matthew, John, and Romans) in the early third century AD.<sup>10</sup>

Most fundamentally, commentaries seek to explain the sense of a written work. In his work on the *Iliad*, Aristarchus of Samothrace tried “to explain Homer by Homer, to interpret him by himself.”<sup>11</sup> In

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<sup>5</sup> I. Howard Marshall, “The Present State of Lucan Studies,” *Themelios* 14.2 (1989): 52–57; D. A. Carson, “Selected Recent Studies of the Fourth Gospel,” *Themelios* 14.2 (1989): 57–64; I. Howard Marshall, “Recent Study of the Pastoral Epistles,” *Themelios* 23.1 (1997): 3–28; Nijay Gupta, “New Commentaries on Colossians: Survey of Approaches, Analysis of Trends, and the State of Research,” *Themelios* 35.1 (2010): 7–14.

<sup>6</sup> D. A. Carson, *New Testament Commentary Survey*, 7th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013). Cf. the companion volume Tremper Longman, III, *Old Testament Commentary Survey*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013). See also the website <https://bestcommentaries.com/>, the recent book Nijay K. Gupta, *New Testament Commentary Guide: A Brief Handbook for Students and Pastors* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020); and Thomas R. Schreiner, “Recommended New Testament Commentaries for Evangelical Pastors,” *9Marks*, 3 February 2023, <https://www.9marks.org/article/recommended-new-testament-commentaries-for-evangelical-pastors/>.

<sup>7</sup> Following the convention of many commentary surveys and commentary sets, I treat some shorter NT letters together: Colossians and Philemon, 1–2 Timothy and Titus, 2 Peter and Jude, and 1–3 John.

<sup>8</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, “On Commentary Writing,” in *On the Writing of New Testament Commentaries: Festschrift for Grant R. Osborne on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel and Stanley E. Porter, TENTS (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 4–5.

<sup>9</sup> Schnabel, “On Commentary Writing,” 5. “Didymus the scholar wrote four thousand books,” according to Seneca (*Epistles* 88.37, LCL).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, T. C. Schmidt, *Hippolytus of Rome’s Commentary on Daniel*, Gorgias Studies in Early Christianity and Patristics 79 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2022); Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 1–5*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, Fathers of the Church 103 (Washington DC, Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Cited by Schnabel, “On Commentary Writing,” 14.



the biblical tradition, commentators take their cues from the Levites who “read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read” (Neh 8:8 NIV). Commentaries are written on texts that are important for a community of readers and require explanation due to factors such as historical distance, differences in language, and challenging subject matter.<sup>12</sup> First-century Hellenistic readers sought commentaries to make sense of Homer and Aristotle. How much more necessary are good commentaries that help contemporary Christian readers understand the authoritative canonical texts written thousands of years ago in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek!

There are various sorts of biblical commentaries and series that reflect distinctive emphases. Some seek to illuminate the text’s historical-cultural context (e.g., *The Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*); others help readers navigate its original language and syntax (e.g., *Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament* and *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* [EGGNT]); others review the text’s reception history (e.g., *Hermeneia* and *Wiley Blackwell Bible Commentaries*); still others focus on the text’s contribution to biblical theology or its enduring theological and pastoral significance (e.g., *Evangelical Biblical Theological Commentary* [EBTC]). Some well-rounded series are particularly well-suited to the needs of pastors and theological students, such as the *Baker Exegetical Commentary* (BECNT), *Pillar New Testament Commentary* (PNTC), *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary* (ZECNT), and *New International Commentary* (NICNT). Regardless of commentaries’ intended scope and audience, they share a common concern to orient readers to the text and clarify its meaning.

G. K. Chesterton famously quipped, “Though St John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators”<sup>13</sup> (a sobering word as I write a commentary on the Apocalypse). It is a daunting task to write a commentary (unless your name is Didymus), and many critics have chastised commentators for their deficiencies and limitations. For example, Marita Mathijssen rehearses the “seven deadly sins” of commentary writing:<sup>14</sup>

1. assembling a hodgepodge of facts in search of comprehensiveness;
2. offering dictionary definitions for terms without really clarifying the text’s meaning;
3. including anecdotes and other information that is interesting but not essential for understanding the text;
4. failing to explain terms, customs, institutions, and actions in their historical context;
5. proposing solutions to riddles that introduce further riddles (which she likens to the mythical Hydra that grows new heads after the first is cut off);
6. presenting condensed textual explanations that include a dizzying maze of abbreviations and references to various other works;
7. presenting various lists, references, and facts in an arid style that doesn’t serve the reader.

NT commentaries may also go astray by treating the text in a fragmented, atomistic way that leads readers to miss the forest for the trees, and by adopting new hermeneutical fads in their search for

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<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Schnabel, “On Commentary Writing,” 9.

<sup>13</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, reprint ed. (Colorado Springs: Shaw, 2001), 15.

<sup>14</sup> Summarizing Marita Mathijssen, “Die ‘Sieben Todsünden’ des Kommentars,” in *Text und Edition: Positionen und Perspektiven*, ed. Rüdiger Nutt-Kofoth, Bodo Plachta, H. T. M. van Vliet, and Hermann Zwerschina (Berlin: Schmidt, 2000), 257–59. Mathijssen’s analysis focuses on literary commentaries, but many of the points apply to NT commentaries as well, according to Schnabel, “On Commentary Writing,” 20.

novelty or originality.<sup>15</sup> Stated positively, a good commentary faithfully and lucidly explains the meaning of the biblical text in its literary and historical-cultural context. A good commentary does not simply rehash the opinions of all who've gone before but offers fresh insights based on rigorous, and careful examination of the text with awareness of the larger scholarly discussion.

## 2. How to Use Commentaries

Trusted commentaries are an essential part of a theological library, taking their place alongside standard lexicons, Bible dictionaries, and works of historical, systematic, biblical, and pastoral theology. While consulting commentaries is valuable, it is a poor substitute for doing the hard work of carefully and prayerfully poring over the biblical text in its original language and in good translations. As Johann Albrecht Bengel famously said, “apply yourself wholly to the text; apply the text wholly to yourself.” Once pastors and theological students have reflected deeply on a text’s literary context, considered its flow of thought, and wrestled with its meaning and significance, they are ready to receive the full benefits of wise, learned commentaries.

For those who take the time to carefully and prayerfully study and meditate on the biblical text for themselves, good commentaries are invaluable tools. C. S. Lewis wrote, “My own eyes are not enough for me. I will see through those of others.”<sup>16</sup> Most pastors preparing their weekly sermons do not have the option to sit down with a senior biblical scholar to ask questions about the text’s difficult Greek syntax and unusual terms, its historical-cultural context, and its history of interpretation. But pastors can bring those questions to the commentaries on their shelf or in their digital library. Writing a major exegetical commentary is no small undertaking. Seasoned scholars spend years and sometimes decades carefully poring over the biblical text, teaching exegesis and survey courses, reading countless academic articles and monographs, mastering extrabiblical primary sources, and working with experienced editors to refine their writing to communicate the fruits of their research most effectively. So pastors and students of the Scriptures would do well to consult well-chosen exegetical commentaries to expand and deepen their grasp of the biblical text’s meaning in its context that they may rightly handle the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15).

Some authors stress the need to read commentaries “to broaden your horizons,” consulting works by those from other ethnic or cultural backgrounds and church traditions.<sup>17</sup> While busy pastors with a limited book budget may have difficulty following this advice, it’s certainly applicable to biblical scholars and seminary professors, who should consult read deeply and broadly, including works in other languages (where possible)<sup>18</sup> as well as commentaries and sermons from previous generations. Familiarity with older works may help the interpreter to build up some immunity “from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his own age.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, while my recommendations below focus on more

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<sup>15</sup> Schnabel, “On Commentary Writing,” 26–29.

<sup>16</sup> C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, reprint ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 140.

<sup>17</sup> Gupta, *New Testament Commentary Guide*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, James Prothro’s [review](#) of *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer: Kapitel 1–5* by Eckhard Schnabel (*Themelios* 44.1 [2019]: 153–54) and Robert Yarbrough’s [review](#) of *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* by Gerhard Maier (*BBR* 25.4 [2015]: 588–90).

<sup>19</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Learning in War-Time,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, reprint ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 59.

recently published commentaries, expositors would do well to consult older works such as Chrysostom on Matthew, Augustine in John, Murray or Lloyd-Jones on Romans, Luther on Galatians, Lightfoot on Philippians, Owen on Hebrews, or Bede on Revelation, to name a few.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Langham Publishing has produced the Africa Bible Commentary and Asia Bible Commentary series and multiple single-volume biblical commentaries, making the insights of global scholars readily available to readers worldwide.<sup>21</sup>

While there is real value in reading broadly, all students of Scripture should remember that “the dominant need is *to understand meanings accurately*. Postmodern sensibilities notwithstanding, the issue at stake is that of sheer faithfulness to the biblical message rather than smuggling one’s own ideas into the interpretation under the cover of the authoritative text.”<sup>22</sup>

### 3. New Testament Commentary Recommendations

I’ve reviewed the purpose of commentaries, reflected on ways to use them effectively, and discussed strategies for effectively using commentaries. Now I offer a shortlist of recommended commentaries for pastors and theological students, the primary readers of this journal.

This list is limited to commentaries written in English and assumes that readers have some facility with biblical Greek and theological training. Where available, I include links to *Themelios* reviews of recommended commentaries.

#### 3.1. One Volume and Online Commentaries

Most single-volume commentaries offer Bible readers a short introduction to each biblical book with an outline of its contents and a brief discussion of each chapter. Most pastors and theological students will want to consult more substantial exegetical commentaries, but one or two good single volume commentaries offers a helpful starting point to one’s personal theological library, especially for lay people. Here are my three shortlist recommendations:

- (1) Beale, G. K. and D. A. Carson, eds. *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007.

This is not your ordinary one-volume commentary but a serious exegetical work focused on explaining how the New Testament authors cite and allude to the Old Testament Scriptures. In fact, it is one of the most valuable and frequently used books in my library, and I require it as a seminary textbook every year. Each book is covered by recognized experts: Pao and Schnabel on Luke, Köstenberger on John, Silva on Galatians, Weima on 1–2 Thessalonians, Guthrie on Hebrews, Beale and McDonough on Revelation, etc. Pastors and theological students looking to add to their library would do well to start with this incredibly useful volume.

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<sup>20</sup> See especially The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (InterVarsity Press) and Crossway Classic Commentaries series.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Steven Guest’s [review](#) of the South Asia Bible Commentary, edited by Brian Wintle, *Themelios* 41.2 (2016): 316–18.

<sup>22</sup> Carson, *New Testament Commentary Survey*, 1, emphasis original. Schnabel concurs: “The most fundamental function of commentary is the explanation of the sense of the text” (“On Commentary Writing,” 16).

- (2) Carson, D. A., R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, and G. J. Wenham, eds. *New Bible Commentary*. 21st century ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994.

For a single-volume commentary treating the whole-Bible, I recommend the *New Bible Commentary*. While it's been in print for nearly three-decades, it remains a solid reference work with an outstanding group of contributors: Marshall on Luke, Morris on John, Moo on Romans, Winter on 1 Corinthians, Beasley-Murray on Revelation, etc. For example, France's entry on Matthew begins with a succinct four-page introduction covering Matthew the Teacher, Matthew's treatment of several key issues (Jesus the Messiah, Israel and the church, and Jesus the King), Authorship and Date, recommended further reading, and an outline of the book's contents. France's comments on the biblical text are brief yet informative, typically 400–500 words of exposition on each unit. This would be a solid choice for students and thoughtful Christians looking for an affordable, useful commentary to begin their theological library.

- (3) *TGC Concise Commentary*. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/commentary/>.

Readers of this journal may also be interested in a new online commentary series published by TGC. A team of trusted evangelical scholars have written introductions to the Old and New Testament and accessible commentaries on each biblical book, which are available for free online. The commentary introductions address each book's authorship, date, purpose, theological focus, and outline, the exposition of the text is clear and crisp, and a substantial bibliography directs readers to further resources.

### 3.2. The Gospel according to Matthew

The First Gospel was one of the most commented on books during the patristic age, including early expositions by Origen and Hilary of Poitiers and ninety sermons by John Chrysostom. In recent decades, there have been a number of important technical commentaries published on Matthew, including W. D. Davies and Dale Allison's landmark three-volume work (ICC), John Nolland's careful NIGTC volume, and Craig Keener's socio-rhetorical commentary that Donald Hagner has called a "tour de force."<sup>23</sup> Craig Blomberg (NAC) and Charles Quarles (EBTC) are also worthy of note.

While many others could be discussed, here are my shortlist picks for Matthew's Gospel:

- (1) Carson, D. A., Walter W. Wessel, and Mark L. Strauss. *Matthew–Mark*. Revised ed. EBC 9. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010. Read Gerhard Maier's [review](#) of the first edition.

Carson's work is well-known to readers of *Themelios*, and pastors and students of Scripture have been well-served by his *Expositor's Bible Commentary* on Matthew since its original publication in 1984. Revised in 2010, Carson's commentary includes a sixty-page introduction and nearly six-hundred pages of judicious, verse-by-verse exposition that assumes the Gospel's inerrancy, historicity, and unity. He explains that Matthew's Gospel fulfills multiple purposes, instructing and encouraging believers in the faith, supplying apologetic and evangelistic material, and fostering a deeper understanding of the Messiah's "person, work, and unique place in the unfolding history of redemption" (p. 49).

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<sup>23</sup> See Donald Hagner's [review](#) of Keener (*Themelios* 26.1 [2000]: 73–75) and David Wenham's [review](#) of Davies and Allison (*Themelios* 16.2 [1991]: 27–28).



- (2) France, R. T. *The Gospel of Matthew*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007. Read Donald Hagner's [review](#) of France's earlier Matthew commentary.

The late R. T. France, the first general editor of *Themelios*, devoted much of his distinguished career to studying the Gospels, and this massive Matthew commentary is his magnum opus. France extensively discusses introductory matters in an earlier book (*Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*),<sup>24</sup> so his NICNT commentary includes only a brief introduction followed by over a thousand pages of careful yet readable exposition.

- (3) Osborne, Grant R. *Matthew*. ZECNT. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010. Read the [review](#) by Jonathan Pennington.

Osborne is an exemplary commentator, who writes clearly, summarizes major scholarly views with charity, and regularly makes sound exegetical decisions. The reader-friendly series format includes the author's own translation, the main idea of each unit, a clear exegetical outline, and relevant theological reflections. I have assigned this volume as a seminary-level textbook, and as Jonathan Pennington notes, "the pastor who makes this one of the main commentaries in sermon preparation will not be disappointed" ([review](#)).

### 3.3. The Gospel according to Mark

No complete commentaries on the Gospel of Mark survive from the patristic era,<sup>25</sup> and the Second Gospel has often been overshadowed by Matthew, Luke, and John. C. E. B. Cranfield (CGTC) and William Lane (NICNT) were for many years the standard commentaries on Mark, later joined by Robert Guelich and Craig Evans' WBC volumes, Robert Gundry's massive Eerdmans commentary, and Morna Hooker's work in the BNTC series. The technical commentaries by Joel Marcus (AB) and Adela Yarbro Collins (Hermeneia) represent the standard historical-critical treatments of the book. The excellent commentaries by Robert Stein (BECNT) and Eckhard Schnabel (TNTC) fall just outside of my shortlist but would be valuable resources for pastors and students.

Here are my shortlist commentaries on Mark:

- (1) Edwards, James R. *The Gospel according to Mark*. PNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002. Read the [review](#) by Iain Campbell.

Edwards asserts that Mark's Gospel "displays considerable sophistication in literary intention and design" and portrays "a profoundly theological conception of Jesus as the authoritative yet suffering Son of God" (p. 3). Following a brief yet informative introduction, Edwards organizes his commentary in sixteen chapters (e.g., "The Gospel Appears in Person" [Mark 1:1–13]). Throughout, he combines clarity of style with insightful, responsible exegesis. Highly recommended.

- (2) Strauss, Mark L. *Mark*. ZECNT. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015.

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<sup>24</sup> R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1989).

<sup>25</sup> Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, eds., *Mark*, ACCS NT 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), xxi.

Strauss's fine commentary was a finalist for the 2015 Christian Book Award, and I have assigned this volume as a course textbook. He analyzes the Gospel in sixty-three units. Strauss examines the literary context of each unit, summarizes the main idea, offers his own translation and structural analysis, provides an exegetical outline, explains the text verse-by-verse, and reflects on the text's theological contribution. Some readers may quibble with some of Strauss's textual divisions<sup>26</sup> or interpretive decisions (e.g., rendering Mark 1:41 "being indignant" rather than "moved with pity"<sup>27</sup>), but overall this is a first-rate commentary that will serve pastors and students well.

- (3) France, R. T. *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. NIGTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002. Read the [review](#) by Darrell Bock.

France masterfully blends careful analysis of the Greek text with an appreciation for Mark's literary artistry and profound theology (see his treatment on "Mark the Storyteller" and "the Message of Mark" on pp. 15–35). As Bock notes in his [review](#), France "keeps the reader's focus on what is most important to appreciate."

### 3.4. The Gospel according to Luke

Luke is the longest book in the NT and is well-served by a number of useful commentaries. Joseph Fitzmyer (AB), I. Howard Marshall (NIGTC), and John Nolland (WBC) have been go-to technical commentaries for decades, and the standard historical-critical commentary is now François Bovon's expansive *Hermeneia* set (translated from German). Robert Tannehill's *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts* and Joel Green's NICNT commentary offer strong literary analysis of the Third Gospel, and the best non-technical treatments include Walter Liefeld and David Pao (EBC), Thomas Schreiner (ESVEC), and Nicholas Perrin's new work in the TNTC series (replacing the venerable Leon Morris).

Here are my short-list recommendations on Luke:

- (1) Edwards, James R. *The Gospel according to Luke*. PNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015.

Carson writes in the editor's preface, "Again and again Dr. Edwards displays a sure-footed exegesis that helps readers grapple with the text of Scripture, simultaneously engendering deepening knowledge and grateful reverence" (p. xi). Edwards focuses particularly on Jesus as the fulfillment of God's saving promises.<sup>28</sup> This work shares the same strengths as Edwards's earlier Mark commentary in the same series. It is eminently readable and consistently insightful and highly recommended for all students of Luke's Gospel.

- (2) Bock, Darrell L. *Luke*. 2 vols. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994–1996. Read the [review](#) by Thomas Martin.

Bock's comprehensive treatment of Luke's Gospel is well-organized and skillfully executed. He carefully expounds the book's Greek text, situates it in its historical-cultural context, and effectively

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<sup>26</sup> See Ardel B. Caneday's review (*JETS* 58.4 [2015]: 831–33).

<sup>27</sup> See Peter J. Williams, "An Examination of Ehrman's Case for ὀργισθεῖς in Mark 1:41," *NovT* 54 (2012): 1–12.

<sup>28</sup> See Alan J. Thompson's review (*BBR* 26.4 [2016]: 596–98).

engages scholarly questions about the Gospel's historicity and use of sources (concerns that benefit academic readers more than most preachers, as Martin notes in his [review](#)). Bock has published shorter commentaries in the NIVAC and IVPNTC series, but this two-volume Baker commentary is the standard for pastors and serious students with some facility in Greek.

(3) Garland, David E. *Luke*. ZECNT. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011.

This commentary follows the same user-friendly format as other volumes in the ZECNT series. Garland frequently references primary sources like Josephus and the Mishnah and notes important secondary sources while maintaining focused on the biblical text. His writing is clear and sometimes memorable. For example, he comments that Jesus “is not a publicity hound ... but one who is engaged in a divine mission” (p. 194) and calls Luke “the evangelist of prayer” (p. 977). In sum, Garland is a seasoned commentator who makes sound exegetical decisions and thoughtful theological reflections on Luke's Gospel.

### 3.5. The Gospel according to John

The Fourth Gospel has been likened to a soaring eagle<sup>29</sup> and to a pool shallow enough for a child to wade and deep enough for an elephant to swim.<sup>30</sup> Many commentators, ancient and modern, have reflected on John's heights and depths. C. K. Barrett and Raymond Brown (AB) contributed major critical commentaries in the mid-20th century, and Leon Morris (NICNT) was the standard evangelical treatment of John for decades. J. Ramsey Michaels's massive commentary replaced Morris in the NICNT series and offers “a balanced, nourishing, and very generous meal of Johannine fare.”<sup>31</sup> Herman Ridderbos's theological commentary is “refreshing and useful,”<sup>32</sup> while Marianne Meye Thompson (NTL) is insightful and accessible to pastors and students.

Certainly, many more John commentaries could be discussed, but here are my short-list recommendations:

(1) Carson, D. A. *The Gospel according to John*. PNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.

While Carson's commentary was published three decades ago, it remains a treasured resource for pastors and students. The hefty eighty-page introduction covers issues like the book's authorship (by the apostle John), structure, and evangelistic purpose, as well as a rich discussion of the Gospel's theological emphases and sage advice on preaching from John. Throughout, the commentary is marked by clear, straightforward, penetrating exposition of the text.

(2) Keener, Craig S. *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. 2 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003. Read the [review](#) by Alistair Wilson.

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<sup>29</sup> Augustine, *Harmony of the Gospels* 1.6; 4.10.11.

<sup>30</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus: An Exposition of John 14–17* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1988), 9. Variations of this saying go back at least to Gregory the Great's *Moralia* 4.

<sup>31</sup> Citing Murray Harris's [review](#) (*Themelios* 36.1 [2011]: 102–3)

<sup>32</sup> Citing Marianne Meye Thompson's [review](#) (*Themelios* 24.3 [2011]: 59–60).

Keener's commentary reflects rich, detailed engagement with John's Gospel, informed by extensive examination of primary sources and command of the scholarly literature. Indeed, "There are few questions Keener has not addressed."<sup>33</sup> While the thoroughness and length of this commentary may deter pastors, it is lucidly written and invaluable as a reference work.

(3) Klink III, Edward W. *John*. ZECNT. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016.

Klink aims to situate the Gospel of John "in its divine context as Christian Scripture" as well as "in its historical context" (p. 41). This is an outworking of a "confessional approach" that embraces the theological claims and the complete historicity of the biblical text (pp. 22–24). Klink outlines the Gospel into ten major sections and follows the same readable format as the other ZECNT volumes (discussed above). He writes as a scholar-pastor, combining exegetical rigor, clear communication, and warm devotion to Christ.

### 3.6. The Acts of the Apostles

F. F. Bruce's two commentaries on Acts served as the gold standard of conservative scholarship for decades, and his revised NICNT volume remains useful to pastors and students. Joseph Fitzmyer (AB) and C. K. Barrett (ICC) authored important critical commentaries, while Bock (BECNT) offers a well-balanced evangelical treatment of Acts, and Ben Witherington's socio-rhetorical commentary is superb. Patrick Schreiner's new CSC volume helpfully captures the book's theological message, and Steve Walton's forthcoming commentary will be an outstanding addition to the WBC series.

Here are my shortlist recommendations for Acts:

(1) Peterson, David G. *The Acts of the Apostles*. PNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009. Read the [review](#) by Carl Park.

Peterson's commentary on this book of theological history is simply outstanding—exegetically responsible, eminently readable, and consistently insightful. Peterson carefully attends to the text's literary qualities (see pp. 39–48) and consistently draws out the book's profound theological message (summarized on pp. 52–97). I've assigned Peterson as a seminary textbook and consult this commentary whenever I preach on Acts.

(2) Schnabel, Eckhard J. *Acts*. ZECNT. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012. Read the [review](#) by Benjamin Wilson.

As readers familiar with Schnabel's other writings would expect, his Acts commentary combines meticulous research, sound exegesis, and a strong emphasis on the early Christian mission. Schnabel's masterful engagement with the book's historical-cultural context and primary sources serves as a nice complement to Peterson's emphasis on literary and theological matters. An expanded digital edition of Schnabel's commentary is available on Logos Bible Software.

(3) Keener, Craig S. *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012–2015. Read Sean Adams's [review](#) of volumes 2–3.

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<sup>33</sup> Carson, *New Testament Commentary Survey*, 64.

Keener's encyclopedic work is the most thorough and detailed commentary available on Acts (over 2,300 pages). It includes a far-reaching introduction, numerous excurses on a variety of topics, and meticulous attention to the text of Acts and a wealth of primary sources that are especially beneficial to academic readers. For pastors who are deterred by the length and cost of Keener's four-volume set, the commentaries by Schreiner, Witherington, and Bock (noted above) are strong one-volume options.

### 3.7. Romans

It is difficult to improve on Luther's opening remarks in his Preface to Romans: "This letter is truly the most important piece in the New Testament. It is purest Gospel. It is well worth a Christian's while not only to memorize it word for word but also to occupy himself with it daily, as though it were the daily bread of the soul. It is impossible to read or to meditate on this letter too much or too well. The more one deals with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes." Commentaries abound on this great letter, and it is impossible to mention them all here. One's view of the New Perspective(s) on Paul strongly influences choices about Romans and Galatians commentaries. For example, Nijay Gupta includes New Perspective advocates James Dunn (WBC) and N. T. Wright (NIB) among his top recommendations on Romans,<sup>34</sup> while my shortlist commentaries are each conversant with the New Perspective while maintaining a more traditional, reformed reading of Paul. In addition to the commentaries mentioned below, pastors may consider the fine older work by John Murray (Eerdmans Classic) and less technical volumes by David Peterson (EBTC), David Garland (TNTC), Robert Yarbrough (ESVEC), and Andrew David Naselli (Crossway).

Here are my top three recommended Romans commentaries for pastors and students:

- (1) Moo, Douglas J. *The Letter to the Romans*. 2nd ed. NICNT. Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 2018. Read Stanley Porter's [review](#) of the first edition.

First published in 1996 and now in a revised edition, Moo's Romans commentary is a model of careful, thorough, balanced exegesis. He consistently presents major interpretive positions in an even-handed way and provides textual arguments in favor of his decisions (see, for example, his treatment of "the righteousness of God" on pp. 73–78). This commentary's rather brief introduction may be supplemented by Longenecker's *Introducing Romans*.<sup>35</sup> Moo has published several shorter, more popular works on Romans, but the NICNT volume remains the gold standard.

- (2) Schreiner, Thomas R. *Romans*. 2nd ed. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018. Read Craig Blomberg's [review](#) of the first edition.

Schreiner excels in clearly explaining the letter's flow of thought. The second edition includes revised analysis of several key interpretive matters, including the meaning of the righteousness of God (1:17), the Gentiles as Christians in 2:14–15, and the logic of 5:12, which Schreiner now renders "death spread to all, *because* all sinned" (p. 276). This well-written, up-to-date commentary proves a reliable guide for pastors and students.

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<sup>34</sup> Gupta, *New Testament Commentary Guide*, 58–61.

<sup>35</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). Read the [review](#) by Guy Prentiss Waters (*Themelios* 36.3 [2011]: 508–9).

- (3) Thielman, Frank. *Romans*. ZECNT. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018.

It's exceedingly difficult to shortlist only three Romans commentaries, as one could make a good case for including Cranfield (ICC), Longenecker (NIGTC), or Kruse (PNTC), among others. I give the nod to Thielman as an established evangelical scholar who writes well, makes sound exegetical decisions, and offers a meaty yet reader-friendly commentary on Paul's greatest letter.

### 3.8. 1 Corinthians

Paul summons the Corinthian believers to grow in purity and unity in response to the gospel as he addresses a series of controversial topics in the church, such as factions, lawsuits, marriage and divorce, and spiritual gifts, etc.<sup>36</sup> First Corinthians is well served by many strong commentaries, and it is difficult to choose only three. Anthony Thiselton (NIGTC) and David Garland (BECNT) have written excellent technical commentaries on the Greek text, and Bruce Winter's *After Paul Left Corinth* is remarkably insightful about the letter's historical, cultural, and social context.

Here are my shortlist recommendations on 1 Corinthians with pastors and students in mind:

- (1) Fee, Gordon D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. 2nd ed. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014.

Fee's commentary has been a valuable resource for preachers and students of 1 Corinthians since 1987, and the 2014 revision utilizes the 2011 edition of the NIV and interacts with more recently published scholarly literature on the letter. His exegesis and arguments are typically reliable and persuasive, with a few exceptions. For example, he curiously treats 14:34–35 as an interpolation rather than an authentic Pauline composition. Overall, this commentary remains an excellent choice.

- (2) Ciampa, Roy E. and Brian S. Rosner. *The First Letter to the Corinthians*. PNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010. Read the [review](#) by Drake Williams.

Ciampa and Rosner offer a carefully researched, coherently argued commentary that provides reliable guidance for pastors and students of this letter. They attend particularly well to Paul's use of the Old Testament and to the apostle's confrontation of the Corinthians' core problems of immorality and idolatry.

- (3) Schreiner, Thomas R. *1 Corinthians*. TNTC 7. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018.

While most of my short-list recommendations are longer exegetical commentaries, I make an exception here for Schreiner's wonderful recent contribution to the Tyndale series (replacing Leon Morris's earlier work). Schreiner helpfully expounds Paul's argument in the letter and makes judicious exegetical decisions throughout.

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<sup>36</sup> See Andrew David Naselli, "1 Corinthians," in *Romans–Galatians*, ESV Expository Commentary 10 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 211, 213.



### 3.9. 2 Corinthians

Carson calls 2 Corinthians “the most passionate and in some ways the most difficult of Paul’s letters,”<sup>37</sup> and it is well-served by a number of good commentaries. In addition to the shortlist volumes discussed below, Scott Hafemann (NIVAC) offers an excellent blend of careful exegesis and contemporary application, Mark Seifrid (PNTC) provides rich theological reflections, and Paul Barnett (NICNT) helpfully navigates the letter’s historical-cultural context.

- (1) Guthrie, George H. *2 Corinthians*. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015. Read the [review](#) by Malcolm Gill.

This commentary ably handles the technicalities of Paul’s Greek syntax and the historical-cultural context of the letter without losing sight of its pastoral aims and theological message. Guthrie writes, “Paul commends his ministry ... as one of integrity. Appointed by God, under the lordship of Christ, and suffering in his proclamation of the gospel, Paul calls the Corinthians to repent from unhealthy relationships and embrace his authentic leadership” (p. 50). Highly recommended.

- (2) Garland, David E. *2 Corinthians*. 2nd ed. Christian Standard Commentary. Nashville Holman, 2021. Read Alistair Wilson’s [review](#) of the earlier edition.

Garland is a seasoned commentator, and he proves up for the challenge with 2 Corinthians. This revised edition is over a hundred pages longer than his 1999 NAC volume and is informed by two further decades of scholarship. Garland’s style is clear and compelling throughout as he shows that the apostle not only defends his ministry but, “more importantly, he clarifies the implications of the gospel that they have failed to grasp” (p. 18).

- (3) Harris, Murray J. *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. NIGTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.

The pastor or theological student poring over the difficult Greek of 2 Corinthians will find able assistance from Harris’s outstanding commentary. The lengthy introduction engages critical debates about the integrity of 2 Corinthians and thoughtfully summarizes the letter’s theology. The eight-hundred pages of commentary model careful exegesis and scholarship, and Harris’s “expanded paraphrase” of the letter is very helpful. Readers seeking a less-technical commentary should consider Hafemann (noted above).

### 3.10. Galatians

Luther famously remarked, “Galatians is my favorite epistle, the one in which I place all my trust. It is my Katie von Bora.”<sup>38</sup> This great letter is well served by many older and more recent commentaries. David deSilva (NICNT) and Craig Keener (Baker) have recently published major exegetical commentaries

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<sup>37</sup> Carson, *New Testament Commentary Survey*, 98.

<sup>38</sup> Martin Luther, *Off the Record with Martin Luther*, ed. and trans. Charles Daudert (Kalamazoo, MI: Hansa-Hewlett, 2009), 311, cited by Matthew S. Harmon, *Galatians*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2021), 1.

that reflect careful attention to the Greek text, the letter's historical and cultural context, and current scholarly discussions. J. Louis Martyn (AB) remains influential for his "apocalyptic" reading of Paul, while James Dunn (BNTC) reflects a New Perspective approach. If I expanded my shortlist beyond only three, I would add the very fine commentaries by Jarvis Williams (NCCS) and Matthew Harmon (EBTC).

Here are my shortlist commentaries on Galatians (of which I think Luther would approve):

- (1) Moo, Douglas J. *Galatians*. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013. Read the [review](#) by John Anthony Dunne.

Moo is well known for his magnificent Romans commentary and award-winning *Theology of Paul and His Letters* and many other books, and his exposition of Galatians does not disappoint. He slightly favors the south Galatian hypothesis and concludes that Paul wrote this letter just before the events of Acts 15, and he offers a robust argument for the traditional rendering "faith in Christ" for the debated phrase πιστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (pp. 38–48). Moo models insightful exegesis throughout, presents interpretive options clearly and fairly, and offers well-reasoned, theological sound conclusions. Highly recommended.

- (2) George, Timothy. *Galatians*. 2nd ed. CSC. Nashville: Holman, 2020. Read Walt Russell's [review](#) of the first edition.

George writes, "St. Jerome once said that when he read Paul he could hear thunder. There is a thunderstorm on every page of Galatians" (p. xvii). This introductory comment reflects the sort of clarity of expression and awareness of the history of interpretation that make George's commentary a helpful complement to more detailed technical commentaries such as Moo, Schreiner, and Keener. Carson noted that George's first edition (published in 1994) was thin in its treatment of contemporary scholarship,<sup>39</sup> but the revised edition is conversant with apocalyptic and New Perspective readings of Paul and both recent and classic commentaries on Galatians.

- (3) Schreiner, Thomas R. *Galatians*. ZECNT. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010. Read the [review](#) by Philip Kern.

Schreiner writes, "Paul unpacks the heart of the gospel. We see the meaning and the centrality of justification by faith, which Luther rightly argued was the article by which the church stands or falls. How can a person stand before a holy God without being condemned? Paul answers that question in Galatians" (p. 21). The commentary includes Schreiner's own translation of the letter, summaries of the literary context, structure, and main idea of each unit, judicious explanation of the Greek text, and theological reflections. He skillfully navigates challenging passages such as 3:10–14, which teaches that "the curse of the law is removed only by the cross of Christ, and thus faith is the pathway to blessing" (p. 200). The commentary concludes with a concise summary of major theological themes in Galatians (pp. 387–401).

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<sup>39</sup> Carson, *New Testament Commentary Survey*, 103.

### 3.11. Ephesians

Ephesians takes only about nineteen minutes to read straight through, yet this letter addresses a broad range of theological and ethical matters. Ephesians “clarifies the heart of the Christian faith, explores the dynamics of a personal relationship with Christ, sets forth God’s overall plan for the church, and draws out the implications of what it means to live as a Christian.”<sup>40</sup> There is a longstanding debate over the book’s authorship: critical commentaries such as Andrew Lincoln (WBC) and Ernest Best (ICC) think that Paul did not write Ephesians, while works by Harold Hoehner (Baker), Clinton Arnold (ZECNT), Lynne Cohick (NICNT), and others affirm Pauline authorship.

Here are my shortlist recommendations for Paul’s letter to the Ephesians:

- (1) Campbell, Constantine R. *The Letter to the Ephesians*. PNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023.

This new commentary replaces the earlier volume by Peter O’Brien, to whom Campbell dedicates his work. Campbell writes especially with teachers, expositors, theologians, and students in view, and he seeks to bring forth “the rich profundity of the message of Ephesians” without overwhelming readers with technical details on the one hand or compromising depth for accessibility on the other (p. xiv). In this balance, Campbell admirably succeeds. He regularly draws attention to crucial theological emphases in the letter such as union with Christ, the *Missio Dei*, the glory of God, and God’s plan for the church’s unity and maturity. While there are a number of excellent Ephesians commentaries, this is among the best.

- (2) Baugh, Steven M. *Ephesians*. EEC. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016.

Baugh offers a rich, detailed, well-argued exegetical commentary on Ephesians. He interacts carefully with the Greek text (like Thielman, Hoehner, and Arnold), offers his own translation and outline of each passage, and provides detailed comments as well as thoughtful theological synthesis of the apostle’s teaching from a Reformed perspective. Baugh’s treatment of the household exhortations in Ephesians 5 is exemplary, and his summary devotional applications throughout are well stated. For example, he comments on ch. 6, “Christianity is not a stroll through the mall but a grim fight ... a contest against supernatural foes. Because we cannot stand on our own against superhuman powers, we must rely on the strength of the Lord’s own might, which he supplies chiefly through prayer” (p. 562). The blend of exegetical rigor and theological depth makes Baugh’s volume a worthy addition to the pastor’s shelf.

- (3) Thielman, Frank. *Ephesians*. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010. Read the [review](#) by Mark Owens.

Thielman’s commentary masterfully explains the purpose of Ephesians, the argument of the letter, and the apostle’s use of Scripture. The thirty-page introduction addresses the usual topics with clarity and brevity (authorship, setting, structure, etc.), followed by over four hundred pages of careful exposition. For example, Thielman helpfully explains the challenging citation of Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8 (pp. 264–68), and he notes that Paul weaves “complex theology with straightforward ethical instruction”

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<sup>40</sup> Clinton Arnold, *Ephesians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 21.

throughout his household instructions in Ephesians 5–6 (p. 371). While engaging in detail with the Greek text, he maintains a clear and accessible style and draws out important biblical-theological connections in Ephesians.

### 3.12. Philippians

Paul's letter to the Philippians "sparkles with joy—the sort of life-giving, heart-refreshing joy that is tangibly transforming in its effect on the mundane realities of everyday existence."<sup>41</sup> Keown's lengthy commentary (EEC) and Silva's shorter volume (BECNT) provide excellent treatment of the letter's Greek text. Fee (IVPNTC), Garland (EBC), and Bockmuehl (BNTC) are strong options for mid-range commentaries, and Carson's *Basics for Believers* is a short, edifying exposition of the book for general readers.

Here are my shortlist recommendations for Philippians with pastors and students in mind:

- (1) Harmon, Matthew S. *Philippians: A Mentor Commentary*. Mentor. Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2015. Read the [review](#) by Dennis Johnson.

Harmon's fine study on Philippians has been called "a felicitous merger of careful scholarship, exegetical prudence, and pastoral sensitivity" ([review](#)). Harmon's work stands out particularly in his careful attention to Paul's allusions to the OT (for example, Isa 45:14–25 and 52:13–53:12 as the backdrop for the famous Christ Hymn in Phil 2) and his thoughtful suggestions for preaching/teaching and application at the end of each section.

- (2) Hansen, G. Walter. *The Letter to the Philippians*. PNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009. Read the [review](#) by Matthew Harmon.

Hansen's volume is a worthy contribution to the Pillar series. His introduction sets an effective tone for the commentary as a whole: "Paul's letter to Philippians exudes a joyful spirit and warm affection. As a thank you note to his friends for their generosity, Paul's letter wraps them in his warm embrace. Yet, as he affirms his friends, he also responds to their problems.... Above all, Paul's letter leads us to worship Jesus Christ as we contemplate his suffering on the cross, his exaltation as Lord, and his ultimate victory over all earthly powers" (p. 1). Hansen proves a sure guide for interpreters of this treasured apostolic letter.

- (3) Fee, Gordon D. *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995. Read the [review](#) by Ben Witherington III.

Fee is a masterful commentator. He served as longtime editor of the esteemed NICNT series and contributed superb volumes on 1 Corinthians, 1–2 Thessalonians, and Philippians. He calls Philippians "a hortatory letter of friendship," which reveals "an extraordinary amount of Pauline theology" (p. 46). Fee accurately and elegantly expounds the text of Philippians, which "invites us into the advance of the gospel" and "points us to Christ, both now and forever" (p. 53).

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<sup>41</sup> Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, BNTC (London: Continuum, 1997), 1.

### 3.13. Colossians and Philemon

Colossians and Philemon are often treated together in commentaries. Paul pens both of these short letters from prison and refers to many of the same individuals (Onesimus, Epaphras, Aristarchus, Mark, etc.), and scholars often identify Philemon as a resident of Colossae. Murray Harris (EGGNT) and James Dunn (NIGTC) serve as able guides for the Greek text of the book, and the newer and older TNTC volumes by Alan Thompson and N. T. Wright, respectively, are helpful non-technical commentaries.<sup>42</sup>

Here are my shortlist picks on Colossians and Philemon:

- (1) Beale, G. K. *Colossians and Philemon*. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019.

Beale leaves few exegetical stones unturned in this marvelous commentary. Beale's work stands out in two primary ways: extensive focus on OT allusions in Colossians and clear explanations of Paul's flow of thought, with summary exegetical ideas for each unit. For example, Beale summarizes the main idea of Colossians 1:15–23 this way: "Christ's supremacy over the first creation is a pattern recapitulated for the new creation to bring about reconciliation of all creation, especially in order to make believers acceptable before God." He extensively shows that Genesis 1:26–28 and Psalm 89:27–29 provide the crucial basis for Paul's presentation of Christ as the "image" of God and "firstborn." Highly recommended.

- (2) Moo, Douglas J. *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*. PNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008. Read the [review](#) by Jason Meyer.

Moo's work showcases his characteristic strengths as a seasoned commentator and complements the approach of Beale. Moo offers lengthier introductions to both letters, providing a very thorough defense of Pauline authorship of Colossians and the letter's theology. Moo considers various proposals for the situation behind Paul's letter to Philemon and slightly favors the traditional hypothesis that Onesimus was a runaway slave, though he stresses that the letter is not *about* slavery but focuses on the deep fellowship of believers in Christ (p. 378).

- (3) Pao, David W. *Colossians and Philemon*. ZECNT. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012. Read the [review](#) by Nijay Gupta.

Pao's excellent commentary admirably achieves the aims of the ZECNT series and excels particularly in his reflections on these letters' "theology in application." For example, he commends Colossians 1:9–14 as "a powerful model of prayer." Reflecting on Colossians 3:18–41, Pao stresses Paul's point for the household code—"A wife/child/slave must put the Lord first" (p. 263)—then extensively reflects on the theological and practical implications of the centrality of Christ in relationships between husbands and wives, children and parents, and slaves and masters.

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<sup>42</sup> See Nijay Gupta's earlier [survey](#) (*Themelios* 35.1 [2010]: 7–14) and Adam Copenhaver's review of Alan Thompson's commentary in this issue (pp. 209–11).

### 3.14. 1–2 Thessalonians

The Thessalonian letters are well served by a number of technical and non-technical commentaries. In addition to the commentaries mentioned below, the works by Gordon Fee (NICNT), Charles Wanamaker (NIGTC), F. F. Bruce (WBC), and Gene Green (PNTC) are all helpful treatments of these letters. For academic readers, Nijay Gupta's critical introduction to the Thessalonian correspondence provides useful guidance to the secondary literature and key issues such as the disputed authorship of 2 Thessalonians.

Here are my shortlist recommendations (each affirms Pauline authorship of both letters):

- (1) Weima, Jeffrey A. D. *1–2 Thessalonians*. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014. Read the [review](#) by Peter Orr.

Carson wrote in 2013, “There is no commentary on the Thessalonian epistles that stands head and shoulders above all others in a crowded field,”<sup>43</sup> but Weima's remarkable volume was published the following year and remains the gold standard on these letters. This commentary is comprehensive, carefully argued, and usually compelling. Weima takes a literary-epistolary analysis to these books, ably explains their Greco-Roman context, and pays attention to Paul's allusions to the Old Testament.

- (2) Beale, G. K. *1–2 Thessalonians*. IVPNTC 13. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003.

Beale's short commentary excels in reading these letters through the lens of inaugurated eschatology and showing the significance of Paul's use of the Old Testament. He also carefully traces the apostle's argument and includes thoughtful applications for contemporary readers. I have assigned this commentary as a college textbook, and it serves as an excellent complement to a fuller exegetical commentary on the Greek text.

- (3) Shogren, Gary S. *1 and 2 Thessalonians*. ZECNT. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012. Read the [review](#) by Gene Green.

This commentary exhibits the format and strengths of other ZECNT volumes. Shogren divides the letters into fourteen units, summarizing the context, main point, and logical flow of each unit, expositing the Greek text, and offering theological applications. The commentary's concluding note illustrates Shogren's theological depth and pastoral concern: “Above all else, Paul sketches out a cosmivision at the center of which is Christ.... This is why even dying in Jesus is no tragedy” (p. 354).

### 3.15. 1–2 Timothy and Titus

The letters to Paul's delegates are often called the Pastoral Epistles because they discuss the qualifications and duties of church leaders. Yet these letters address a range of theological and practical matters—above all the saving power of the gospel, which must be protected and stewarded. Major exegetical commentaries include those by I. Howard Marshall (ICC)—who argues that the letters come from someone other than Paul—as well as Luke Timothy Johnson (AB), Philip Towner (NICNT), and

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<sup>43</sup> Carson, *New Testament Commentary Survey*, 123.



George Knight (NIGTC)—each of whom marshals a strong case for the traditional view of Pauline authorship.<sup>44</sup>

Here are my shortlist recommendations on the letters to Timothy and Titus:

- (1) Yarbrough, Robert W. *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*. PNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018.

Yarbrough offers a readable, well-informed, mature exposition of these letters that he takes to be written by the apostle Paul. He presents a complementarian perspective on the prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:12, takes “women will be saved” (2:15) to refer to eschatological salvation. One particular highlight is Yarbrough’s discussion of Paul as a working pastor: “God’s mighty work in Christ resulted in Paul working mightily” (p. 28). Highly recommended for pastors and theological students.

- (2) Köstenberger, Andreas J. *1–2 Timothy and Titus*. EBTC. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020.

Köstenberger acknowledges that this commentary “continues a twenty-five-year-long quest to properly interpret and faithfully live out Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus” (p. xvii), reflected in previous publications like *Entrusted with the Gospel* and *Women in the Church*.<sup>45</sup> Köstenberger presents a complementarian perspective on 1 Timothy 2:9–15 and frequently makes judicious exegetical decisions with a special focus on the letters’ contribution to biblical theology. Notably, the commentary includes an extensive, 186-page treatment of major biblical theological themes, such as mission, the church, and the last days.

- (3) Mounce, William D. *Pastoral Epistles*. WBC 46. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000.

Pastors and students reading the Greek text of Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus will want to have Mounce’s commentary at the ready. Mounce is well known for his introductory Greek textbook, and his work on the Pastoral Epistles blends rigorous scholarship, conservative theological convictions, and pastoral sensibilities. For example, Mounce comments on 1 Timothy 2:12–15 that “Paul sees the prior creation of Adam (Gen 2) as justification for male leadership in the church” (p. 148). He also provides a comprehensive and convincing case for understanding “our great God and savior” as a Christological title in Titus 2:13 (pp. 425–31). While Mounce’s comments are detailed and thorough, his explanation sections helpfully synthesize and apply the text’s message in a way that is accessible to readers regardless of their knowledge of Greek.

### 3.16. Hebrews

While “God only knows” who wrote Hebrews (to quote Origen), this “word of exhortation” (Heb 13:22) combines urgent pastoral warnings and profound biblical theological reflections on the supremacy of Christ. The letter is well-served by a number of detailed exegetical commentaries, including Craig Koester (AB), Gareth Cockerill (NICNT), Paul Ellingworth (NIGTC), Harold Attridge (Hermeneia),

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<sup>44</sup> See Marshall’s earlier survey of scholarship in *Themelios* 23.1 (1997): 3–28.

<sup>45</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and Terry L. Wilder, eds., *Entrusted with the Gospel: Paul’s Theology in the Pastoral Epistles* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010); Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Women in the Church: An Interpretation and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9–15*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

and David deSilva (Eerdmans). David Peterson (TNTC) is a strong option for readers seeking a shorter, less technical commentary, while Harris (EGGNT) offers an excellent resource for students of Greek.

Here are my top three Hebrews commentaries for pastors and theological students:

- (1) Schreiner, Thomas R. *Hebrews*. EBTC. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020.

This recent commentary blends Schreiner's strengths as a seasoned professor, pastor, exegete, and biblical theologian. He emphasizes that the letter's expansive Christology provides the foundation for "the pastoral thrust of the work," as the author urges readers not to fall away (p. 14). The commentary's format is straightforward: each unit (2–10 verses) includes an outline, the CSB translation, a summary of the literary context, exegesis, and a "bridge" for contemporary application. Schreiner's 75-page overview of central theological themes in Hebrews is an excellent resource for all students of this book.

- (2) Lane, William L. *Hebrews*. WBC 47A–B. 2 vols. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991. Read the [review](#) by John Lewis.

Though published over three decades ago, Lane's commentary remains a go-to resource for serious students of Hebrews. He writes, "The purpose of Hebrews is to strengthen, encourage, and exhort the tired and weary members of a house church to respond with courage and vitality to the prospect of renewed suffering in view of the gifts and resources God has lavished upon them" (p. c). Throughout, Lane blends careful exegetical analysis of the book's Greek text with thoughtful reflections on its theological message, and I have used it as a required textbook for exegesis courses.

- (3) Guthrie, George. *Hebrews*. NIVAC 58. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998.

Guthrie is a well-regarded Hebrews scholar whose writings include a monograph on the book's structure<sup>46</sup> and an excellent treatment of the author's use of Scripture in the *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. This NIVAC volume effectively expounds the text while suggesting thoughtful areas for application. Guthrie's work effectively complements more technical volumes by Lane, Koester, and others.

### 3.17. James

Famously called an "epistle of straw" by Luther,<sup>47</sup> the letter of James includes various exegetical challenges for readers—including the author's famous teaching about faith, works, and justification. In addition to the recommendations below, academic readers should also consult Dale Allison (ICC),<sup>48</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson (AB), Scott McKnight (NICNT), Peter Davids (NIGTC), and Richard Bauckham (New Testament Readings), while Douglas Moo (TNTC) and George Guthrie (EBC) offer excellent non-technical commentaries.

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<sup>46</sup> George H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis*, BSL (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998).

<sup>47</sup> For discussion, see Martin Foord, "The 'Epistle of Straw': Reflections on Luther and the Epistle of James," *Themelios* 45.2 (2020): 291–98.

<sup>48</sup> See Daniel M. Gurtner's [review](#) (*Themelios* 39.3 [2014]: 533–35).

Here are my shortlist picks for James:

- (1) Moo, Douglas J. *The Letter of James*. 2nd ed. PNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021. Read Thorsten Moritz's [review](#) of the first edition.

While Moo is well-known for his work on Paul's letters, his commentary on James displays his usual combination of exegetical rigor, clarity of expression, and sound theology. The first edition of Moo's commentary appeared in 2000, and the new second edition is about thirty percent longer, owing to interaction with recent scholarship and revised and expanded comments on various passages. His treatment of "Faith, Works, and Justification" is simply outstanding: "*Biblical* faith cannot exist apart from acts of obedience to God. This is James's overriding concern" (p. 48). Moo remains a sure-footed guide to this letter.

- (2) Blomberg, Craig L. and Mariam J. Kammell (Kovalishyn). *James*. ZECNT. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008. Read the [review](#) by Scott Newman.

The initial work in the ZECNT series set a high standard for subsequent volumes. Blomberg and Kammell (Kovalishyn) admirably navigate key exegetical questions in the letter while offering thoughtful theological reflections along the way. They argue that "the theme of wealth and poverty ... emerges as this letter's most important issue" (p. 254), effectively explain James's teaching on faith and works, and stress that this letter calls readers to "become people of integrity" in response to God's unwavering constancy (p. 261).

- (3) McCartney, Dan G. *James*. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009.

McCartney's work on James is well-researched, clear, and exegetically responsible. He explains that the letter is "about true faith as opposed to a false one" (p. 2). James 1 introduces key themes that the remainder of the letter addresses in a series of discourses (p. 66). The commentary concludes with four excellent excurses: Faith as the Central Concern of James; Faith, Works, and Justification in James and Paul; James and Wisdom; and James and Suffering.

### 3.18. 1 Peter

"The central issue in 1 Peter is probably the problem of suffering, with which all Christians must of necessity deal."<sup>49</sup> The letter reminds the recipients—"elect exiles" (1:1)—of their unshakeable hope, their abiding joy, and their calling to follow in the steps of our suffering Savior. Among major exegetical commentaries on 1 Peter, Paul Achtemeier (Hermeneia) argues that the letter is pseudonymous, while J. Ramsey Michaels (WBC), Craig Keener (Eerdmans), and the volumes below affirm that the apostle Peter stands behind this letter. Wayne Grudem (TNTC) and I. Howard Marshall (IVPNTC) also offer strong shorter commentaries on this apostolic letter.

Here are my shortlist recommendations on 1 Peter for pastors and students:

- (1) Jobes, Karen H. *1 Peter*. 2nd ed. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022.

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<sup>49</sup> Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 30.

Jobes offers an excellent, well-balanced commentary on 1 Peter that has served readers well since its initial release in 2005. The revised edition retains her assessment of the book's historical background and of the importance of the Greek Jewish Scriptures for interpreting 1 Peter. She argues, "The explanation of the significance of Jesus Christ (Christology) in 1 Peter is inseparable from the exhortations about how to live the new life in Christ (paraenesis)" (p. 47).

(2) Schreiner, Thomas R. *1 and 2 Peter and Jude*. 2nd ed. CSC. Nashville: Holman, 2020.

In this revised edition of his earlier 2003 NAC volume, Schreiner reflects broad interaction with recent scholarship and has reworked and expanded his commentary on the letters of Peter and Jude. Writing with his usual clarity, Schreiner is a trustworthy guide to the flow of thought and message of these epistles.

(3) Davids, Peter H. *The First Epistle of Peter*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990. Read the [review](#) by Craig Blomberg.

While Davids's commentary was released more than three decades ago, it remains a competent resource for interpreting Peter's first letter. On difficult passages such as 1 Peter 3:18–22, Davids sets forth the major perspectives and gives sound arguments for his own reading.

### 3.19. 2 Peter and Jude

Interpreters have long debated the apostolic authorship of 2 Peter and the relationship of 2 Peter and Jude, such that 2 Peter has been called the NT's "ugly stepchild,"<sup>50</sup> while Jude may be "the most neglected book in the NT."<sup>51</sup> Yet these canonical letters certainly warrant serious study by the saints as they seek to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet 3:18). Though it is four decades old, Richard Bauckham (WBC) remains the gold standard for academic readers—it has been called "expert, thorough, balanced and lucidly written."<sup>52</sup> In addition to the recommended volumes below, Douglas Moo (NIVAC) and Michael Green (TNTC) are strong non-technical options.

Here are my shortlist commentaries on 2 Peter and Jude, each of which affirms apostolic authorship of 2 Peter:

(1) Schreiner, Thomas R. *1 and 2 Peter and Jude*. 2nd ed. CSC. Nashville: Holman, 2020.

Schreiner writes, "Peter's second letter teaches us that God's grace in Jesus Christ should not and must not be untethered from a life of virtue and godliness" (p. 295), while Jude's brief letter "should not be ignored" (p. 484). This readable and insightful commentary is my first choice for 2 Peter and Jude.

(2) Green, Gene L. *Jude and 2 Peter*. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008.

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<sup>50</sup> As summarized by Peter H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 121. For analysis and arguments in favor of Petrine authorship, see Michael J. Kruger, "The Authenticity of 2 Peter," *JETS* 42 (1999): 645–71.

<sup>51</sup> D. J. Rowston, "The Most Neglected Book in the New Testament," *NTS* 21 (1974–75): 554–63.

<sup>52</sup> See David Wenham's [review](#) (*Themelios* 11.1 [1985]: 30).

Green excels in interpreting Jude and 2 Peter in their historical-cultural context. He takes Jude to be written first (by the brother of Jesus), and the apostle Peter imitates portions of Jude in his second letter. He regularly offers judicious treatments of thorny exegetical and theological issues in these letters, such as Jude's use of pseudepigraphal writings (pp. 26–33). Highly recommended.

(3) Davids, Peter H. *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*. PNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.

Davids is a recognized expert on the general epistles who has written excellent commentaries on James (NIGTC) and 1 Peter (NICNT), and his work on 2 Peter and Jude is similarly superb. Like Green, Davids argues that 2 Peter follows Jude and extensively incorporates the short letter by Jesus's brother. He attends to theological themes in these letters while providing sound exegesis and sensible explanations of the text throughout.

### 3.20. 1–3 John

The letters of John combine simplicity and profundity—a first year Greek student can translate the text with minimal aids, yet these brief epistles make profound claims about “the word of life” (1 John 1:1) the nature of true Christian belief and practice in fellowship with the God who is light, and the urgency of forsaking sin and idols. Excellent exegetical commentaries include the works of I. Howard Marshall (NICNT), Stephen Smalley (WBC), and Gary Derickson (EEC), while John Stott (TNTC) and Marianne Meye Thompson (IVPNTC) provide useful non-technical guides to these letters.

Here are my recommended 1–3 John commentaries for pastors and students:

(1) Yarbrough, Robert W. *1–3 John*. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008.

Yarbrough expertly guides readers through the argument of the Johannine letters with rigorous attention to the Greek text, clear expositions, and evident pastoral concern. Consider, for example, his reflection on the closing charge in 1 John 5:21: “Undistracted and unencumbered by the Christ-substitutes that for so long literally bedeviled God's people, believers are now freed to walk in the truth: the light, the faith, the love, and the eternal life won for them by the Son of God” (p. 325).

(2) Kruse, Colin G. *The Letters of John*. 2nd ed. PNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020.

Kruse is eminently readable and reliable in his exegetical and theological reflections on John's letters. Originally published in 2000, the revised edition includes additional bibliographic entries, fresh theological reflections after each section, and twenty-four excurses including two new notes on children, fathers, and young men (1 John 2) and God's invisibility (1 John 4). His “note on the bases of assurance” reflects on a primary concern of 1 John with pastoral wisdom. For Kruse, 1 John 3:23 encapsulates John's letters “central message: the importance of right belief on the one hand and love for fellow believers on the other” (p. xiii).

(3) Jobes, Karen H. *1, 2, and 3 John*. ZECNT. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014.

This award-winning commentary is exegetically responsible and very well written. Jobes helpfully traces these letters' flow of thought, summarizes the main idea of each passage, and provides thoughtful

theological reflections along the way on topics such as “The Problem of Truth in an Age of Relativism” (1 John 1:1–4) and “Christian Hospitality” (3 John 5–8). The volumes of Yarbrough, Kruse, and Jobes complement each other well, and together admirably serve the needs of a preacher or seminarian.

### 3.21. Revelation

Carson remarks, “Of the writing of books on Revelation there is no end: most generations produce far too many.”<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, pastors and students need exegetically sound, theologically faithful commentaries as they seek to understand the book’s apocalyptic imagery and urgent message for the church awaiting Christ’s return. People’s preferences for Revelation commentaries are often closely linked to their eschatological views. For example, one dispensationalist institution recommends Buist Fanning (ZECNT), Robert Thomas (Moody), and Paige Patterson (NAC) as top choices on Revelation.<sup>54</sup> The most detailed critical commentary is David Aune’s three-volume set (WBC), which is better suited for discerning academic readers than for the typical pastor. Robert Mounce (NICNT) and Grant Osborne (BECNT) are still worth reading, and Peter Leithart’s two-volume theological commentary (ITC) is remarkably insightful, though frequently espouses novel and tenuous interpretations.<sup>55</sup> Jeffrey Weima’s *The Sermons to the Seven Churches of Revelation* is a superb treatment of chapters 2–3.

My shortlist recommendations on Revelation are as follows:

- (1a) Beale, G. K. *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. NIGTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999. Read the [review](#) by Dave Mathewson.
- (1b) Beale, G. K. and David H. Campbell. *The Book of Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015.

Though it has been in print for over two decades, Beale’s massive NIGTC commentary remains an outstanding go-to resource for all students of Revelation. This work stands out for many reasons. Beale rigorously traces the book’s overall argument while attending to the precise details of the Greek text. Further, he carefully attends to John’s pervasive use of the OT as a crucial key for interpreting the book and grasping its theological message. The 178-page introduction is wide ranging, and the sections on the book’s use of the OT and interpreting symbolism are essential reading. More recently, Eerdmans published Beale and Campbell’s shorter commentary on Revelation, which is an accessible distillation of the larger work with suggestions for reflection after each section. I regularly assign the shorter commentary as a textbook in exegesis courses while referencing both volumes in my own study.

- (2) Schreiner, Thomas R. *Revelation*. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023.

Schreiner’s much anticipated commentary succeeds Osborne in the BECNT series. This new volume is “substantial enough for serious exegesis but short enough for the busy pastor to read” (Preface). While Schreiner is best known for his work on Paul’s letters and biblical theology, he has also written an excellent book on the theology of Revelation (*The Joy of Hearing*, which I [reviewed](#)) and a helpful

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<sup>53</sup> Carson, *New Testament Commentary Survey*, 156.

<sup>54</sup> “Basic Library Booklist,” Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022.

<sup>55</sup> See Brandon Smith’s [review](#) (*Themelios* 43.3 [2018]: 482–84).



shorter commentary on the Apocalypse for the ESVEC series. His substantial introduction covers the usual matters such as authorship, date, genre, and structure, as well as useful treatments of Revelation's use of Scripture and contemporary objections to the book's message. He adopts a minority reading of Revelation 20 that he calls "new-creation millennialism." Overall, Schreiner blends careful exegesis, accessible style, and pastoral warmth in this first-rate exposition of Revelation.

(3) Koester, Craig R. *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. AB 38A. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. Read my [review](#).

As I explained in my earlier [review](#), Koester's commentary is meticulously researched and elegantly written, masterfully situates the Apocalypse in its Greco-Roman and Jewish-Christian context in the late first century, and demonstrates unsurpassed grasp of the history of interpretation of this important and enigmatic book. While I disagree with Koester's view of the book's non-apostolic authorship and quibble with some of his interpretive decisions, this work is an invaluable guide to serious students of Revelation. For readers looking for a shorter, non-technical commentary on Revelation, Dennis Johnson's *Triumph of the Lamb* or Ian Paul (TNTC) are worthy options.

#### 4. Conclusion

While there is no substitute or shortcut for pastors and theological students to carefully and prayerfully pore over the biblical text for themselves, expositors have long recognized that good commentaries are invaluable resources. The apostle sent for his books and parchments from prison (2 Tim 4:13), suggesting that "Paul remained a reader and thinker devoted to the ministry of the word until the end."<sup>56</sup> Readers today have unprecedented options of new and old biblical commentaries available in print and digital formats from various publishers. I hope that my reflections above provide guidance on how to use commentaries and how to choose commentaries that will illuminate the meaning of the sacred writings.

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<sup>56</sup> Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 450.

STRANGE TIMES

# Going Deeper

— Daniel Strange —

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Late last year at the annual gathering of the fellowship of churches to which I belong,<sup>1</sup> I was asked to give a five-minute address to the following question: ‘*What will be the main theological issues facing us in the next few years?*’ Quite a challenge! I wonder how you would respond? Here’s a slightly expanded version of what I said in full recognition that I’d canvassed and collated responses from some friends and colleagues as to how they’d answer the question in such a limited span. I hope that nothing I say will be a surprise for *Themelios* readers, as I believe these reflections are in sympathy with our journal’s aims and objectives. So, if nothing else, take these as an encouragement and confirmation to keep calm and carry on.

It’s been said that the main issue in the first millennium was, ‘Who is Jesus Christ?’ In the second millennium the question became, ‘How are we saved?’ And now as we are into the third millennium, the question is and will continue be, ‘What is a human being?’ The seismic implications of this individually, culturally and politically—even while still recognising a Christian ‘afterglow’—cannot be underestimated. We are all feeling these implications in various ways, given the presenting issues surrounding sexuality, gender, transhumanism, embodiment, and the underlying worldviews and of the focus on the self; expressive individualism; social construction; or just what we call human identity.<sup>2</sup> The main theological issue facing us will be a danger that our responses will be superficial and all we’ll hear are the words of *Star Wars*’ Red Leader as he shoots at the Death Star: ‘Negative, negative. It didn’t go in. It just impacted on the surface.’ And so we will need to go deep.

First, our challenge will be to go deep *theologically*. As we dig down into the presenting issues we see all around us, we discover competing interpretations of reality what are called ‘theories’—the lenses through which we view the world which highlight the things we believe to be viable, visible and valuable.<sup>3</sup> Our challenge in our preaching, praying, discipling and evangelising, will be to analyse, critique and construct, looking *through* the Bible to demonstrate how the biblical story and Christ crucified is the true interpretation of reality, or if I might be allowed to say, the subversive fulfilment of

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<sup>1</sup> The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC).

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020); and *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> See Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 29.

all other idolatrous interpretations.<sup>4</sup> This will include (and I think Covid helpfully highlighted this for us), how thin our political/public theologies have been. So simply prioritising time and resources for theological (in the broadest sense) thinking and teaching at every level from basic catechesis to advanced research is vital. In that sense, the biggest theological challenge is ignorance and lack of concern. The need to bang the drum for theological education has never been greater.

Second, our challenge will be to go deep *affectively*. The increasing grip of secularism is going to make the social cost of Christianity higher and higher. We will not pay that cost unless we perceive the incomparable nature of God not just quantitatively but qualitatively. Our challenge will be to live in reverent fear, not fearing others, or what other people fear (increasingly apocalyptically).<sup>5</sup> This *is* a theological issue. How are we going to engender this affection and its fruit which should lead to sense our own solid and stable identity in Christ and a love for Him in which there is a boldness, freedom and joy? We must pray for the ongoing production of ‘true’ theologians, men and women who not only know and believe, but have ‘also sensible experience of, the forgiveness of sins and the privilege of adoption and intimate communion with God and the grace of the indwelling Spirit and the hidden manna and the sweet love of Christ—the earnest and pledge, in short, of perfect happiness.’<sup>6</sup>

Third, our challenge will be to go deep *historically*. By this I don’t mean a sentimentalised romanticism or retreat. In my context of the UK, we are going to have to come to terms with being a minority (often a despised minority) in our churches with certain professions closed to Christians—professions like teaching and medicine from which, in the fellowship of churches of which I am part, we have disproportionately drawn from. I think as non-conformist churches we have a particular contribution to make here if we can remember our history. It was only two hundred years ago that we couldn’t stand for parliament and one hundred and fifty years ago that we couldn’t go to university and therefore into the professions.<sup>7</sup> Recently, my *Crosslands* colleague Tim Chester has been inspired by the life and ministry of his ‘local’ Puritan William Bagshawe (1628–1702), the so-called ‘Apostle of the Peak.’<sup>8</sup> As one of the two thousand ministers who comprised the Great Ejection after Charles II’s Act of Uniformity (1662), Bagshawe’s itinerant preaching and teaching in homes, barns and under trees, produced much fruit despite constant crackdowns from authorities. Although times and locations of meetings had to be constantly changed and conducted in secret, Bagshawe was heard where he had not been heard before. Mini revivals broke out in places where there had previously been no church, and places that had resisted Bagshawe’s evangelistic efforts before 1662 now were responsive. Moreover, in the midst of this persecution Bagshawe was planning for the future. He knew his congregations needed pastors, and so every summer he held a three-week residential study in the Peak District where students came together to hear lectures and discuss theology. Let’s draw on this heritage, learning what it means

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<sup>4</sup> See my book, *Their Rock Is Not Our Rock: A Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), chs. 7–8.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. 1 Peter 1:17; 3:14.

<sup>6</sup> Herman Witsius, *On the Character of a True Theologian*, ed. J. Ligon Duncan (Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 1994), 36.

<sup>7</sup> As I write this, there is continued opprobrium in much of the UK media towards Kate Forbes, a member of the Scottish Parliament and a member of the Free Church of Scotland, in her bid to become leader of the Scottish National Party.

<sup>8</sup> John Brentnall, *William Bagshawe: The Apostle of the Peak* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1970)

both to minister and to train in a hostile environment. It's been done before and it can be done again. Yes, it's going to be messy and 'sub-optimal', but it's where God has placed us at this time.

Fourth and finally our challenge will be to go deep '*fellowshiply*'. We need each other, not simply the challenge of making time for relationships between leaders (important though this is), but the challenge of maintaining firm theological convictions whilst recognising the need to collaborate with other gospel-centred Christians within our national contexts, and internationally as we learn from the global church. One of the great challenges is how to minister the never-changing gospel of Christ in contexts where both the cultural diversity and pace of change leaves us dizzy and breathless as we try to keep up. To meet the challenge of complexity we need the wisdom of the church. And it starts by recognising that we need one another to serve the cultural contexts in which God has placed us. No one individual nor any one tribe or denomination has all that is needed to love and serve our neighbours. If complex problem solving requires a complex strategy, we need the collected wisdom of the church. *Your* perspective along with *mine* will give us all better answers. However much this puts us out of our cultural comfort zones we will have to collaborate and be working on a theology of collaboration.

All these are great challenges but we have a God who is with us in them and Lord over all of them.

# The Individual and Collective Offspring of the Woman: The Canonical Outworking of Genesis 3:15

— Jonathan M. Cheek —

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**Abstract:** Studies on Genesis 3:15 often debate whether the seed of the woman refers to an individual or a collective group. The key words and concepts from Genesis 3:15 recur in numerous instances in the OT and the NT, which support the idea that the offspring of the woman should be understood as both an individual and as a collective group. This article will survey the key arguments for the individual view and for the collective view and will then present four arguments in support of the idea that the intent of Genesis 3:15 is to speak of both a collective offspring of the woman in addition to an individual offspring.

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The past thirty years have provided something of a renaissance in the interpretation of Genesis 3:15 with many Evangelical scholars providing sound exegetical and theological argumentation that Genesis 3:15 explicitly anticipates a future individual offspring of the woman.<sup>1</sup> Many scholars, though, still strongly affirm the collective understanding of the seed of the woman in Genesis 3:15. Another view proposes that the expectation of the seed of the woman in Genesis 3:15 is both individual and collective. In this interpretation, Genesis 3:15 anticipates both (1) an individual coming deliverer who will be at enmity with and exchange blows with the serpent and (2) a collective group associated with the individual coming deliverer who will participate in this enmity against the serpent and his seed. Though some interpreters have supported this view throughout church history, none have attempted a full presentation of this view in light of a canonical approach to Scripture.<sup>2</sup> This article argues that a ca-

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<sup>1</sup> See Jonathan M. Cheek, “Recent Developments in the Interpretation of the Seed of the Woman in Genesis 3:15,” *JETS* 64 (2021): 215–36.

<sup>2</sup> I understand a “canonical” approach as explained by G. K. Beale: “NT writers may interpret historical portions of the OT to have a forward-looking sense in the light of the whole OT canonical context.... Rather than interpreting a text only in the light of its immediate literary context within a book, we are now merely interpreting the passage in view of the wider canonical context.” *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 15, 25. Douglas J. Moo and Andrew David Naselli clarify: “This approach

nonical reading of Scripture recognizes the outworking of Genesis 3:15 as both an individual offspring and a collective offspring.

### 1. The Collective Seed of the Woman

Some scholars understand the seed of the woman to refer either to God's people as a whole throughout history or to the human race as a whole. The former idea positions the people of God against Satan and his demons, whereas the latter places the entire human race against either (1) Satan and his demons or (2) literal, physical snakes. Most Protestants followed the Messianic view of 3:15 (the view of Luther) until the time of the Enlightenment, during which the collective view became prominent among liberal theologians, as well as many conservatives.<sup>3</sup> During this period, many who adhere to the historical-critical method argued that 3:15 represents "a quite general statement about mankind and serpents and the struggle between them which continues as long as the earth exists."<sup>4</sup>

The collective view is supported by the idea that זרע ("offspring") is a collective noun. Without substantive discussion, Westermann asserts that "it is beyond doubt that זרע is to be understood collectively. The text is speaking of the line of descendants of the woman as well as of the serpent."<sup>5</sup> John H. Walton argues similarly, "On the basis of grammatical fact, the Hebrew word for 'seed' is collective, and as such, it will typically take singular grammatical associations (pronouns, verbal forms)."<sup>6</sup> Walton, therefore, argues that Genesis 3:15 speaks of "an ongoing battle" between humans and "evil's establishment among humanity."<sup>7</sup> Some who hold to the collective understanding of 3:15 may still consider the verse as a *protevangelium*, in that it anticipates a promise of victory for the collective seed of the woman over evil, while rejecting the idea that an individual Messiah is in view.<sup>8</sup>

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does not appeal to the divine author's meaning that is deliberately concealed from the human author in the process of inspiration (a *sensus occultus*); it appeals to the meaning of the text itself that takes on deeper significance as God's plan unfolds (a *sensus praegnans*)." "The Problem of the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament," in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 736.

<sup>3</sup> Conservative representatives of the collective view include H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1942), 163–70; and Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*, reprint ed. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1975), 41–44.

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, trans. G. W. Anderson (New York: Abingdon, 1954), 8. Others who interpret the serpent in primarily a zoological sense include Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 90; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, trans. John J. Scullion, CC (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984), 260–61; Terrence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," in *NIB*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:362–63; and R. W. L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, OTT (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 79–80.

<sup>5</sup> Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 260.

<sup>6</sup> John H. Walton, *Old Testament Theology for Christians: From Ancient Context to Enduring Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 230.

<sup>7</sup> Walton, *Old Testament Theology for Christians*, 213. Those holding to this view include Tremper Longman, III, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 66–67; Andrew T. Abernethy and Gregory Goswell, *God's Messiah in the Old Testament: Expectations of a Coming King* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 11–21; and John Goldingay, *Genesis*, BCOTP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 79–80.

<sup>8</sup> Walton, for example, does *not* see a promise of victory for one side or the other (*Old Testament Theology for Christians*, 230–31). Goldingay similarly argues that the reference is to an ongoing, unresolved conflict (*Genesis*,

## 2. The Individual Seed of the Woman

Alternatively, many interpreters have understood the seed of the woman as a reference to an individual descendant who would be at enmity with the serpent and its seed. This individual understanding of the seed of the woman appears to predate the NT, finding support in the LXX translation of Genesis 3:15, which may provide “the earliest evidence of an individual messianic interpretation of Gen 3:15.”<sup>9</sup> Several early church fathers, such as Justin Martyr (ca. AD 100–167)<sup>10</sup> and Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. AD 125–200)<sup>11</sup> understand 3:15 as a prophecy of *Christus Victor*. Martin Luther interprets the “seed of the woman” with reference to Christ, who will crush the serpent’s head,<sup>12</sup> and the messianic view became the prominent post-Reformation Protestant view. In spite of the prominence of the collective understanding of “seed” during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, some conservative scholars still held to a messianic understanding of זרע.<sup>13</sup>

Over the past thirty years, however, scholars have presented several strong arguments in support of the idea that in Genesis 3:15 זרע was originally intended to refer to an individual seed of the woman.<sup>14</sup> The lexical-syntactical work of C. John Collins has proven to serve as a critical turning point in the interpretation of 3:15 because it provides a strong exegetical foundation for understanding the seed of

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79–80). Abernethy and Goswell, however, argue that 3:15 does anticipate a victory of Eve’s collective seed over evil (*God’s Messiah in the Old Testament*, 21).

<sup>9</sup> R. A. Martin, “The Earliest Messianic Interpretation of Genesis 3:15,” *JBL* 84 (1965): 427. The LXX uses αὐτός (masculine singular) to refer to σπέρμα (“seed”). Since the word σπέρμα is neuter, not masculine, the most direct translation would have used the neuter form, αὐτό. Grammatically, the LXX should have used αὐτό (neuter) to refer to the neuter σπέρμα, and in other cases, the LXX renders the Hebrew pronoun with another gender (as necessary) to agree with the Greek gender of the antecedent. Of 103 instances in which the LXX translates the Hebrew הוּא (masc. sing.), Genesis 3:15 is the only reference in which the LXX “literalistically translates the Hebrew masculine pronoun with the masculine Greek pronoun αὐτός,” where the Greek would ordinarily require the neuter αὐτό.

<sup>10</sup> Justin Martyr identifies an analogy between Eve and Mary, who gives birth to the one “by whom God destroys both the serpent and those angels and men who are like him; but works deliverance from death to those who repent of their wickedness and believe upon Him.” *Dialogue with Trypho* 100 (ANF 1:249).

<sup>11</sup> James R. Payton, Jr., *Irenaeus on the Christian Faith: A Condensation of Against Heresies* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 83. See also pp. 152, 172–73.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther’s Works 1 (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1958), 191. Ken Schurb presents Luther’s view and a summary of the early Protestant debates on the passage in “Sixteenth-Century Lutheran-Calvinist Conflict on the *Protevangelium*,” *CTQ* 54.1 (1990): 25–47.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Edward J. Young, *Genesis 3: A Devotional and Expository Study*, reprint ed. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1983), 120; Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 76n32; Francis A. Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 103–5; Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 78–79; LaSor, “Prophecy, Inspiration, and *Sensus Plenior*,” *TynBul* 29 (1978): 53–60.

<sup>14</sup> C. J. Collins, “A Syntactical Note (Genesis 3:15): Is the Woman’s Seed Singular or Plural?” *TynBul* 48 (1997): 139–48; and T. D. Alexander, “Further Observations on the Term ‘Seed’ in Genesis,” *TynBul* 48 (1997): 363–67. Prior to the work of Collins and Alexander, the primary foundation for the messianic understanding of Genesis 3:15 had been grounded only in progressive revelation or a carefully defined *sensus plenior*. For example, see LaSor, “Prophecy, Inspiration, and *Sensus Plenior*,” 53–60; and “The *Sensus Plenior* and Biblical Interpretation,” in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and William Sanford LaSor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 272; and Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1 (Dallas: Word, 1987), 81.

the woman to be individual and *not* collective. Collins analyzes how the OT uses pronouns and verb inflections for number when used with זרע when it refers to “offspring,” concluding that “offspring” in 3:15 is an expressly singular rather than a collective reference.<sup>15</sup> T. D. Alexander builds on Collins’s argument, providing further evidence from Genesis 22:17–18 and 24:60 that “the ‘seed of the woman’ must be understood as referring to a single individual and not numerous descendants.”<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Alexander argues that the development of the concept of “seed” in the book of Genesis indicates the expectation of the development of a royal dynasty leading to a future king who will bless the nations. The זרע is prominent in the patriarchal promises, which will result in the blessing of the nations through a future royal figure (e.g., 17:6, 16; 35:11; 36:31; 49:8–12).<sup>17</sup>

James M. Hamilton Jr. demonstrates that the promises to Abraham of land, offspring, and blessing are “direct answers to the curses of Genesis 3:14–19.”<sup>18</sup> The seed promise in Genesis 3:15, therefore, serves as the foundation for the promise of seed to Abraham. Hamilton turns to the NT’s description of Jesus as the one through whom the promises of land, seed, and blessing are finally fulfilled and through whom the serpent is crushed (Rev 12). Therefore, the development of God’s redemptive plan in Scripture reveals the messianic identity of the seed of the woman.

The arguments presented by Alexander, Collins, and Hamilton in support of the individual view of in Genesis 3:15 are convincing and have met little resistance among scholars.<sup>19</sup> Based on these arguments, this paper assumes that the seed of the woman *must* refer to an individual seed, regardless of how much the original author of Genesis may have known about the identity of that individual or exactly what that individual would do. The question here, then, is whether it is legitimate to understand the seed of the woman in both an individual and a collective sense.

### 3. *The Individual and Collective Seed*

The idea that the offspring of the woman refers to both an individual and a collective group of people is seen first in Cyprian of Carthage (ca. AD 200–258). In his comments on Isaiah 7:10–15, Cyprian speaks of Christ as “this seed God had foretold would proceed from the woman that should trample on the head of the devil.”<sup>20</sup> Cyprian elsewhere alludes to the church as the agent who crushes the serpent: “Let our feet be shod with evangelical teaching, and armed, so that when the serpent shall begin to be trodden and crushed by us, he may not be able to bite and trip us up.”<sup>21</sup> After the Reformation, John

<sup>15</sup> Collins, “Syntactical Note,” 139–48.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander, “Further Observations,” 363.

<sup>17</sup> See T. D. Alexander, “From Adam to Judah: The Significance of the Family Tree in Genesis,” *EvQ* 61 (1989): 5–19; “Genealogies, Seed, and the Compositional Unity of Genesis,” *TynBul* 44 (1993): 255–70; and “Messianic Ideology in Genesis,” in *The Lord’s Anointed*, ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite, Richard S. Hess, and Gordon J. Wenham (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1995), 19–39.

<sup>18</sup> James M. Hamilton Jr., “The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham,” *TynBul* 58 (2007): 254.

<sup>19</sup> For a critique of the arguments of Collins and Alexander, see Walton, *Old Testament Theology for Christians*, 230; and Abernethy and Goswell, *God’s Messiah in the Old Testament*, 11–21.

<sup>20</sup> Cyprian, *Testimonies against the Jews* 2.9 (ANF 5:519).

<sup>21</sup> Cyprian, *Letter* 55.9 (ANF 5:350).



Owen identifies Genesis 3:15 as the “foundation of the Old Testament”<sup>22</sup> and “the chief promise of the new covenant itself.”<sup>23</sup> As such, Owen understands Genesis 3:15 as the promise of an individual messianic seed of the woman,<sup>24</sup> though Owen holds that the seed of the woman is collective as well. Owen asserts, “By the seed of the woman is meant the whole body of the elect, Christ in the first place as the head, and all the rest as his members.”<sup>25</sup>

More recently, Hamilton presents this argument based on the use of the term “seed” in Genesis and the use of terms related to the crushing of heads in numerous OT and NT passages.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Bruce K. Waltke argues that “the further discourse of Scripture ... merges” the individual and collective ideas of “offspring.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, “Since the seed struggles against the Serpent’s presumably collective seed, we infer it has its collective sense. But since only the head of the Serpent is represented as crushed, we expect an individual to deliver the fatal blow and to be struck uniquely on his heel.”<sup>28</sup>

The question, then, is whether it is legitimate to understand the seed of the woman in both an individual and a collective sense. This article offers four arguments, which scholars have not thoroughly addressed elsewhere, in support of the idea that the canonical outworking of Genesis 3:15 demonstrates that the seed promise looks forward to a collective offspring of the woman in addition to an individual offspring.

### 3.1. The Collective Identity of the Offspring of the Serpent Implies a Collective Offspring of the Woman

The final clause of 3:15 clearly indicates that it is the individual serpent who is going to exchange blows in enmity with the seed of the woman. The use of singular pronominal suffixes in this section of the verse (“your head” and “his heel”) and the singular independent pronoun (“he will strike”) give clear indication that an individual seed of the woman is in view. It seems, then, that this portion of the verse certainly expects a battle with mutual strikes between two individuals. The earlier part of the verse, however, refers not to the serpent but to the offspring of the serpent. Interpreters consistently identify the seed of the serpent as a collective use of זרע. Additionally, apart from those who see the

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<sup>22</sup> John Owen, “The Beauty and Strength of Zion,” ed. Thomas Russell, *The Works of John Owen* 16 (Edinburgh: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850), 396. Owen also asserts that 3:15, which is “truly called Πρωτευαγγέλιον” is “the very foundation of the faith of the church.” *The Glory of Christ*, Works 1:120.

<sup>23</sup> John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1967), 95.

<sup>24</sup> Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Works 18:240.

<sup>25</sup> Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, 178. Owen elsewhere explains that “either seed hath a leader; there is he and thou, it and thou; that is, Christ and Satan: Christ is the leader of the seed of the woman, the captain and head of it in this great conflict.” Also, Owen argues that the bruising of the heel refers to the sufferings of Christ as well as the sufferings of his church. “The Beauty and Strength of Zion,” 396–97. For a helpful discussion of Owen’s view of 3:15, see Ryan M. McGraw, “The Foundation of the Old Testament,” *JRT* 10 (2016): 9–14.

<sup>26</sup> James M. Hamilton Jr., “The Skull Crushing Seed of the Woman: Inner-Biblical Interpretation of Genesis 3:15,” *SBJT* 10.2 (2006): 31–33; see also *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 76–85.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce Waltke with Charles Wu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 280–81. See also Young, *Genesis* 3, 119–21; and Kaiser, *The Messiah in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 39–42; and *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 56–57.

<sup>28</sup> Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 281.

serpent as nothing more than a mere creature, interpreters unanimously understand the collective seed of the serpent not in a biological sense but in a spiritual sense—those who resemble the serpent’s nature.<sup>29</sup> Assuming that the serpent’s offspring must be both collective and spiritual (not biological), it is reasonable to expect that the woman’s offspring in this part of the verse would be both collective and spiritual.<sup>30</sup> Though it is certainly possible that 3:15 looks forward to the individual offspring of the woman in opposition to a whole horde of the collective offspring of the serpent, it seems more natural to see a collective offspring of the woman in 3:15 in contrast to the collective offspring of the serpent. If this is the case, then when Scripture later alludes to Genesis 3:15, the reader would expect to encounter a reference to collective entities in opposition to each other as well as the singular opposition between the individual seeds. This paper will examine biblical allusions to 3:15 which include the collective references as well as the individual references.

In this view, Genesis 3:15 presents four key parties that are involved in the conflict: (1) the serpent, (2) the collective/spiritual offspring of the serpent, (3) the individual offspring of the woman who exchanges blows with the serpent, and (4) the collective/spiritual offspring of the woman who are at enmity with the collective/spiritual offspring of the serpent. Therefore, the “seed of the woman” represents the individual who delivers the crushing blow to the serpent, but the promise also finds its fulfillment in the enmity between the collective offspring of the woman and the offspring of the serpent. Genesis 3:15, therefore, presents the offspring of the woman as “the one who represents the whole group as well as the group itself.”<sup>31</sup> Perhaps this is similar to (though perhaps not exactly the same as) saying that Wellington defeated Napoleon at Waterloo in contrast to saying that the British coalition defeated the French. Both are true. Wellington’s victory required a significant military force to defeat Napoleon’s force. It can be spoken of in individual and/or collective terms, but both the individual and collective entities are necessary.

Hamilton points out that the “self-referential” nature of Genesis gives the expectation that Moses’s understanding of the meaning of this promise will be explained throughout the subsequent narrative accounts in Genesis.<sup>32</sup> This enmity between two types of seed first displays itself in the account of Cain

<sup>29</sup> Sydney H. T. Page argues that the offspring of the serpent refers to demonic forces that side with Satan. *Powers of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 20. Most interpreters, though, hold that the offspring of the serpent must include those humans who align themselves with Satan in opposition to God’s purposes. See T. D. Alexander, *The Servant King: The Bible’s Portrait of the Messiah* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2003), 18; Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 28; and Kevin S. Chen, *The Messianic Vision of the Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 40–41. It is likely that both the demonic and the human forces that follow after the ways of the serpent are in view as “offspring of the serpent.”

<sup>30</sup> Alexander comments, “If the serpent symbolizes the powers of evil, then the ‘seed of the serpent’ must denote not merely snakes but rather all who are evil. The corollary of this would be that the ‘seed of the woman’ designates here those who are righteous. Thus, 3:15 refers to a conflict between good and evil which will eventually result in victory for the righteous ‘seed of the woman.’” “Messianic Ideology in Genesis,” 31.

<sup>31</sup> Kaiser, *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, 39.

<sup>32</sup> Hamilton comments, “The creating and promising word of God resulted in earlier biblical authors (beginning with Moses) discerning certain patterns in their material.” And “For Moses himself, the word of God—the promises—shaped his worldview—his assumptions and presuppositions, perceptions and interpretations, resulting in the promised-shaped patterns that he introduced into the accounts.” *Typology: Understanding the Bible’s Promise-Shaped Patterns* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 5. Similarly, John H. Sailhamer argues, “The author of Genesis ... surely knows his own understanding of the identity of the ‘seed’ as he writes Genesis 3:15, but as the author, he leaves the identity of the ‘seed’ ambiguous (or vague) until he supplies the proper answer

and Abel, an account in which the text seems to clearly link Cain with the serpent.<sup>33</sup> Once Abel is identified as the righteous brother, it is probable that he, rather than Cain, is the progenitor of the ultimate offspring who will defeat the serpent or that he himself is that offspring who will defeat the snake. Abel must be eliminated. Cain, who is “of the evil one” (1 John 3:12), murders his brother, who is potentially the righteous one who might defeat the serpent. In this episode, Cain becomes the spiritual offspring of the serpent, and Abel is evidently the spiritual offspring of the woman. This is why Eve later believes that Seth is “another offspring instead of Abel” (Gen 4:25). Eve apparently understands that Cain cannot be the anticipated offspring because of his unrighteousness—he is on the side of the serpent. Abel is obviously not the final offspring of the woman because he never crushes the serpent. Though Abel does not actively display enmity toward Cain, enmity clearly exists between them.<sup>34</sup>

Todd Patterson concludes, “The overall effect of the Gen 4 narrative then is to divide the seed of the woman into two contrasted lines. There is one line that is unrighteous and one that is righteous. As readers our attention is in this way trained to follow the righteous or chosen line, and eschew the other in our search for the promised seed of the woman.”<sup>35</sup> Therefore, in the genealogies in Genesis 4 and 5, Cain’s “unrighteous’ line is placed alongside and contrasted with the ‘righteous’ line of Seth.”<sup>36</sup> The unrighteous line is associated with the seed of the serpent, and the righteous line is associated with the seed of the woman.

### 3.2. The Enmity between Seed Lines in the OT Narrative Renders Collective Enmity a Logical Necessity

At the stage in redemptive history when Genesis was written, it may have been difficult—but not necessarily impossible—for the human writer and his readers to understand how Genesis 3:15 would be fulfilled. If 3:15 divides humanity into two different groups—seed of the woman versus seed of the serpent—then the rest of Genesis—and the rest of the history of humanity—would demonstrate the outworking of this promise. Therefore, it is natural to understand that Genesis (and the rest of the OT) points to “an ongoing conflict between the righteous and unrighteous seed.”<sup>37</sup>

The fact that a future unspecified descendant is promised in 3:15 and that the serpent is aware that that descendant will come through a particular seed line gives the serpent the strongest motivation to

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in the remainder of the Pentateuch.” *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition, and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 322.

<sup>33</sup> Numerous studies discuss this type of relationship between Genesis 3 and 4. For example, see Alexander, “Messianic Ideology in Genesis,” 24, 31; John L. Ronning, “The Curse on the Serpent (Genesis 3:15) in Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1997), 165–78; Seth D. Postell, “Genesis 3:15: The Promised Seed,” in *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy*, ed. Michael Rydelnik and Edwin Blum (Chicago: Moody, 2019), 243–45; Abernethy and Goswell, *God’s Messiah in the Old Testament*, 13; Hamilton, *Typology*, 6–17.

<sup>34</sup> Enmity between two sides does not imply that both sides are acting with enmity toward the other. If one side acts in enmity, there is enmity between the sides. In the Mosaic Law, a person can murder another with אִיבָה (enmity) or without אִיבָה. Murdering “with enmity” does not imply that both sides are acting in enmity toward each other (Num 35:20–24; e.g., Ezek 25:15; 35:5).

<sup>35</sup> Todd Patterson, “The Righteousness and Survival of the Seed: The Role of Plot in the Exegesis and Theology of Genesis” (PhD diss., Trinity International University, 2012), 164. See also Alexander, “Messianic Ideology,” 24.

<sup>36</sup> Alexander, “Messianic Ideology in Genesis,” 24.

<sup>37</sup> Alexander, “Messianic Ideology in Genesis,” 24.

exercise every effort toward the destruction of that seed line so as to prevent the arrival of that future individual. In order to prevent the coming of the individual deliverer, the serpent and his seed must wage war against the collective offspring of the woman. Martin Luther points out this obvious motivation of the devil, with, perhaps, a bit of overstatement included:

This promise and this threat are very clear, and yet they are also very indefinite. They leave the devil in such a state that he suspects all mothers of giving birth to this Seed, although only one woman was to be the mother of this blessed Seed. Thus because God is threatening in general when He says, “her Seed,” He is mocking Satan and making him afraid of all women.... This obscurity increased Satan’s care and worry.... He was hostile and suspicious toward all those who gave birth from that time on until Christ was revealed.<sup>38</sup>

The arrival of the future individual seed of the woman is dependent on the survival of a much larger collective group of people (Israel), a group constantly at enmity with the surrounding nations. This pattern of enmity between righteous and unrighteous is evident in the divine promise to Abraham, “I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse” (Gen 12:3; cf. 27:29). Enmity between the collective offspring of Abraham and the collective offspring of the surrounding nations persists throughout the OT. If the seed promise to Abraham is a continuation of the seed promise from Genesis 3:15, then the continuing enmity between Abraham’s offspring and the surrounding nations appears to be a manifestation of the fulfillment of Genesis 3:15. The bondage in Egypt and subsequent exodus, the conquest of Canaan, and the captivity and exile of Israel continue this theme. The ungodly nations serve other gods and follow after their practices, and they continue to engage in enmity with Israel, often expressing a desire to destroy Israel (Num 22:15–17; Jer 1:14–16; Dan 7:21–25; Zech 12:3) and to eliminate Israel from being a people group (Ps 83:3–8; Est 3:6–13; 7:4; 9:24). In spite of the apparent success of Assyria and Babylon in destroying the nations of Israel and Judah and relocating many Israelites, the OT narrative ends with the people of Israel—the collective offspring of Abraham—returning to their land, preparing the way for the coming of the consummate seed of the woman to come, though the surrounding nations continue to work in opposition to the progress of the Israelites (Ezra 4:4–5:17; Neh 2:10, 19; 4:1–11; 6:7).<sup>39</sup>

Much of the OT displays the hostility of the ungodly nations toward a particular royal seed line descending from Abraham, later identified as the seed line of David.<sup>40</sup> At various times in Israel’s history, the continuation of the line of David is at risk because of sedition and murder. In the time of Jehoram, Ahaziah, Athaliah, Joash, and Amaziah (2 Chr 21–25), in particular, “the Davidic messianic line was suspended by its most slender thread.”<sup>41</sup> The historical record, however, does provide hope for

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<sup>38</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, 1:193–94.

<sup>39</sup> For this theme, see Robert D. Bell, *The Theological Messages of the Old Testament Books* (Greenville: BJU Press, 2010), 183–86.

<sup>40</sup> The enmity against David himself is seen in several examples: (1) Saul, under the influence of the harmful spirit, seeks incessantly to kill David (1 Sam 16–26); (2) after Saul’s death, “a long war” begins between Saul’s house and David’s house (2 Sam 3:1); (3) the Amalekites take David’s wives away, a clear action against David’s potential seed (1 Sam 30:1–6). These examples are in addition to the many other examples of David in deadly conflict with his enemies.

<sup>41</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 373.

the continuation of the Davidic line with the survival of Jehoiachin, who enjoys a position of favor in Babylon (2 Kgs 25:27–30). Therefore, in spite of the threat of extermination, the seed of David survives and has a future.<sup>42</sup>

### 3.3. Key OT Promises Look Forward to Individual and Collective Offspring

In various passages that are critical in the development of God's redemptive plan and that anticipate future "offspring," individual and collective entities are in view. The primary example of this feature is in the seed promises in the Abraham narrative. Several iterations of the seed promise to Abraham are clearly collective (Gen 13:15–16; 15:5, 13; 16:10; 17:7–12; 22:17), but an individual seed for Abraham is in view in 22:17–18 and 24:60.<sup>43</sup> Since, as Hamilton argues, the seed promises to Abraham are the direct answer to the seed promise of Genesis 3:15,<sup>44</sup> then it follows that the outworking of both individual and collective seed promises to Abraham would seem to imply that both an individual and a collective seed should be expected in 3:15.

Two other key messianic texts may support the idea of an expectation of individual and collective "seed." Balaam's second oracle speaks of the vast size of the encampments of Israel and says that Jacob's "seed shall be in many waters" (Num 24:7), a reference to "Israel's proliferating population."<sup>45</sup> In Numbers 24:9b, Balaam refers to the Abrahamic promise of blessing and cursing in terms that call to mind the promises to Abraham (Gen 12:3a).<sup>46</sup> In Balaam's third oracle, though, he speaks not of the vast numbers of Israel but of an individual "star" who will come out of Jacob to crush the forehead of Moab and exercise dominion (24:15–19). It is readily acknowledged that the word "seed" does not appear in this third oracle. However, in this series of key redemptive prophecies in a passage that clearly echoes the Abrahamic promises, Balaam demonstrates an expectation of both a collective entity (identified as "seed") as well as an individual from Israel who will play a role in defeating Israel's enemies. It is also noteworthy that the references to a "scepter" rising out of Israel who will "crush the forehead" of Moab (24:17) and "exercise dominion" (24:19) do seem to allude to messianic statements in Genesis (Gen 3:15; 49:8–12).<sup>47</sup> The Hebrew words for "scepter" (שֵׁבֶט) and "exercising dominion" (רָדָה) are the same words used in Genesis 49:10 and 1:26, though the terminology for "crushing the forehead" is different in Numbers 24:17 (פָּאָה, מַחֵךְ) than in Genesis 3:15 (רָאשׁ, שׁוּף). Nevertheless, the concept of Israel's

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<sup>42</sup> See discussion in Iain W. Provan, "The Messiah in the Books of Kings," in *The Lord's Anointed*, ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite, Richard S. Hess, and Gordon J. Wenham (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1995), 67–85.

<sup>43</sup> Alexander, "Further Observations," 363–67; Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 156 n. 30; Chen, *The Messianic Vision of the Pentateuch*, 74–77; Jason S. DeRouchie, "Redemptive-Historical, Christocentric Approach," in *Five Views of Christ in the Old Testament*, ed. Brian J. Tabb and Andrew M. King, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 197–99. Walton (*An Old Testament Theology*, 230 n. 3) and Abernethy and Goswell (*God's Messiah in the Old Testament*, 14–16) argue against the legitimacy of understanding "seed" here as singular.

<sup>44</sup> Hamilton, "The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham," 254.

<sup>45</sup> Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 491.

<sup>46</sup> See Hamilton, "The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham," 264.

<sup>47</sup> Hamilton displays Genesis 49:9b next to Numbers 24:9a and demonstrates that the latter passage quotes the former nearly verbatim. "The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham," 264.

deliverer striking her enemies on the forehead appears to serve as a conceptual link to Genesis 3:15, as well as the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>48</sup>

Another example of both the individual and collective offspring in the same context is in the communication of the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7. God's promise that he will build a "house" (a dynasty) for David supports the idea of a collective group of descendants. This collective group must, at the very least, include all of the descendants of David until the ultimate Son of David arrives. But God's covenant with David certainly includes an individual element as well. Yahweh promises to raise up David's "offspring" after him, the identity of which is notoriously ambiguous. The expected offspring is clearly an individual, since it consistently uses first person singular pronouns: "I will establish *his* kingdom. *He* shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of *his* kingdom forever" (7:12–13). Though portions of this promise may refer to Solomon to some extent, the promise gives hints of a fulfillment in an individual in the "remote future."<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, the Davidic Covenant is "rich in Abrahamic allusions,"<sup>50</sup> providing "definite resonations of the promises to Abraham,"<sup>51</sup> demonstrating its role as "a further development of the covenant with Abraham."<sup>52</sup> Yahweh promises David "a great name" (2 Sam 7:9; cf. Gen 12:2), a seed "who shall come from your body" (2 Sam 7:12; cf. Gen 15:4),<sup>53</sup> and a dynasty which will experience eternal blessing (7:29; cf. Ps 89:29, 35–37). If, therefore, the promises to Abraham represent "a direct answer to the curses of Genesis 3:14–19"<sup>54</sup> and if the Davidic Covenant serves to further the development of the Abrahamic Covenant, then the Davidic Covenant must also serve as a direct answer to the curses of Genesis 3:14–19, particularly in its reference to the future "offspring" of David. Perhaps the collective seed is included in the promises revealed to Abraham, Balaam, and David simply for the sake of producing the individual seed. However, if subsequent references to the original promise consistently include both individual and collective elements, it seems likely that the original promise of seed would also expect individual and collective elements.

<sup>48</sup> Hamilton summarizes, "These texts indicate that the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham would be realised through a triumphant king of Israel, descended from Judah, who would defeat Israel's enemies. These enemies of Israel are regarded as the seed of the serpent, so that their defeat is simultaneously Israel's victory." "The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham," 266.

<sup>49</sup> Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 661. David G. Firth comments, "We are to understand the singular distributively, since the promise of an enduring dynasty goes beyond the initial son, even if he would build the temple." *1 and 2 Samuel*, ApOTC (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 385. Robert D. Bergen points out that the eternal nature of the Davidic promise "seems to vault this portion of the prophecy beyond the bounds of Solomon's reign and give it eschatological and/or messianic overtones." *1, 2 Samuel*, NAC 7 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 340. D. A. Carson examines the use of 2 Samuel 7:14 in coordination with Psalm 2:7 in Hebrews 1:5 to demonstrate that "both passages depict the Davidic monarch as God's son, ideally imitating his heavenly father's kingly rule. Both passages hint at a Davidic reign that eclipses anything in the first millennium BC." *Jesus the Son of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 48.

<sup>50</sup> Firth, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 385.

<sup>51</sup> Hamilton, "The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham," 266.

<sup>52</sup> Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, NSBT 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 143.

<sup>53</sup> Hamilton notes that this phrase is used in both texts (2 Sam 7:12 and Gen 15:4) and "appears nowhere else in the OT." "The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham," 268.

<sup>54</sup> Hamilton, "The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham," 253.

### 3.4. The New Testament Writers Explain the Outworking of Genesis 3:15 as Individual and Collective

Several NT passages allude to Genesis 3:15 and demonstrate a collective and an individual application of the outworking of Genesis 3:15. This article highlights seven examples that display the outworking of the individual and collective elements of Genesis 3:15.

#### 3.4.1. *The Opponents of Jesus as Offspring of the Serpent*

The Gospel accounts display an ongoing enmity between Jesus and his followers (seed of the woman) on one side and Satan and his agents (seed of the serpent) on the other. On several occasions, Jesus identifies his opponents as children or offspring of the devil. In attributing their spiritual parentage to the devil, Jesus declares that his opponents are thinking and acting like the devil. Craig S. Keener explains,

Jewish people understood the principle of *spiritual* descent, that is, walking in one's ways even if one was not physically a child of that person (e.g., Matt 23:31).... The notion of spiritual parentage drew on the standard conception that children reflect the nature of their parents (as in 3:6); thus children of adulterers betrayed the adulterer by bearing his image. Hence one could revile another by attributing to him ancestors that better explain his behavior.... But sometimes people simply failed to act like their ancestors, in which case someone might deny that they were *truly* descendants in the ways that mattered.<sup>55</sup>

Jesus directly addresses the Pharisees as “You serpents, brood of vipers” (Matt 23:33; cf. 3:7; Luke 3:7). The significant point here is that a Jew identifying someone as the offspring of a serpent is, in view of the broader context of the OT, quite possibly alluding to Genesis 3:15 to some degree.<sup>56</sup> These statements do not necessarily address whether the seed of the woman is individual or collective, but they do suggest that Jesus understands his opponents to be representative of the offspring of the serpent.

In John 8, Jesus identifies the Jewish religious leaders with the offspring of the serpent in his heated dialogue with “the Jews” (also identified as the Pharisees in 8:13) who insist that they are the offspring (σπέρμα) of Abraham (8:33, 39). Though Jesus concedes that these “Jews” are offspring of Abraham in a physical sense (8:37), they are not truly “Abraham’s children” (τέκνα τοῦ Ἀβραάμ) because they do not do “the works Abraham did” (8:39). True offspring of Abraham would not seek to kill Jesus, a man who speaks God’s truth (8:37, 40). Furthermore, God cannot be their father (8:41), since they are rejecting Jesus, the one whom God had sent (8:42). Instead, the devil is their father, since they fulfil his desires in their opposition to Jesus (8:44).<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:756–57, emphasis original.

<sup>56</sup> Hamilton argues that “the authors of the Bible regard the enemies of the people of God as those whose heads, like the head of the Serpent (the father of lies), will be crushed. Those who are understood as opposing the purposes of God and his people appear to be regarded as the seed of the serpent.” “The Skull Crushing Seed of the Woman,” 33. See also Andrew David Naselli, *The Serpent and the Serpent Slayer*, Short Studies in Biblical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 95–97.

<sup>57</sup> Jo-Ann A. Brant helpfully explain this logic: “A son imitates his father. You are doing what the devil does by seeking to kill me. Therefore, the devil is your father.” *John*, Paideia (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 146.

Jesus points out the two primary sins of the devil that solidifies their connection to him: (1) he was a “murderer from the beginning” and (2) he is “a liar and the father of lies” (8:44).<sup>58</sup> The Jews’ intent to murder Jesus (8:37, 40, 44, 59), their rejection of his truth (8:37, 43–47), and their propagation of lies (8:41, 48, 52) demonstrate that their character reflects the character of the devil; the devil, then, is their spiritual father, and they are his offspring. Because Jesus is certainly alluding to the serpent’s actions in Genesis 3 in identifying the devil as a liar and a murderer, he is likely thinking of Genesis 3 in referring to the unbelieving Jews as children of the devil—the offspring of the serpent.

A word that can easily describe Jesus’s relationship with such offspring of the serpent is “enmity.” When Jesus confronts the offspring of the serpent, he does not come peaceably; rather, he engages in a harsh war of words in which he identifies and overcomes the agents of Satan.<sup>59</sup> This enmity does not end with the serpent’s seed’s rejection of Jesus; it continues with the offspring of the serpent persecuting, flogging, killing, and crucifying, Jesus’s messengers (Matt 23:34–35). If these entities are representative of the offspring of the serpent and if they are at enmity with the individual Messiah, then these references appear to support the idea of the individual offspring of the woman being fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus presents these as enemies not only of himself but also as enemies of his followers. Therefore, throughout Jesus’s ministry, the offspring of the serpent are at enmity with Jesus and his followers. Though Jesus’s followers are not specifically identified as “offspring of the woman,” their position of enmity with the offspring of the serpent assumes this identification. It is not necessary for Jesus to say, “You, my disciples, are offspring of the woman” in order to understand that the theme of enmity promised in Genesis 3:15 is being displayed in the Gospels. These conflicts support the idea of enmity between individual and collective offspring.

### 3.4.2. *John’s Theology of the World*

John’s theology of the world also reflects the individual and collective enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. John presents Satan as the ruler of the world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 1 John 5:19), who works in direct opposition to Jesus. The “world” in this sense in John refers not to the created universe but to the sinful people and the systems that stem from those sinful people (and from their ruler, the devil). John positions the world in direct opposition to Jesus. Not only does the world hate Jesus (John 7:7; 15:18–24), the world also hates believers—those who follow Jesus (John 15:18–24; 17:14; 1 John 3:13). If Satan is identified as the serpent from Genesis 3, and those who follow

<sup>58</sup> These descriptions of the devil almost certainly refer to “Satan’s seduction of Adam and Eve (cf. 1 John 3:8, 15), leading to their expulsion from Eden and the introduction of death to mankind (cf. Rom 5:12–14).” Grant R. Osborne, “The Gospel of John,” in *The Gospel of John, 1–3 John*, ed. Philip W. Comfort, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary 13 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2007), 137. Most commentators agree that the serpent’s work of effecting death in the human race in Genesis 3 is in view here. See also J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 519. Alternatively, Raymond E. Brown argues that the devil’s work as a “murderer from the beginning” refers to his work in Cain to murder Abel, particularly since John specifies in 1 John 3:12 that Cain was “of the evil one and murdered his brother.” *The Gospel According to John (1–XII): Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 29 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 358.

<sup>59</sup> Chris Keith contrasts the presentation of Jesus in Matthew 23 with the modern popular idea of Jesus: “Matthew 23’s Jesus is not a vacation Bible school Jesus or seeker-sensitive Jesus.... His message ends not with a head pat to a child and an aphorism about the kingdom, but with tales of murder and bloodshed.” *Jesus Against the Scribal Elite: The Origins of the Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 5. Andrew R. Simmonds adds, “It is verbal martial arts in which Jesus, the speaker, defeated the opponents by using their own weight to topple them.” “Woe to You ... Hypocrites! Re-Reading Matthew 23:13–36,” *BibSac* 166 (2009): 349.



after him are identified as his “seed” or his children—or “the world”—then it seems quite consistent to understand John’s theology of the world as unfolding the concepts presented in Genesis 3. Satan and the world persist in their enmity toward Jesus and believers. The world “hates” Jesus and believers. Satan and the sinful leaders of this world put Jesus to death (striking his heel), but Jesus ultimately is victorious over the devil (striking his head) and overcomes the world (John 16:33). Christians also participate in this victory, as they also overcome the world (1 John 2:13–14; 4:4; 5:4–5).<sup>60</sup> Though John does not specifically identify believers as “offspring of the woman,” he clearly states that they are at enmity with the devil and those who follow the devil. To say that Satan and his “children” are at enmity with God’s people is to identify God’s people as the offspring of the woman who are at enmity with the serpent’s seed.

### 3.4.3. *Parable of the Weeds*

The parable of the weeds (or “tares”) among the wheat provides a subtle allusion to Genesis 3:15. In this parable, an “enemy” comes and sows weeds among good seed (Matt 13:25–28). Jesus is the one who had sown the good seed (identified as the “children of the kingdom,” 13:38), and the devil is the enemy who sows the weeds in an effort “to sabotage the harvest.”<sup>61</sup> The weeds themselves are “the sons of the evil one” (i.e., seed of the serpent).<sup>62</sup> Because the weeds are so intermingled with the wheat, they must grow together until the judgment. The sons of the evil one cause sin (σκάνδαλον), a phrase which likely refers to people who lead others into sin.<sup>63</sup> The point is that Satan seeks to perpetuate the existence of sons of the evil one in the world to oppose God’s redemptive purposes.

It is striking that this parable presents the same key entities that are present in Genesis 3:15: the Son of Man (13:37), the “sons of the kingdom” (Matt 13:38), the “sons of the evil one” (13:38), and the devil (13:39). Furthermore, the two heads of the group (the Son of Man and the devil) are opposing each other, and the two groups who follow the heads are both identified as a type of “seed.” In the end, the seed of the devil will be judged. In relation to Genesis 3:15, it may also be noteworthy that the devil is identified as “an enemy” (Matt 13:28, 39; ἐχθρός / אֵיב), which reflects the language of “enmity” in Genesis 3:15 (ἐχθρα / אֵיבָה). Though the “seed” in the parable is obviously an agricultural reference, the use of the term in addition to the other key themes in this section seems to present a fairly strong allusion to Genesis 3:15.

### 3.4.4. *Children of God and Children of the Devil (1 John 3:8–13)*

In 1 John 3, John clearly has the early chapters of Genesis on his mind. He speaks of the devil who “has been sinning from the beginning” (3:8), and then he moves to a discussion of Cain, who murdered

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<sup>60</sup> For a fuller exposition of the concept of the NT theology of the world as the outworking of Genesis 3:15, see Jonathan M. Cheek, “Genesis 3:15 as the Root of a Biblical Theology of the Church and the World: The Commencement, Continuation, and Culmination of the Enmity between the Seeds” (PhD diss., Bob Jones Seminary, 2019).

<sup>61</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 518. Though Jesus identifies the field as “the world” (κόσμος), he is referring to the world here in a geographical rather than an ethical/moral sense.

<sup>62</sup> Osborne notes that “‘The children’ (οἱ υἱοί) with a genitive is an idiom describing the chief characteristic of a group, so the battle is between the kingdom and the cosmic forces of evil for the souls of humankind, and some belong to God’s kingdom and others to Satan.” *Matthew*, 532.

<sup>63</sup> The Greek σκάνδαλον is used in this sense throughout Matthew (5:29–30; 13:21; 18:6–7). Osborne, *Matthew*, 534.

his brother (3:11–13). John says, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (3:8). This statement itself should certainly be understood to refer to the individual seed of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent. John then proceeds to contrast two different collective groups—the children of God and the children of the devil (3:10). The children of God are born of God, and they do not make a practice of sinning; the children of the devil are the ones who do not practice righteousness.

John, therefore, presents the same entities spoken of in Genesis 3:15: (1) the Son of God, who destroys the works of (2) the devil, (3) the children of God, in whom God’s seed abides,<sup>64</sup> and (4) the children of the devil. The allusion to Genesis 3:15 seems clear, based on the presence of these entities placed in antithesis to each other, with one side ultimately being victorious over the devil and his children. It would be exegetically naïve *not* to see an allusion to Genesis 3:15 in these statements.<sup>65</sup> Jesus clearly represents the seed of the woman who is crushing the serpent, and his children are clearly set in opposition to the children of the serpent. If John is describing the outworking of Genesis 3:15, then he appears to understand the seed of the woman in Genesis 3:15 in both an individual and a collective sense.

### 3.4.5. *Crushing Satan under Your Feet (Rom 16:20)*

Most interpreters acknowledge an allusion to Genesis 3:15 in Romans 16:20, although the language of Paul’s promise is not the same as the language in Genesis 3:15.<sup>66</sup> The LXX rendering of שׁוּשׁ as τηρέω in Genesis 3:15 is known to be problematic.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, it seems likely that Paul chose a Greek word that would more accurately translate שׁוּשׁ: συντρίβω, which means “to crush.”<sup>68</sup> In the context, Paul seems to

<sup>64</sup> It is likely that God’s “seed” is a reference to the Holy Spirit. See Andreas J. Köstenberger, “The Cosmic Drama and the Seed of the Serpent,” in *Seed of Promise: The Sufferings and Glory of the Messiah, Essays in Honor of T. Desmond Alexander*, ed. Paul R. Williamson and Rita F. Cefalu (Wilmore, KY: Glossa House, 2020), 273–76.

<sup>65</sup> Köstenberger identifies this passage as “the strongest connection to Gen 3:15 anywhere in the Johannine corpus.” He points out, though, that “remarkably, the grounding of 1 John 3:9 in Gen 3:15 is almost universally overlooked.” “The Cosmic Drama and the Seed of the Serpent,” 273 n. 21.

<sup>66</sup> Michael J. Thate comments, “It is rather difficult to deny the thematic parallel despite the lexical and linguistic difficulties.” “Paul at the Ball: *Ecclesia Victor* and the Cosmic Defeat of Personified Evil in Romans 16:20,” in *Paul’s World*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 152. The majority of recent commentators support an allusion to Genesis 3:15 here. For example, see Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 994–95; Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 581; and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 779. Douglas J. Moo notes that “the language of the promise may allude to the ‘proto-evangelium’ of Gen. 3:15d,” though he acknowledges that “the language of Paul’s promise is not that close to that of Gen. 3:15.” *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 932 n. 40. Some interpreters question the idea that Genesis 3:15 is in view. For example, Collins argues that the text of Romans 16:20 is “pretty far from the Genesis 3:15 text” and argues against the relationship of the two. *Genesis 1–4*, 158. Frank Thielman argues that “Paul’s language is more directly indebted to Psalms 8:6 and 110:1, ... a combination early Christians often used to describe Christ’s victory over God’s enemies.” *Romans*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 740. In light of this concern, it is important to understand that Psalm 110:1 itself likely alludes to Genesis 3:15. See Schreiner, *Romans*, 779.

<sup>67</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 779 n. 14. For a discussion of the translation of שׁוּשׁ here, see Jonathan Cheek, “Bruising, Crushing, or Striking: The Translation of שׁוּשׁ and the Promise of Victory in Genesis 3:15,” *Journal of Biblical Theology & Worldview* 2.1 (2021): 29–31

<sup>68</sup> BDAG, “συντρίβω.”

be representing the heretics in 16:17 as agents of Satan, an idea supported by other Pauline statements identifying false teachers as agents of Satan (2 Cor 11:14–15). In this sense, these two collective groups are at enmity with each other. What is noteworthy in Romans 16:20 is that it is both an individual (the God of peace) and a collective group (the church) who are involved in crushing Satan, though the key actor in the victory is God rather than the church. If Romans 16:20 is an allusion to Genesis 3:15, which seems quite probable, then it is definitely presenting both an individual and a collective understanding of the identity of the seed of the woman.

### 3.4.6. *Seed and Seeds in Galatians 3:15–29*

Galatians 3 does not contain a direct allusion to Genesis 3:15, but it is relevant in a discussion of whether seed is individual and/or collective.<sup>69</sup> In the same contextual section of Galatians, Paul clearly uses “offspring” (σπέρμα) for an individual, “referring to one, ... who is Christ” (Gal 3:16), as well as the collective group of the Galatian believers: “You [pl.] are Abraham’s offspring” (Gal 3:29). It seems best to see the reference to the individual offspring in Galatians 3:16 as “an exegetically grounded interpretation of Gen 17:8 (and/or 13:15; 24:7) within its broader literary context, especially 3:15 and 22:17–18).”<sup>70</sup> The existence of the collective offspring depends ultimately on the work of the individual offspring, Christ. Thus, based on his reading of key passages in Genesis, Paul interprets the Abrahamic promises with the expectation of both an individual, Jesus the Messiah, and a collective group, the people of God, as “offspring.”

### 3.4.7. *Cosmic Drama in Revelation 12*

Revelation 12–13 describes the outworking of Genesis 3:15 so vividly that it may be said that Revelation 12–13 represents a “midrash on Genesis 3:15.”<sup>71</sup> Paul S. Minear argues that “it is Genesis 3:15–20 that dominates the whole of Revelation 12.”<sup>72</sup> The same four entities from Genesis 3:15 are active in these two chapters in Revelation in which the individual offspring of the woman wounds the head of the dragon (13:3). “The devil and his angels” engage in this conflict, representing the offspring of the serpent (12:7–10), and are waging war with the collective offspring of the woman, identified as “the rest of her offspring” (12:17).

In Revelation 12, a “woman clothed with the sun”<sup>73</sup> gives birth to the Messiah, at whose birth the dragon unsuccessfully attempts to devour him (12:1–5). Upon the Messiah’s ascent to heaven, war

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<sup>69</sup> Galatians 3 serves as the battleground of much debate, particularly relating to the validity of the exegetical methodology Paul uses when he interprets Genesis in support of an individual seed. See Jason S. DeRouchie and Jason C. Meyer, “Christ or Family as the ‘Seed’ of Promise? An Evaluation of N. T. Wright on Galatians 3:16,” *SBJT* 14.3 (2010): 36–48. See also Collins, “Galatians 3:16: What Kind of Exegete Was Paul?” *TynBul* 54 (2003): 75–86.

<sup>70</sup> DeRouchie and Meyer, “Christ or Family as the ‘Seed’ of Promise?,” 40.

<sup>71</sup> This is not original with me. In a conversation with Todd Patterson, Patterson attributes this description of these chapters to Richard E. Averbeck.

<sup>72</sup> Paul S. Minear, “Far as the Curse Is Found: The Point of Revelation 12:15–16,” *NT* 33.1 (1991): 71.

<sup>73</sup> Scholars generally hold to one of two primary interpretations of the “woman clothed with the sun.” Some hold that the woman clothed with the sun refers to Israel. See R. L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 119–21; and Buist Fanning, *Revelation*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 349–50. Others argue that the woman represents the people of God throughout redemptive history, including faithful Israel as well as the church, or “the faithful community, which existed both before and after the coming of Christ.” G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand

arises in heaven, and Michael and his angels defeat “the dragon and his angels” who are thrown down to the earth (12:7–9). This dragon, identified as “the devil” in 12:12, pursues the woman and then goes “to make war on the rest of her offspring [σπέρμα], on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (12:17). In a context that clearly describes the outworking of Genesis 3:15, a reference to a collective group of godly people as “the rest of her offspring” certainly supports the idea of an expected collective offspring of the woman. G. K. Beale and Sean M. McDonough comment, “Such a contrast between individual and corporate seeds is supported by the fact that 12:17 is an allusion to Gen. 3:16, where John would have seen that Eve’s messianic seed has both individual and corporate meaning.”<sup>74</sup> The two beasts aim to carry out the dragon’s work “to make war on the saints and to conquer them” (13:7) for forty-two months (13:1–18). If Genesis 3:15 is the basis for this text, then the collective groups on both sides seem to be engaged in the outworking of the enmity promised in Genesis 3:15.

One critical point in Revelation 13 is that the head of one of the beasts “seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed” (13:3). Beale notes that “such a wound on the head of the grand nemesis of God’s people reflects Gen. 3:15, especially when seen together with Rev. 12:17.”<sup>75</sup> In spite of the apparent victory of the beast, who is “allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them” (Rev 13:7), the saints are ultimately victorious over the beast (15:2). When the beast kills the martyrs, “the beast’s apparent victory is the martyrs’—and therefore God’s—real victory.”<sup>76</sup> Bauckham explains, “The point is not that the beast and the Christians each win some victories; rather, the same event—the martyrdom of Christians—is described both as the beast’s victory over them and as their

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Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 625. For this view, see also Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 456; and Brian J. Tabb, *All Things New: Revelation as Canonical Capstone*, NSBT 48 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 106–7. The idea that the woman is Israel seems preferable; it is difficult to see how the church could have given birth to the Messiah; rather the church exists as an outcome of the work of the Messiah. Neither view, however, creates a problem with a connection to the woman (Eve) in Genesis 3:15. The picture of the individual offspring, the Messiah, being born out of Israel (the collective offspring of Eve), fits quite well with the idea that Genesis 3:15 anticipates a collective group, Israel (and the church), whose ultimate victory over the serpent comes through an individual, the Messiah.

<sup>74</sup> G. K. Beale and Sean M. McDonough, “Revelation,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1126. Numerous other scholars see a reference to the offspring of the woman in Genesis 3. For example, see Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 677–78; Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, BNTC 18 (London: Continuum, 2006), 185; and Osborne, *Revelation*, 485. Theoretically, one could argue that the offspring of the woman in Revelation 12 refers to Abraham’s numerous offspring (spiritual Israel). However, this ignores the strong connection of the rest of Revelation 12 with Genesis 3:15 and ignores the concept that the Abrahamic seed promise is a continuation of the seed promise of Genesis 3:15.

<sup>75</sup> *Revelation*, 688. Michaels agrees: “Clearly the beast from the sea bears the battle scars of the combat prophesied in that ancient text [Gen. 3:15].” Michaels continues, “The beast’s wounded head suggests a *previous* encounter between the Lamb and the beast, probably centered in Christ’s death on the cross. Both the Lamb and the beast were ‘slaughtered’ or ‘slain’ in that encounter, yet both are ‘alive’ (1:18; 13:14).” *Revelation*, IVPNTC (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1997), 156. Most scholars acknowledge that the elements of a woman and her seed engaged in conflict with the dragon and the beast, coinciding with a deadly wound to the beast’s head must allude to Genesis 3:15. For further support, see also Beale, *Revelation*, 687–90; Michaels, *Revelation*, 156; Osborne, *Revelation*, 496; Hamilton, “The Skull Crushing Seed of the Woman,” 42–43.

<sup>76</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, NTT (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 91.

victory over the beast.”<sup>77</sup> In this way, the victory of the saints over the beast follows the pattern of the victory of Christ over Satan—Satan appears to be victorious at Jesus’s death, but Jesus’s death (and resurrection) is actually the critical event in his victory over Satan. And this actually reflects the fullest sense of the promise from Genesis 3:15, that the serpent would strike the offspring of the woman, but the offspring of the woman would emerge as the ultimate victor.<sup>78</sup> The individual offspring of the woman, the one sitting on the white horse, accompanied by his army, will defeat the armies of the beast and his prophet (19:11–20).

In summary, Table 1 shows how each of the NT passages discussed here reflects the individual and collective understanding of the seed of the woman and the seed of serpent.

Table 1: NT References to Genesis 3:15

<i>Canonical Reference</i>	<i>The Individual Offspring of the Woman</i>	<i>The Collective Offspring of the Woman</i>	<i>The Serpent</i>	<i>The (Collective) Offspring of the Serpent</i>
Gen 3:15	He will strike your head	Enmity between seeds	He will strike your heel	Enmity between seeds
The Gospels	Jesus	Believers	The Devil	Jesus’s opponents (Pharisees)
John 15:18–24; 16:33	Jesus	Believers	The Devil	The World
Matt 13:24–30	The Son of Man	“Children of the kingdom”	The Devil/The Enemy	“Sons of the evil one”
1 John 3	The Son of God	“Children of God”	The Devil	“Children of the Devil”
Rom 16:20	(The God of Peace)	The Church	Satan	(False teachers)
Gal 3:15–29	Christ	Believers	N/A	N/A
Rev 12–13	Child of the woman clothed with the sun	“The rest of her offspring”	The dragon	Evil angels; those whom the beast deceives

### 4. Conclusion

This paper has presented several arguments demonstrating that a canonical reading of Scripture supports an interpretation of Genesis 3:15 that anticipates both an individual and a collective offspring of the woman. The collective identity of the seed of the serpent implies that a collective seed of the woman is in view. Several key promises in the OT seem to anticipate a future individual and collective offspring of the woman. The fact that an individual offspring is expected and that the collective seed will be at enmity with that offspring necessitates the continued existence of the collective offspring until the individual offspring arrives. Finally, the NT writers seem to allude to Genesis 3:15 in several

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<sup>77</sup> Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 90.

<sup>78</sup> See Cheek, “Bruising, Crushing, or Striking,” 29–31.

passages which, though not always using the same language as Genesis 3:15, speak of the same concepts and similar language to Genesis 3:15. Though it is difficult to know exactly how the original readers of Genesis would have identified the offspring of the woman, the fuller revelation of the canon of Scripture seems to draw attention to a fulfillment in both an individual and collective offspring.

# Failure to Atonement: Rethinking David's Census in Light of Exodus 30

— Paul A. Himes —

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**Abstract:** Various interpretations have been offered on how David sinned in taking the census of 2 Samuel 24, but too few have seriously grappled with the implications of Exodus 30:11–16 or the structure of 2 Samuel 21–24. Taking Exodus 30:11–16 as the starting point, this article argues that David was supposed to take the census, and that, as with the situation with the Gibeonites in 2 Samuel 21, David's role was meant to be that of one who atones for the nation's sins, turning away God's wrath. The final section answers potential objections such as the role of Joab.

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The “wrongness” of David's census in 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21 is generally assumed, and the question then becomes one of theodicy or the general incomprehensibility of God's ways.<sup>1</sup> Yet such a perspective, that the census itself was wrong and that God incited David to perform an immoral action, virtually ignores what the Torah has to say about taking a census and raises two difficult theological issues in the process. First, would God incite somebody to sin with whom he has a personal, intimate relationship (as contrasted with Pharaoh)? Would not this create a view of God as a capricious “agent provocateur,” for whom “the end justifies the means,” luring an innocent victim to punishment by tempting him to commit an evil act?<sup>2</sup> Indeed, from the perspective of biblical theol-

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Paul Borgman states, “The text insists on the sinfulness of the act, but does not explain exactly what is so wrong about it.... God incites David to commit a sin—so that God can punish Israel!” (*David, Saul, and God: Rediscovering an Ancient Story* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008], 212). Gnana Robinson declares, “We have here a primitive understanding of the moral nature of God—that God incites people to sin. (*Let Us Be Like the Nations: A Commentary on the Books of 1 and 2 Samuel*, International Theological Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 283). One of the most recent treatments of the topic even acknowledges that its thesis “does not resolve the theological issue that results from the characterization of God as a petty, jealous, callous ruler who willingly punishes his people for an act he himself incites” (Song-Mi Suzie Park, “Census and Censure: Sacred Threshing Floors and Counting Taboos in 2 Samuel 24,” *HBT* 35 [2013]: 41 n. 89). Cf. also Antony F. Campbell *2 Samuel*, FOTL 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 207; Joshua J. Adler, “David's Census: Additional Reflections,” *JBQ* 24 (1996): 255–57; Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1973), 351.

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Schenker, *Der Mächtige im Schmelzofen des Mitleids: Eine Interpretation von 2 Sam 24*, OBO 24 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 19–20.

ogy, a being who tempts David to sin as an excuse to punish Israel does not sound like the God of 1–2 Samuel who “*is compassionate ... [who] is seen as a God of compassion who cares for the people who are oppressed and in a lamentable state.*”<sup>3</sup> One is left wondering whether or not James 1:13 possesses any relevance at all, if God did indeed incite David to commit an immoral act.

Second, why would God incite *David* to sin as an excuse to punish *Israel* for her sin? Why not simply cut out the middle-man and punish Israel directly? The problem is compounded when we see David’s clear intermediary role in the story. It is difficult to understand why it was necessary for YHWH to incite somebody to sin in order that they may play an intermediary role so that YHWH could punish Israel, with whom he was already angry.<sup>4</sup> As will be noted, this point becomes more significant when compared to the episode of the Gibeonites (2 Sam 21).

Interpreters have long noted the difficulty of this passage, and its parallel in 1 Chronicles 21.<sup>5</sup> The supposed sinfulness of David’s census is explained in a variety of ways, and scholars often hold to multiple explanations simultaneously.<sup>6</sup> Many also focus on the general unease or perceived danger that surrounded a census within ANE culture.<sup>7</sup>

While such explanations may be helpful, and may indeed have played a role in David’s failure, they have not adequately grappled with why God incited David to sin when it was Israel he was angry with. Yet since David clearly *does* play an intermediary role for his people, perhaps that was the point all along. By inciting David to take a census, YHWH intended David to fulfill the role of intermediary by initiating the atonement via the half-shekel tax, thus turning aside the anger of the Lord. Sadly, David’s failure to take the half-shekel resulted in the very plague that the atonement tax was supposed to avoid,

<sup>3</sup> John A. Martin, “Studies in 1 and 2 Samuel, Part 4: The theology of Samuel,” *BibSac* 141 (1984): 303–13, esp. 307.

<sup>4</sup> As Elizabeth Robar argues, the *wayyiqtol* “has to do with schematic continuity”; “it functions as a consecutive tense” (*The Verb and the Paragraph in Biblical Hebrew: A Cognitive Linguistic Approach*, SSSL 78 [Leiden: Brill, 2015], 77, 102). If the *wayyiqtol* forms of 1 Samuel 24:1 are meant to indicate sequence, then clearly the Lord is angry with Israel before he pushes David towards taking a census.

<sup>5</sup> David G. Firth calls it “one of the most perplexing narratives in Samuel, if not the OT as a whole” (*1 & 2 Samuel*, ApOTC [Nottingham: Apollos, 2009], 548).

<sup>6</sup> For a variety of perspectives, sometimes by the same author, see Joshua J. Adler, “David’s Last Sin: Was it the Census?,” *JBQ* 23 (1995): 91–95, and Adler, “Additional Reflections,” 255–57; Bill T. Arnold, *1 and 2 Samuel*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 643; Shimon Bakon, “David’s Sin: Counting the People,” *JBQ* 41 (2013): 53–54; Robert Barron, *2 Samuel*, Brazos Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015), 200; Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 351; Tony W. Cartledge, *1 and 2 Samuel*, SHBC (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 698–700; Raymond B. Dillard, “David’s Census: Perspectives on II Samuel and I Chronicles 21,” in *Through Christ’s Word: A Festschrift for Dr. Philip E. Hughes*, eds. W. Robert Godfrey and Jesse L. Boyd III (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1985), 94–107, esp. 106; Thomas B. Dozeman, *Exodus*, ECC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 48; Firth, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 541, 545; Kyle R. Greenwood, “Labor Pains: The Relationship between David’s Census and Corvée Labor,” *BBR* 20 (2010): 467–77; Grace Ko, “2 Samuel 21–24: A Theological Reflection on Israel’s Kingship,” *OTE* 31 (2018): 114–31, esp. 121–22; Peter J. Leithart, *A Son to Me: An Exposition of 1 and 2 Samuel* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 288); Park, “Census and Censure,” 21–41.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 9 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 512–13; Frank Michaeli, *Le Livre de L’Exode*, CAT 2 (Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1974), 264; Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des alten Testaments* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1957), 1:316 n. 17 (where he discusses the work of Livius). For a comprehensive comparison of the census in the Old Testament with ancient Mari texts, see E. A. Speiser, “Census and Ritual Expiation in Mari and Israel,” *BASOR* 149 (1958): 17–25.



the very punishment the Torah promised would happen. The problem was not that David's sin *caused* God's wrath; rather, David's sin lay in the fact that he *intensified* God's wrath by failing to turn it away from his sheep as intended.

A few scholars have granted the significance of the Torah here in 2 Samuel 24.<sup>8</sup> Yet to my knowledge, almost nobody has suggested that David “failed to atone,” a key exception being Adrian Schenker.<sup>9</sup> This paper will contribute to the discussion by (1) defending the census of Exodus 30 as a recurring event, (2) making the case for a strong link between Exodus 30:11–16 and 2 Samuel 24 while paying special attention to the theme of atonement, and (3) attempting to deal with anomalies in the 2 Samuel account and possible counter-arguments to this thesis.

## 1. The Census in Exodus 30:11–16

The Torah clearly mandates a census, links it to atonement, and warns of a plague if instructions for that census are not followed. Whether or not this census was meant to be recurring, however, is very controversial and will be addressed below.

### 1.1. Atonement and Plague

The significance of the Torah for David's census has, in this writer's opinion, been neglected, especially in light of the fact that all of Israel's kings were to gain intimate awareness of the Torah via writing out their own copy (Deut 17:18–20). Surely, at a minimum, this would suggest that any failure in a future king of Israel should be analyzed first with the Torah in mind, especially if the punishment that results is the exact punishment warned about (the fact that three choices were offered to David will be discussed below).

In Exodus 30:12, the Lord speaks to Moses specifically about when Moses “lifts up the heads of the sons of Israel to number them.” The generic term for “to number,” פָּקַד, appears in a variety of passages (though not always with that meaning), including 2 Samuel 24:2 and 1 Chronicles 21:6.<sup>10</sup> Immediately after this statement in Exodus, the Lord declares that “each man will give an “atonement [כִּפּוּר] of his life to YHWH when he numbers them.” Failure to do so would result in a plague (נִגָּף), and the final clause of Exodus 30:16 reiterates that the half-shekel tax is “in order to atone for their lives” (לְכִפּוּר עַל-נַפְשֵׁיהֶם).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> E.g., Cartledge, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 700; Ko, “2 Samuel 21–24,” 114–31, esp. 121; McCarter, *II Samuel*, 513–14; Park, “Census and Censure,” 27.

<sup>9</sup> Schenker, “Der Mächtige im Schmelzofen des Mitleids,” 18.

<sup>10</sup> All word searches and syntactical searches conducted utilizing *Accordance* 11.2 (OakTree Software, 2016). All translations are this writer's own, unless otherwise noted. Also, see the discussion in William Johnstone, *1 and 2 Chronicles*, JSOTSup 253 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 1:228, for a comparison of the פָּקַד root in 1 Chron 23–26 with Exodus 30:11–16).

<sup>11</sup> Regarding the theological significance of how concrete “value” is often linked to atonement, see the excellent discussion in Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 245–47.

Clearly “atonement” terminology plays a central role in this passage.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the “expiatory function” of the half-shekel tax links this passage with the preceding context.<sup>13</sup> The function of atonement is, ultimately, the “repairing and restoring” of “the relationship between the sinner and the LORD.... [It] leads to peace,” and is initiated by YHWH himself.<sup>14</sup>

This aspect of “peace” as a restored relationship must not be missed. As Schenker has noted in his extensive study of the noun כִּפָּר, “atonement” is essentially “an accommodation between two parties in a dispute, the guilty and the wronged.”<sup>15</sup> Thus the injured party (God) offers Israel the opportunity to make peace with him and avoid judgement; he does so because he prefers reconciliation over conflict.<sup>16</sup>

That the need for atonement (and the danger of a plague) is directly linked to the counting of the people seems necessitated by Exodus 30:12.<sup>17</sup> The reason behind this is unclear, though many see a primarily military purpose behind a census.<sup>18</sup> This would seem to be implied by the age limit (20 years and younger).<sup>19</sup> Such a focus on military preparation may have resulted in a temptation to sin that otherwise would not have existed. Victor P. Hamilton, while noting that a census would occasionally be “legitimately required,” focuses on how it could be “the occasion for boasting in one’s numbers rather than in one’s Lord, an occasion for advancing military power as one’s asset rather than divine power.”<sup>20</sup> P. Kyle McCarter discusses the link between the census and purity laws.<sup>21</sup> Thomas B. Dozeman suggests, “The danger in a census is that it turns the focus from faith in God as the resource of the people in war to the inherent strength of a nation.”<sup>22</sup> Douglas K. Stuart sees a casual census, without divine permission, as the abrogation of God’s divine right to initiate holy war; thus the census, rather than functioning as a “bribe” or “penalty,” ultimately “recognized two important facts: (1) God owns the lives of his people, and (2) although he would have the right to require his people to lose their lives in battle, he generously

<sup>12</sup> T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, ApOTC (London: Apollos, 2017), 603.

<sup>13</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: JPS, 1991), 195; similarly, Alexander, *Exodus*, 602.

<sup>14</sup> Jay Sklar, “Sin and Atonement: Lessons from the Pentateuch,” *BBR* 22 (2012): 467–91, esp. 468 and 470.

<sup>15</sup> Adrien Schenker, “*Köper et expeation*,” *Biblica* 63 (1982): 32–46, quote from p. 45 (my translation). Schenker points out how the use of כִּפָּר in Exodus 21:30 constitutes an alternative that avoids capital punishment, if the aggrieved party so desires (p. 33).

<sup>16</sup> Schenker, “*Köper et expeation*,” 45–46. Schenker aptly writes that God “loves to be reconciled; he does not wish to hold a grudge” (my translation).

<sup>17</sup> William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19–40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 2B (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 535.

<sup>18</sup> Dozeman, *Exodus*, 666; Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 511; McCarter, *II Samuel*, 514; Speiser, “Census and Ritual Expiation,” 17–25, esp. 17; and Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC 2 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 636.

<sup>19</sup> See the discussion in Stuart, *Exodus*, 638, and McCarter, *II Samuel*, 514, in light of Numbers 1:2–3, etc. This is not, of course, an “either-or” situation. The census probably involved both military and cultic matters. Cartledge states that in Exodus 30 “the expected ransom price also gives a cultic meaning to the institution of the census, one that was apparently ignored in 2 Samuel 24” (*1 and 2 Samuel*, 700).

<sup>20</sup> Hamilton, *Exodus*, 511.

<sup>21</sup> McCarter, *II Samuel*, 514 (in the context of Exod 30); cf. Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 535.

<sup>22</sup> Dozeman, *Exodus*, 666 (Dozeman specifically mentions David’s census in this context).

gave them back their lives so they could enjoy the abundant life he had for them within his covenant protection.”<sup>23</sup>

The main point here is that all Israelites belonged to God, and to neglect the half-shekel tax would essentially put the Israelites under a curse. As Stuart states,

Something that rightfully belongs to God (e.g., firstborn animal, firstborn son) may be given back to its owner (e.g., one's life) rather than taken by God as long as his rightful claim to it is recognized by the payment of the appropriate ransom/redemption/atonement fee in substitution for the thing itself. Thus if the Israelites were not capable of being ransomed, it would mean that they were in fact destined for death in war, or the principle enunciated in Lev 27:29, “No person devoted to destruction may be ransomed; he must be put to death.”<sup>24</sup>

Consequently, both taking and neglecting to take the half-shekel tax for atonement manifests one's attitude towards God's kingship. Either the Israelites belong to God, or they do not.<sup>25</sup> Either their lives depend on God, or they do not. To fail to take the half-shekel tax declares, in essence, that Israelite lives do not matter, that they are “on their own,” so to speak, and not bound to God.

Thus, atonement in Exodus 30:11–16 is preventative.<sup>26</sup> It could also, however, function to repair the breach that exists between God and his people via the latter's inherent sinfulness, an opportunity to “clear the air,” so to speak, much like the atonement of the high priest (Exod 30:10; cf. Job 1:5). Atonement could simultaneously prevent an outbreak of the plague while also functioning to remind Israelites of their close relationship with God, repairing any breach in fellowship at the same time. The census itself functions as a call to secure Israel's relationship with God. To fail to offer the half-shekel tax not only invites catastrophe, but may exacerbate an already broken relationship with YHWH, a relationship that would have been repaired if the atonement tax had been assessed.

## 1.2. Were the Census and the Tax Meant to Be Recurring?

Whether or not the command in Exodus 30:11–16 was meant to be recurring must be explored. If it was not, then David cannot be faulted for failure to take a half-shekel tax, and one must look elsewhere for a solution to the problem.

Scholars are divided on the issue. Kyle R. Greenwood, for example, argues, “The *kōper* received in Exodus 30 was a direct result of a poll-tax intended for the construction of the tabernacle (Exod. 38:24–26). It had a specific function in a specific milieu.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, because Exodus 30 differs significantly even from Numbers 31:48–50, “A more detailed analysis would reveal that the difference

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<sup>23</sup> Stuart, *Exodus*, 636–37. Cf. Park, “Census and Censure,” 32.

<sup>24</sup> Stuart, *Exodus*, 637. Stuart, almost unique among commentators, sees significance in this for both New Testament theology and Christology (pp. 637–39).

<sup>25</sup> As R. Alan Cole states, “All Israel collectively was God's first-born (Ex. 4:22),” and thus Exodus 30:11–16 “is an extension of the same principle of ‘redemption’” (*Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 2 [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973], 206).

<sup>26</sup> Schenker, *Der Mächtige im Schmelzofen des Mitleids*, 17 (“Der Sühnpreis ist hier nicht heilend nach eingetretener Wunde, sondern vorbeugend, ...”). See also Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 536; and Johnstone, *1 and 2 Chronicles*, 1:228–29.

<sup>27</sup> Greenwood, “Labor Pains,” 467–77, esp. 469.

between these two texts are such that one must conclude that the half-shekel *kōper* collected in Exodus 30 cannot be seen as a permanently binding institution, particularly one whose failure to collect would result in a national plague.”<sup>28</sup>

Yet the similarities between Numbers 31:48–54 and Exodus 30 more than outweigh their differences: a census is taken (they “lifted up the heads” [נָשְׂאוּ אֶת־רָאשׁ] in v. 49, the exact same terminology of Exod 30:12); they “atoned” [לְכַפֵּר] for their “souls/lives” [נַפְשׁ] (v. 50; once again, the exact same terminology as Exod 30:12); and the result was material for the tabernacle for “a memorial” (v. 54, זִכָּרוֹן, the exact same term that occurs in Exod 30:16). Numbers 31 must be giving a specific instance of the general command in Exodus 30, because otherwise why would the soldiers have assumed the offering was “to atone” (v. 50) and why else would Aaron and Eleazar have used the money for tabernacle (v. 54)?<sup>29</sup>

In further defense of the census as a recurring event, the following points are worth considering. First, the money from the census was not for the *building* of the tabernacle, but rather its *service* (עֲבֹדָה in Exodus 30:16). Since “service” is an ongoing event, this raises the question: If the census tax itself was only a one-time event, what would happen when the money ran out?

This leads to the second point, the fact that it was to be “for a memorial on behalf of the sons of Israel” (Exod 30:16, לְזִכָּרוֹן יִשְׂרָאֵל לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל), an expression which must be given due weight, since “for a memorial” (specifically the preposition *lamed* prefixed to זִכָּרוֹן) only occurs seven other times in Scripture (ignoring passages like Exod 39:7 and Num 38:54 where the noun occurs without the preposition): Exod 12:14, 13:9, 28:12, 28:29; Num 10:10; Josh 4:7; and Zech 6:14. In every instance, one of two things is true. Either a one-time activity was meant to have enduring, *visible* effects (e.g., the stones of Josh 4:7), or the activity itself was a recurrent event (e.g., Num 10:10). If the census were a one-time event, yet the money was meant to be for “service,” it is difficult to see how the first and only census could be “for a memorial” once the money ran out. Conversely, if the census were taken periodically, then the money for the upkeep would continue as a memorial, even when the tabernacle was replaced by the temple. Durham well notes the theological significance of the term “memorial” as an ongoing status:

Thus even so pragmatic and routine a necessity as the financial support of the Tabernacle and its ministry of worship is turned into an expression of the central confession of Israel’s faith. An existing procedure of counting and taxation was apparently turned from a census with an element of fear ... to a passing into the ranks of those who would be remembered, each one equally, in the place where Yahweh came by promise. Here, then, as elsewhere, atonement comes to mean blessing, the blessing of being in Yahweh’s

<sup>28</sup> Greenwood, “Labor Pains,” 467–77, esp. 469. In agreement with Greenwood, see Alexander, *Exodus*, 603; Sarna, *Exodus*, 195; Hamilton, *Exodus*, 510. For representatives of the positive view (that the census is recurrent), see Propp, *Exodus* 19–40, 537, and Stuart, *Exodus*, 636. Also, some scholars see a future form of this census in Matthew 17:24–27 (Propp, *Exodus*, 537; Hamilton, *Exodus*, 537; Cole, *Exodus*, 206). Cole goes one step further by seeing the census in Nehemiah 10:32 as “its collection in the post-exilic period. In days of economic stress, Nehemiah had to rest satisfied with one third of a shekel” (p. 206).

<sup>29</sup> Granted, in Numbers 26 the same terminology for initiating a census is used in v. 2, but without the accompanying “memorial” and “atonement” terminology elsewhere in the chapter. Interestingly, this census actually occurs *after* a plague, and a key emphasis on the chapter is on their future inheritance in the promised land. Absence of those terms in the description does not necessarily imply that a tax was not taken.

Presence, rather than escape, a flight from that same Presence. By the payment of the atonement money, Israel is to be remembered, not forgotten.<sup>30</sup>

Third, a neglected text, 2 Kings 12:5–7 [vv. 4–6 in English], demonstrates that the tax taken during a census was a natural way to help repair the temple. In this passage, Jehoash determines to repair the temple and institutes three different types of funding for that purpose. One of those means of funding is clearly a census tax (v. 5 [6]).<sup>31</sup> The parallel account in 2 Chronicles 24 clearly equates this with something commanded by Moses (v. 6 [7], אֶת־מִשְׁאַת מֹשֶׁה, “the collection of Moses”).<sup>32</sup> In other words, there can be no doubt in light of these passages that at least *Jehoash* saw the census tax as a recurring event (whether or not other kings did, or even cared). Significantly, Josephus agrees, even going so far as to state that the amount Jehoash taxed was a silver half-shekel (ἡμίσικλον ἀργύρου in *Jewish Antiquities* 9.161).

Fourth, although the temporal כִּי followed by an imperfect does not necessarily refer to a recurring event (it can, in fact, introduce the protasis of a one-time event, e.g., Exod 3:21), nonetheless within Exodus such a construction is the natural way to provide the protasis to a generic command, “if/when you do something” or “if/when something happens, then do this ...” (e.g., Exod 21:2, 7, 14, 7, 14; 22:1, 5, 7; 23:4; etc.).<sup>33</sup> When dealing the text of Exodus itself, the balance of evidence favors an event that is likely to happen more than once.

Finally, the immediate context of Exodus 30:11–16 favors viewing this as a recurring event. The preceding passage (vv. 1–10), though it begins with describing the building of the tabernacle, finishes with a discussion of *consistent, ongoing* cultic practice; indeed, v. 10 states clearly that the high priest would be consistently atoning, every year, for multiple generations (לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם). The subsequent context (vv. 17–21) once again begins with the construction of key elements of the tabernacle, but then ends with *consistent, recurrent* cultic activities (see especially v. 21, לְדֹרֹתֵם “for their generations”). While the census was not necessarily meant to be a yearly matter (*pace* later interpretation), the contextual evidence does indicate it would happen more than once.<sup>34</sup> Since both the tabernacle and the future temple would require funds for maintenance, it makes sense to have a means established in the Torah of providing those funds.

In light of this, David cannot be faulted for taking the census *per se*, nor does this raise a problem for theodicy if God persuaded him to do so—i.e., it was *not* necessarily a sin. Dillard well notes that other kings such as Jehoshaphat also had “military enrollments ..., but without the dire consequences

<sup>30</sup> John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC 3 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 403.

<sup>31</sup> Significantly, the word for “passing over” (עָבַר) in 2 Kings 12:5, within the context of a monetary value for one’s “soul/life” (נַפְשׁ) also occurs in Exodus 30:12–13. On this point, and the link between this passage and Exodus 30:11–16, see C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, trans. James Martin, reprint ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 3:366–67.

<sup>32</sup> However, J. Liver suggests that this is actually a reference to the collection of Exodus 25 (“The Half-Shekel Offering in Biblical and Post-Biblical Literature,” *HTR* 56 [1963]: 173–98, esp. 178). Yet in Exodus 25:2 there is no numbering of the people like we see in 2 Kings 12:5 [4]. To be fair, though, both Exodus 25:2 and 2 Kings 12:5 [4] seem to combine elements of taxation with free-will offering.

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of כִּי as a temporal conjunction, see Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 161–62.

<sup>34</sup> Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 537.

of David's census"; indeed, Chronicles even has a positive view of "raising great armies."<sup>35</sup> The census itself is not the problem, and surely it seems easier to suppose that the Lord himself had a more positive reason for inciting David to take the census than to entrap David to sin as an inexplicably necessary precursor to the Lord's punishment of Israel.

### 1.3. External Evidence for a Recurring Tax—DSS 4Q159 and Josephus

Two pieces of extra-biblical evidence demonstrate that at least some Second Temple Jews assumed a recurring census. First, in the Dead Sea Scrolls, 4Q159 Frag. 1 Col. 2, 6–7 states, "Concerning [the Ransom]: the money of the valuation which a man gives as ransom for his life shall be half [a shekel in accordance with the shekel of the sanctuary.] He shall give it only o[nce] in his life." This text is paralleled by 11Q19 Col. 39, 8, which calls the half-shekel tax an "eternal law."<sup>36</sup>

To be sure, debate existed during the Second Temple period as to how often the census should be taken. Yet the issue does not seem to revolve around whether or not it was a one-time event, but whether or not it was an annual event with an annual obligation for every man, versus a once-in-a-lifetime obligation. 4Q159, at least, favors the latter. As Jodi Magness notes, "In 4Q159 the pentateuchal regulation of the half-shekel is understood as referring to an offering made only once in a lifetime by those included in the census."<sup>37</sup> This requirement that every man would pay the half-shekel, but only once in his life, seems to have been in opposition to the rabbinic tradition of an annual offering.<sup>38</sup> Again, so far as this writer can tell, the debate within Second Temple literature was not whether the temple tax was recurring. Rather, the debate was over whether one had an obligation to pay it every year, or only once in one's lifetime.<sup>39</sup> Regardless, it was assumed that the census in Exodus was not a unique historical event.

Second, in *Jewish Antiquities* 7.318, Josephus portrays David as "completely forgetting Moses's commands" (τῶν Μωυσέος ἐντολῶν ἐκλαθόμενος) when he desired to number the people. Josephus further clarifies here that this was Moses's command concerning the half-shekel poll tax. Thus, so far as Josephus was concerned, Moses's census was clearly recurrent; otherwise, Josephus's observations about the correct way to take such a census (with a half-shekel, ἡμίσικλον) would be inexplicable.

The significance of Josephus's discussion does not lie with its accuracy or lack thereof. Nor should one deny that Josephus sets his own "spin" on the character of David, in light of the social-political circumstances of the day.<sup>40</sup> The neglected point, however, is that a first century Jewish author, well-versed in Jewish history, when offering a reason behind the plague that harmed Israel, naturally gravitated to the Torah.

<sup>35</sup> Dillard, "David's Census," 104.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Wise, Martin Abegg Jr., and Edward Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007), 231, 611. I am grateful to Martin Abegg for pointing me to DSS 11Q19 as well (in a personal e-mail).

<sup>37</sup> Jodi Magness, *The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scroll* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 190; note also 193.

<sup>38</sup> See the discussion in Liver, "The Half-Shekel Offering," 173–98, esp. 195.

<sup>39</sup> I am grateful to Martin Abegg and Edward M. Cook for their e-mail correspondence and assistance in understanding 4Q159. Any mistakes are the sole responsibility of this writer.

<sup>40</sup> See the insightful treatment by Louis H. Feldman, "Josephus' Portrait of David," *HUCA* 60 (1989): 129–74 (Feldman discusses Josephus's perspective of David's census on p. 160).

The point of this section has *not* been to argue that Israel kept the census tax at every stage of her history (J. Liver, for one, points out the absence of such a tax in 2 Chronicles 31).<sup>41</sup> The point, rather, is that the natural way to understand Exodus 30:11–16 is in reference to a tax that was expected to occur multiple times in the future, and two key pieces of Second Temple literature support this, even though debate existed in that era about the frequency of the census.

## 2. *David's Census in 2 Samuel 24*

Having established the background of the census in the Torah, we can now turn to 2 Samuel 24 itself. We will focus on the terminology, syntax, and structure of this passage.

### 2.1. Key Points within 2 Samuel's Account of the Census

Having established that the census in Exodus 30 was most likely recurring, and noting once again that all of Israel's kings were supposed to know the Torah intimately (David being the king *par excellence*), we can now examine some key points of David's census.

First, 2 Samuel 24 begins with the statement, “Then the anger of YHWH was again kindled against Israel.” The sentence begins with a *wayyiqtol* (or *waw*-consecutive) form of **וַיִּסָּף** (“it was added”) combined with the infinitive of **הִקְדָּה** (“it was kindled”). Since the *wayyiqtol* form generally deals with “schematic continuity,”<sup>42</sup> one should naturally ask how the verb exhibits this in 24:1. In addition, the *wayyiqtol* of **וַיִּסָּף** in particular indicates the repetition of an activity that had occurred previously (e.g., Gen 4:2, 8:10; Judg 3:12, 4:1; 1 Sam 3:6; 2 Sam 5:22; etc.).<sup>43</sup> In light of that, the key phrase here is “at/against Israel” (**בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל**), and the last time we see God angry at Israel is 2 Samuel 21, due to Saul's treatment of the Gibeonites. When this point is combined with the fact of the chiasm from chs. 21–24 (the existence of which is almost universally acknowledged by scholarship—more on this below), one can reasonably conclude that a link exists between 24:1 and the famine story in ch. 21.<sup>44</sup>

With that in mind, I stress once again that the Lord is angry with *Israel*, not David. The problem begins at the corporate level (God is angry with *Israel*) and continues at the corporate level (God ultimately punishes *Israel* with a plague).<sup>45</sup> The “flock” of Israel has indeed transgressed, and it was David's job to figure out how. In other words, the language of 2 Samuel 24:1 seems to indicate the *people* of Israel, collectively, had sinned, rather than David, personally, being guilty through his specific actions. Whether or not David personally sinned *vis-a-vis* how he dealt with Absalom, for example, is beside the point.

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<sup>41</sup> Liver, “The Half-Shekel Offering,” 173–98, esp. 181.

<sup>42</sup> Robar, Verb and the Paragraph in Biblical Hebrew, 77.

<sup>43</sup> I could find no exceptions, though occasionally the sense seems to be an intensifying of an action/attitude that was already there (e.g., the hatred of Gen 37:5, 8 or the fear of 1 Sam 18:29).

<sup>44</sup> As argued by, e.g., S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of Samuel*, reprint ed. (Winona Lake, IN: Alpha, 1984), 372; McCarter, *II Samuel*, 509.

<sup>45</sup> Graeme Auld well notes, “Although David and his actions and his responses bulk very large in this extended narrative, it is important to note that the final word of the very different introductory clauses of 2 Sam 24:1 and 1 Chron 21:1 is the same. The prior prepositions may be different, but the name is the same. The story is about ‘Israel’: it is the people that is in focus” (*I & II Samuel*, OTL [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011], 605).

Second, it has been generally assumed within scholarship that “incite” (סוֹת) within this context necessarily refers to the act of causing an inclination within somebody to do something immoral.<sup>46</sup> While this matter will be dealt with later (including the significance of סוֹת when paired with בָּ), for now one should note that the verb by itself does not necessarily possess negative connotations. For example, in Joshua 15:18, Caleb’s daughter is clearly not inciting her father to sin (cf. the parallel passage in Judg 1:14). Similarly, in Job 36:16 the word is also used in a positive manner, in that God “allured [Job] out of distress into a broad place” (ESV). This is not to deny that the word *can* have negative connotations, with one party wishing the other party to do something wrong or harmful (e.g., Deut 13:6); the point is simply that the word itself hardly necessitates that meaning, and thus the use of סוֹת cannot be the determining factor in deciding whether or not God incited David to commit a sinful or harmful act.

Third, the fact that whatever was wrong resulted in a corporate plague (where David himself remains untouched) must not be overlooked. Second Samuel 24 uses two specific words to denote the tragic consequences (not including general terms such as רָעָה in v. 16): דָּבַר (vv. 13, 15) and מַגֵּפָה (v. 25).<sup>47</sup> Both words can clearly signify a form of illness or physical malady (e.g., Exod 9:3; Deut 28:21; 1 Kgs 8:37 for the former; Num 14:37; 17:13; 1 Sam 6:4 for the latter, though cf. 1Sam 4:17 for a more generic sense). More importantly, the latter מַגֵּפָה is a cognate for נִגָּף, the word which occurs in Exod 30:12.<sup>48</sup> Since נִגָּף, though a rare word, generally seems to refer to “plague,” with Num 16:46 being the clearest instance of this (note the link to atonement in that passage), one can safely suggest that whatever the consequences of the sin in 2 Samuel 24, it is broadly the same as the consequences of improperly carrying out a census in Exodus 30.

The significance of this point must not be downplayed. If the plague was the promised result of not carrying out the half-shekel tax for atonement during a census, and if Israel suffered a plague after David carried out a census, would it not be natural to infer that David had not carried out the half-shekel tax for atonement?<sup>49</sup> If one overhears a neighbor telling his son that the failure of the latter to cut the grass would result in his bike being confiscated, and if the next day the boy is loudly bemoaning his bike having been confiscated, then one is certainly justified in assuming that the grass was not cut!

This does not necessarily mean that David was not guilty of other sins as well; he may, for example, have decided to use the census as an excuse to raise up a corvée labor force, as some argue.<sup>50</sup> Yet the link

<sup>46</sup> See footnote 1.

<sup>47</sup> The terminology of 2 Samuel is mirrored in 1 Chronicles 21:12, 14, and 17. Within the Septuagint, 2 Samuel 24:13–15 and 1 Chronicles 21:12, 14 both use θάνατος (occasionally used to refer to a physical malady, e.g., Exod 10:17). Second Samuel 24:25, however, uses θραῦσις, (a rare word, though it clearly refers to a plague in Num 16:47–50) while 1 Chronicles 21:17 uses the more generic ἀπώλεια. Exodus 30:12 uses the rare πτώσις, which generally refers to either a literal or metaphorical “fall” (thus, “destruction”). Josephus generally prefers λοιμός (*Jewish Antiquities* 7.321, 324, 329, though in 7.324 he calls it τὴν νόσον (cf. LXX Deut 7:15; 2 Chron 21:15; etc.). Each of these words, including θάνατος in some contexts, can indicate physical illness.

<sup>48</sup> Both words are often treated together, e.g., Leonard J. Coppes, “נִגָּף,” in *TWOT* 2:552 (entries 1294a and 1294b).

<sup>49</sup> Speiser, “Census and Ritual Expiation,” 17–25, esp. 22.

<sup>50</sup> E.g., Cartledge, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 700; Greenwood, “Labor Pains,” 467–77; Bakon, “David’s Sin,” 53–54.



between “census” and “plague” is too strong to brush aside (why the Lord offered David *three* choices will be discussed below).<sup>51</sup>

Another aspect of the narrative also indirectly links to Exodus 30. David solves the problem of God’s judgment by purchasing land designated for cultic usage and building an altar (2 Sam 24:24–25). Then, and only then, is the plague averted. While it is too late for judgment to be averted by the Israelites themselves contributing to the upkeep of the place of worship, David is personally able to pay a price that creates a new place of worship, the site of the new temple.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, “Though the temple was built by Solomon, the author is keen to stress that the origin of the Jerusalem cult goes back to David the ideal king of Israel.”<sup>53</sup>

One more point must be considered. Second Samuel 24 (and thus the entire book) ends with the statement, “YHWH was entreated for the land, then the plague was restrained from all of Israel” (v. 25b). The verb עָתַר (“to be entreated”) in connection with the Lord is often used in contexts where somebody acts as an intermediary between God and somebody else (e.g., Isaac petitioning God on behalf of his wife in Gen 25:21; Pharaoh begging Moses to intercede for him with the Lord in Exod 8:8, 28; 9:28; 10:17). The fact that an almost identical expression occurs in 2 Samuel 21:14 is significant and will be discussed below.

## 2.2. The Chiasm of 2 Samuel 21–24

That 1 Samuel 21–24 form a chiasm has not, to my knowledge, been seriously questioned.<sup>54</sup> While a variety of chiastic outlines have been proposed, based on each individual scholar’s theological or literary interests, the common denominators seem to be as follows:

- A. Narrative: The Lord is angry at Israel, but David appeases divine wrath (21:1–14)
- B. Chronicle: David’s mighty men (21:15–22)
- C. Poetry: David’s psalm (22:1–51, very similar to Psalm 18)
- C’. Poetry: David’s last words (23:1–7)
- B’. Chronicle: David’s mighty men (23:8–39)

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<sup>51</sup> Peter J. Leithart argues for viewing 2 Samuel 24 in light of another passage in Exodus, the Passover story (*A Son to Me*, 288–89). There may indeed be some intertextual links here, but Leithart surely goes too far when he states, “David suffered plagues as Pharaoh did, and this suggests that he committed a sin analogous to Pharaoh’s” (p. 289). The problem is that David did *not* suffer from the plagues himself; in fact, he was fully aware of the incongruity of his people suffering while he did not (24:17)! The *people*, not David, suffered via a plague. Whereas Pharaoh suffered alongside his people, David did not. This amplifies the fact that the problem begins with the *people*, not David, as 24:1 indicates.

<sup>52</sup> See the insightful discussion in Johnstone, *1 and 2 Chronicles*, 1:235. Also, as David Toshio Tsumura notes, with this pericope “The books of Samuel thus end anticipating the building that David himself had desired but had not been allowed to accomplish” (*The Second Book of Samuel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 339.

<sup>53</sup> Robinson, *Let Us Be Like the Nations*, 282; cf. Arnold, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 646.

<sup>54</sup> For a discussion of the chiasm, the reader should especially note Arnold, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 615–16, 648; Borgman, *David, Saul, and God*, 177; Antony F. Campbell, “2 Samuel 21–24: The Enigma Factor,” in *For and Against David: Story and History in the Books of Samuel*, eds. A. Graeme Auld and Erik Eynikel, BETL (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 347–58, esp. 348; Firth, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 502; and Leithart, *A Son to Me*, 268. In what is probably the most recent scholarly treatment, Ko insightfully suggests, “The core of the chiasmus of these chapters emphasizes the divine election of David, and the requirement of kingship in Israel: that the king should rule under the guidance and governance of the One True King, Yahweh” (“2 Samuel 21–24,” 114–31, esp. 133).

A' Narrative: The Lord is angry at Israel, but David appeases divine wrath (24:1–25)

In light of this, the census account is closely linked to the need to appease God's wrath concerning Saul's mistreatment of the Gibeonites. The significance of the parallelism of these two events begs to be explored further.

First, working backwards, in both cases David serves as the intermediary. The expression **וַיַּעֲתֶר** **אֱלֹהִים לְעֶרְץ אֶחָרִיבֵן** ("then, after these things, God was entreated for the land") in 2 Samuel 21:14c is paralleled by the **וַיַּעֲתֶר יְהוָה לְאֶרֶץ** of 24:25 ("then YHWH was entreated for the land").<sup>55</sup> Whatever David's original fault might have been, he does eventually intercede for Israel. Significantly, in 21:3, David seeks to make *atonement* (**וַיִּבְנֶה אֲכִפָּר**), an atonement that will return YHWH's blessing on Israel. Although not every element in a chiasm must equal its counterpart, it seems natural to read the same role for David in the census account of ch. 24. David's role is to once again heal the breach between the Lord and Israel.

Second, in light of **וַיִּסַּף אֶף-יְהוָה לְחַרוֹת בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל** in 24:1 ("then, again, the anger of YHWH was kindled against Israel"), I note once again that in both incidents God is angry with *Israel*, not David, and in such cases Israel is in danger unless God's anger is turned away and peace is restored. In the Gibeonite episode, David handled the famine correctly by enquiring of the Lord and seeking a way to atone for the sin that God had attributed to Israel because of Saul.<sup>56</sup> The fact that the Lord was angry at Israel *again* in 24:1 (on the basis of the *wayyiqtol* use of **וַיִּסַּף**, discussed earlier) would seem to indicate that the problem that incited the Lord to anger existed *before* the census. David may, of course, have been involved in the initial problem. Nonetheless, in both cases (chs. 21 and 24) divine wrath exists *before* David enters the story, and in both cases David eventually succeeds in becoming the instrument of turning away that wrath.

This fact, however, brings up a key difference between the Gibeonite episode and the census episode. In the former, David correctly saw the problem (albeit rather belatedly, after three years) and inquired of the Lord. This allowed him to atone and thus appease the Gibeonites (and God). In the latter episode, David does *not* seek divine guidance.<sup>57</sup> David does follow the divine impulse implanted within him to take a census, and according to Exodus 30:11–16, the half-shekel tax associated with it would have functioned as a means of atonement, if David had taken it. David's fault lies in failing to examine his reasons for taking a census and subsequently failing to enquire of the Lord like he did in ch. 21. As

<sup>55</sup> As Leithart notes, "There is a clear parallel in the final cause of each story" (*A Son to Me*, 287). Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu further amplify this point (drawing on the work of Ronald Youngblood)—"The framing prayers of David [*vis-à-vis* the chiasm] while Israel is under God's wrath present an important dimension of the ideal king's relationship to God.... Both stories present David in extreme circumstances praying effective intercessory prayers, and both show that God's grace is greater than God's wrath" (*An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical and Thematic Approach* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007], 674).

<sup>56</sup> Firth is certainly correct to note how the sin of the monarch can cause guilt to be attributed to the nation as a whole (*1 and 2 Samuel*, 502). Yet I believe he goes too far in stating, "As before, David must find the mechanism for ameliorating YHWH's anger, but the crucial difference is that this time the sin is his own" (p. 541). To the contrary, the Lord was *already* angry at Israel, *before* the census happened. The sin that David is supposed to atone for is *Israel's* sin, but he exacerbates the problem by not functioning as intermediary like he is supposed to, at least not initially. Having said that, I do appreciate Firth's later discussion of David seeking "atonement" for both himself and Israel (p. 548).

<sup>57</sup> One could even go so far as to say that, since David does not seek direction as to why God is angry at Israel, the reader also never learns why God is angry at Israel, in contrast to the Gibeonite episode.

Schenke points out, by not taking the half-shekel tax, David essentially fails to recognize God's authority and thus acts without his prerogative.<sup>58</sup> What should have been a joint endeavor in taking the census, with David recognizing both divine sovereignty and divine initiative in atonement, results in a failure to atone and the blood of the people on David's hands.

Yet the census episode (and hence the book) ends on a positive note. Just as with the Gibeonite episode, David eventually turns away divine wrath. Since taking a census without the temple tax is a violation of the Torah, David now has his own sin to atone for as well, which he does.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, once David purchased the threshing floor, "There he committed himself to worship, through sacrifice that made atonement, and shared with the community."<sup>60</sup> Finally David functions as the intermediary he was supposed to be.

### 3. Anomalies and Potential Objections

No matter what position one takes on the nature of David's census, certain anomalies remain. First amongst these is the role of Joab. His recalcitrance at taking the census seems justified in light of 2 Samuel 24:10. Yet one is forced to ask, does the narrator truly wish us to view Joab as the voice of reason? After all, Joab's role a few chapters earlier (2 Sam 20:9–10) is hardly that of the ideal, morally upright man.

The answer to that question will of necessity depend on how one views Joab throughout the whole story of David. Michael A. Eschelbach has done well to focus on Joab's role as a literary foil throughout 2 Samuel, though this writer is skeptical of Eschelbach's overly positive approach towards Joab.<sup>61</sup> At the very least Eschelbach demonstrates that Joab's literary role brings tension to what otherwise would have been a straightforward activity.

Consequently, to ask whether Joab is right or wrong in 2 Samuel 24 is to ask the wrong question. Indeed, one cannot even tell what Joab's motives are in objecting to the census. The most one should assert is that Joab has a sense of general unease.<sup>62</sup> As a result, the reader also should feel that unease, a sense that *something* is out of place with David's census.

The ideal audience of 2 Samuel, however, should possess knowledge of the Torah, knowledge that both Joab and the king seem to lack. That the Law of God is completely absent from both David's and Joab's speeches should point to their general cluelessness. David follows the divine impulse to take the

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<sup>58</sup> Schenke, *Der Mächtige im Schmelzofen des Mitleids*, 16–18. This article's thesis is compatible with traditional interpretations that David was prideful. The point, however, is that there is much more to the story.

<sup>59</sup> Firth, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 549.

<sup>60</sup> Firth, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 549.

<sup>61</sup> Michael A. Eschelbach, *Has Joab Foiled David? A Literary Study of the Importance of Joab's Character in Relation to David*, StBibLit 76 (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), esp. 7, 72–76. For a general critique of the moral character of Joab, see Caleb Henry, "Joab: A Biblical Critique of Machiavellian Tactics," *WTJ* 69 (2007): 327–43.

<sup>62</sup> Robert P. Gordon writes, "*Joab* voices what was probably a popular distrust of censuses" (*1 and 2 Samuel: A Commentary* [Exeter: Paternoster, 1986], 317; emphasis original). For various other suggestions, see Adler, "David's Last Sin," 91–5, esp. 91–2; A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Second Book of Samuel with Notes and Introduction*, Cambridge Bible (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1919), 224; Hans-Peter Mathys, "Der unbekannte Joab," *BZ* 64 (2020): 32–38; and Henry Preserved Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Samuel*, ICC (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), 389.

census, but does so completely oblivious of the proper reason or method. He does the right thing, but in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons. Joab senses David's wrong motives and rightly questions him, but fails to realize that the impulse to take the census comes from God himself. Neither knows the Torah like they should. Of course, this is not the first time the narrator has portrayed David as neglecting the Torah (cf. 2 Sam 11:4).

Second, the fact that David is offered a choice between three punishments, instead of simply being hit with a plague, must be discussed at both the literary and theological level. At the literary level, R. A. Carlson may be correct when he notes, "In 24:13, David is given a *qēlālāh* choice which shows in retrospect that the triple misfortune of flight, famine and pestilence which comes upon him in 2 Sam..... The first two alternatives put before David by Gad the seer evidently allude to what has passed."<sup>63</sup>

At the theological level, one may suggest that YHWH's choice of three punishments also challenges David to see if he knows the proper punishment mandated by the Torah for an improper census. In other words, David is being challenged to search the Torah. David may, in fact, have actually chosen correctly (rather than allowing the Lord to decide between two), since David's expression "by the hand of the Lord" may have indicated that he was choosing the plague.<sup>64</sup> The translator of the LXX certainly thought so.<sup>65</sup> In addition, one could argue that of the three options only the plague could truly be said to function "purely at YHWH's pleasure" since in famine "the wealthy inevitably eat at the expense of the poor."<sup>66</sup>

Next, one could object at this point that in the expression *וַיִּסֶּת אֶת־דָּוִד בָּהֶם* ("and [the Lord] incited David against them") in 2 Samuel 24:1, the combination of this verb plus the *beth* preposition must portray the Lord moving David in a way that is meant to harm Israel. I offer here a couple points in response. First, neither *סוּת* nor the *beth* preposition by themselves necessitate the idea that God was trying to get David to do something harmful against Israel. For the former, we note again Joshua 15:18 and Job 36:16. For the latter, the preposition could, in theory, be causal, i.e., God moved David to act in a particular way *because of* Israel.<sup>67</sup> That a *beth causa* can take a group of people as its object is clear from the dialogue between Abraham and God in Genesis 18:28–31, where we have multiple instances of a verb immediately followed by a *beth causa* with, as its object, a number representing a group of people.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>63</sup> R. A. Carlson, *David the Chosen King: A Traditio-Historical Approach to the Second Book of Samuel*, trans. Eric J. Sharpe and Stanley Rudman (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1964), 204.

<sup>64</sup> See Eveline van Staaldoune-Sulman, *The Targum of Samuel*, Studies in the Aramaic Interpretation of Scripture (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 695; McCarter Jr. *II Samuel*, 511; J. J. M. Roberts, "The Hand of Yahweh," VT 21 (1971): 244–51, esp. 248–49.

<sup>65</sup> While Peter R. Ackroyd suggests that "both famine and pestilence would qualify for David's choice," he does helpfully note that the LXX clearly has David choosing the plague (*The Second Book of Samuel*, CBC [London: Cambridge University Press, 1977], 232). The LXX unambiguously states, *Καὶ ἐξελέξατο ἑαυτῷ Δαυὶδ τὸν θάνατον* ("and David chose for himself the death [i.e., plague]").

<sup>66</sup> Cartledge, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 705; cf. Leithart, who notes that a famine would "force [David] to rely on other men" by "buying food from other countries" (*A Son to Me*, 291 n. 24).

<sup>67</sup> For discussion of the causative use of *beth*, see Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 119; Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jackie A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), 282.

<sup>68</sup> I am indebted for this particular example to Ronald J. Williams, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax*, 3rd ed., rev. and exp. by John C. Beckman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 99.

The combination of סוּת (“to incite”) with בִּ allows for an event with negative connotations. Yet the construction is very rare (only 5 times in the entire Hebrew Bible; the verb occurs a total of 18 times).<sup>69</sup> Out of those 4 other occurrences, one of them clearly does *not* fit the pattern of “A inciting B to harm C,” specifically Job 36:18, where the *beth* is probably instrumental.<sup>70</sup> Consequently, the possibility exists of taking the construction in 2 Samuel 24:1 as involving a *beth causa*. Regardless, this rare two-word construction is neither clear enough nor consistent enough to definitively determine what is going on in the story.

In other words, a two-word construction that only occurs five times in the entire Hebrew Bible, when one of those constructions clearly has a different sense than the other four, can hardly be determinative for understanding this passage.

Finally, space does not permit this paper to reconcile the differences between Samuel and Chronicles.<sup>71</sup> A couple points are in order, however. First, understanding שָׂטָן (*satan*) in 1 Chronicles 21:1 as a human military adversary (the means by which God urges David to take a census) would fit well with this paper’s view of 2 Samuel 24, and this writer is skeptical that 1 Chronicles 24:1 would be the *only* place in the entire Hebrew Bible where an anarthrous שָׂטָן is meant to be taken as a proper name.<sup>72</sup> Nonetheless, the contrary perspective would not challenge my thesis; after all, God and “the Adversary” may have both had different motives for persuading David to take the census, the former for the benefit of Israel, the latter against it.

In addition, William Johnstone has demonstrated how David’s census in 1 Chronicles 21 can also be viewed through the lens of David’s failure to follow the Torah.<sup>73</sup> Both the Chronicler and the Deuteronomist may be making similar points. Second Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21 can be theologically reconciled, though the precise details of that must await further discussion.

#### 4. Conclusion

Linking 2 Samuel 24 to Exodus 30 helps one better understand the significance of David’s sin. God was angry with Israel, not David, and God naturally sought for a means of renewing peace between his people and himself. David was to be the intermediary but initially failed in that role by not following the Torah’s instructions for the atonement tax. The result is precisely what the Torah warned against and precisely what tends to befall the Israelites when God’s anger is not appeased—a plague.

A satisfactory analysis of David’s census in Samuel via Exod 30:11–16 has hitherto been lacking in most scholarly treatments. By viewing the census in 2 Samuel 24 through the lens of the Torah, one can satisfactorily answer the issue of the purpose of the census without raising unnecessary questions of

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<sup>69</sup> The four occurrences of סוּת followed by בִּ (other than 2 Sam 24:1) are 1 Samuel 26:19; Jeremiah 43:3; Job 2:3; and 36:18.

<sup>70</sup> Regarding the instrumental use of *beth*, see Arnold and Choi, *Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 118. Regarding the difficulties of Job 36:18, see John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 474.

<sup>71</sup> These differences are capably discussed in Eugene H. Merrill, “The Chronicler: What Kind of Historian Was He Anyway?” *BibSac* 165 (2008): 397–412, esp. 407–11.

<sup>72</sup> For a defense of שָׂטָן as referring to a foreign, human military adversary, see John H. Sailhamer, “1 Chronicles 21:1—A Study in Inter-Biblical Interpretation,” *TrinJ* 10 (1989): 33–48, esp. 41–43.

<sup>73</sup> See William Johnstone, *1 and 2 Chronicles*, especially 1:225, 227–29, and 231.

theodicy. This approach also opens up new avenues of biblical theological interpretation of 2 Samuel, including a more comprehensive “theology of census and numbering,” as well as further study on the theme of atonement and David’s role as intercessor. Such studies of David’s role as an intermediary (no matter how imperfect), can naturally point the way towards David’s perfect Son.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> This article is a direct result of having taught Hebrew History every Fall for the past eight years, and I am grateful to my students for their interaction and encouragement and occasionally pointing me to a specific resource. I am grateful to the suggestions of the anonymous peer reviewers of this and past versions of this paper, and to the original audience of this paper at a regional ETS meeting at Moody Bible Institute. Some of the thoughts regarding Joab and his character were cultivated through my interaction with participants at this ETS meeting. Finally, I am grateful to my research assistant, Devon Swanson, for assistance in proofreading and improving on clarity. Any mistakes or faulty reasoning are the sole responsibility of this writer.

# Christ's Surpassing Glory: An Argument for the "Inappropriateness" of OT Christophanies From Exodus 33–34 and 2 Corinthians 3:7–4:6

— Greg Palys —

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**Abstract:** Did the Pre-incarnate Christ reveal himself in the Old Testament? Many believe that visible manifestations of God in the Old Testament must be manifestations of the Son. Surely if this is true, then we would be able to identify Christ most clearly in the Old Testament's grandest manifestations of God's glory. However, Paul's reflection on the Sinai theophany identifies that which was revealed to Moses as a lesser glory, one that we cannot equate with Christ's surpassing glory. If Christ's greater glory was inappropriate for the Sinai theophany, then it follows that all other lesser "Christophanies" would be equally inappropriate.

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The Trinitarian God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. This truth orthodox Christians hold dear. Yet Christians debate the extent to which God makes his tri-unity known in the pages of the OT. One sub-topic of OT Trinitarian debate centers on Christophanies. The term "Christophany" refers to any appearance of the second person of the Trinity. However, this debate centers around purported appearances of the pre-incarnate Son in the OT.

What leads some to find distinct manifestations of the Son in the OT? Theophanies provoke the question. The OT records several visible manifestations of God. The NT then identifies Jesus as God incarnate and links him to some of these theophanies. Christians with proper Trinitarian instincts often wonder if, piecing together the puzzle, they should view these theophanies as Christophanies.

Some believe the stakes are even higher. For instance, Matt Foreman and Doug Van Dorn recently co-wrote a volume arguing for Christophanies. In it, they do not undersell the importance they assign to their view. They believe the "Angel of the Lord," a term they believe refers to the pre-incarnate Son, "is the most important and central figure in the Old Testament, the most frequent way God is revealed, and appears way more often than most people realize. The storyline of the Bible from the Old Testament

to the New is about him.”<sup>1</sup> To them, failing to see Christophanies is failing to understand the narrative of Scripture.

I would like to contend the opposite. My thesis is that visible, particular manifestations of the Son in the OT would be inappropriate for the old covenant age. As with proponents of Christophanies, I will look at OT revelation in light of the NT. However, I believe that the NT gives less reason for viewing OT theophanies as Christophanies, not more. Instead, the NT, while heightening awareness of the Son’s presence in the OT, increases the expectation that Christ’s visible manifestation waits for the incarnation.

Recognizing the enormous scope required to properly prove this thesis, I focus on one major instance of theophany with its NT commentary. I start with detailed exegesis of Exodus 33–34 followed by the same in 2 Corinthians 3:7–4:6. I hope to show that Paul’s logic in 2 Corinthians 3:7–4:6 makes any claim to identify Christ with the Sinai theophany in Exodus 33–34 seem inappropriate. I then employ a greater to lesser argument to suggest the same for any other lesser theophany in the OT. Finally, I respond to several anticipated objections. In making this argument, I do not want to temper enthusiasm for finding the fullness of the triune God in the pages of the OT. I do, however, want to recommend carefulness regarding the precision with which we should expect to identify manifestations of the Son prior to the incarnation. In doing so I hope to engender respect for both progressive revelation and the sheer immensity of the new covenant glory revealed in Christ.

## ***1. Exodus 33–34***

Any study of Christophanies should place a high value on conclusions drawn from Exodus 33–34. The text checks multiple boxes. Exodus 33–34 contains an uncontested theophany with NT commentary. Additionally, it is a theophany with little OT precedent. Except for Elijah, God reveals himself to no one else with this level of magnitude. In this way, Exodus 33–34 acts as a kind of high point of God’s self-revelation in the OT. Surely if Christ can be found in any theophany, it is here. The following is a summary of the text along with the key questions and conclusions the text presents.

### **1.1. Exodus 33:1–6**

Exodus 32–34 functions as a literary unit that highlights God’s presence.<sup>2</sup> After the Golden Calf debacle of chapter 32, chapter 33 opens with the Lord commanding Moses to leave Sinai and lead Israel into the land of promise. He promises an angel to lead them, but he will no longer promise his presence due to the people’s sin. His presence is now unbearable; it would consume them in a single moment of contact.

### **1.2. Exodus 33:7–11**

In contrast, Moses alone experiences God’s presence in the tent of meeting. The text goes out of its way to portray the vast gulf between Moses’s experience of God and everyone else’s. When Moses would go to the tent, everyone would rise, stand at their tent doors, and watch Moses from afar. Then, when Moses would enter, the pillar of cloud would move to the tent entrance and God would speak to

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Foreman and Doug Van Dorn, *The Angel of the Lord: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Study* (Dacono, CO: Waters of Creation, 2020), 2.

<sup>2</sup> T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, ApOTC 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 613.



Moses intimately (“face-to-face, as a man speaks to his friend”).<sup>3</sup> The close connection between the movement of the cloud and God’s speaking with Moses demonstrates that God’s actual presence is in the cloud. The Israelites recognized God’s presence in the cloud and therefore worshipped when it moved to the tent.<sup>4</sup>

### 1.3. Exodus 33:12–16

Moses, emboldened due to his unique intimacy with the Lord, challenges God’s reluctance to send his presence with his people. Moses questions how God can command him to bring his people into the promised land without also offering his entirely necessary presence. He requests that God show him his “ways” so that he would “know” God, appealing both to God’s desire to protect his name and the favor which God has shown Moses. At this, God relents and promises his presence.

### 1.4. Exodus 33:17–23

Moses, firmly assured of his special relationship with the Lord, decides to risk everything. He asks to see God’s glory. God responds positively: he will indeed allow his goodness to pass before Moses. He will also proclaim his name and character. However, he will not reveal his face. If anyone were to see what Moses desired to see, they would die. This reminds Moses that there is a level of God’s presence that even he can’t approach. God offers to hide Moses, letting Moses see his back, not his face, as his glory passes by.

### 1.5. Exodus 34:1–28

God makes good on his offer in a covenant renewal ceremony on Mt. Sinai. He reinforces that Moses alone would be allowed to experience such a great, though still not full, display of God’s glory. Then, finally, God shows himself. He descends in a cloud, stands with Moses, and passes by, all the while proclaiming his name and character. Moses does not take this lightly. He prostrates himself in worship and repeats his desperate request to have this God’s presence in their midst. God responds by rehearsing the terms of the covenant, promising his presence, and proclaiming the glory he will receive.

### 1.6. Exodus 34:29–35

When Moses comes down to meet the people after this momentous encounter, his face is shining.<sup>5</sup> Moses does not realize his face is shining, but the text specifies that it shone “because he had been talking with God.” The people respond with fear. However, Moses invites them to come near to hear from him anyway. He proclaims the renewal of the covenant but afterward veils his face. This pattern continues every subsequent time he speaks with the Lord. When Moses enters the tent, he removes his veil to speak with the Lord face-to-face. Then, he reveals his shining face and the Lord’s command to his people. However, after he finishes proclaiming God’s words, he veils his shining face again until his next discussion with God.

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all Bible quotations come from the ESV.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander, *Exodus*, 635.

<sup>5</sup> Some argue that Moses’s face was “horned” as well as or instead of “shining.” The translation decision does not seem to affect the point of the narrative. In both cases, Moses’s face has been noticeably changed by a divine encounter. Eric X. Jarrard, “Double Entendre in Exodus 34: Revisiting the קרן of Moses,” *ZAW* 131 (2019): 388–406. Contra Joshua M. Philpot, “Exodus 34:29–35 and Moses’ Shining Face,” *BBR* 23 (2013): 1–11.

### 1.7. Interpretive Questions

This narrative leaves the careful reader with several interpretive questions. First, what is the meaning of God's "face"? At the most basic, "face" does not refer to one of God's physical features, as if Moses simply wanted to "look God in the eyes." God, of course, does not have a face in that sense. So, what does Moses ask to see? The Hebrew word translated "face" (פָּנֶיךָ) does a lot of work in this passage. It refers to Moses's face (34:29–35), God's face which Moses apparently saw (33:11), God's face which no one can see (33:20), and the "face of the earth," though the latter does not seem to have bearing on the present study. Additionally, Ian Wilson notes that both in and outside of Exodus, "those who see God's face receive 'blessing,' 'vitality,' and commissioning for service."<sup>6</sup> Finally, פָּנֶיךָ refers to God's presence (33:14, 15). This final meaning unlocks the others. At issue in this narrative is God's presence and whether it would go with Moses and Israel. When Moses asks to see God's glory, what he desires is even more of God's manifest presence. God responds that he will show some of himself in his goodness, name, and attributes, but he will not show his face. By responding to a request for his glory with a statement about his face, God implies that his face represents the level of God's presence Moses hopes to see. His response also renders virtually synonymous his face, name, glory, attributes, and presence. Therefore, to see God's face is to see *him*.

At this point, another question arises: If Moses would die if he saw God's face on Sinai, how does he survive regularly speaking to God face-to-face in the tent of meeting? This seems to be an irreconcilable tension: either man can or cannot see God's face and live. Some resolve this tension by pointing to the different initiators of these two events. When Moses asked to see God's face on Sinai, God declined because Moses initiated. But when God spoke to Moses in the tent, it was God who initiated.<sup>7</sup> On this line of reasoning, man can only see God and live if he initiates. This could perhaps be true, but it is not clear from the text that God denies Moses a view of his face due to Moses's uninvited boldness. Instead, his boldness results in God showing more of his glory than Moses had ever seen.

T. Desmond Alexander attempts to diffuse this tension by noting that Moses only *speaks* to God face-to-face. Perhaps this means that Moses never actually saw God in the tent of meeting.<sup>8</sup> This interpretation is helpful in one sense because it draws the reader's attention away from speculating as to what form God may have taken. Instead, the reader focuses on the more important matter of the significance of the phrase "face-to-face" (פָּנֶיךָ אֶל-פָּנַי). To speak to God "face-to-face" seems to convey a locational nearness that goes beyond simply seeing one another. Elsewhere, this phrase conveys God's fearsome, manifest presence among his people (Num 14:14; Deut 5:4; Judg 6:22). In some cases, God or a foe may draw extremely near to *judge* "face-to-face" (Jer 32:4; 34:3; Ezek 20:35).<sup>9</sup> However, in the present context, Victor Hamilton believes the phrase conveys intimacy to a level experienced by lovers.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, "as a man speaks to a friend" (33:11) seems to exegete this phrase in the text itself.

However, Alexander's view has a potential problem. Moses left his post-Sinai tent encounters with a shining face. The people responded because they saw something different about his face, ruling out

<sup>6</sup> Ian Douglas Wilson, "Face to Face' with God: Another Look," *ResQ* 51 (2009): 114.

<sup>7</sup> Mark D. Wessner, "Toward a Literary Understanding of Moses and the Lord 'Face to Face' (Panim 'el-Panim) in Exodus 33:7–11," *ResQ* 44 (2002): 109–16.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander, *Exodus*, 634.

<sup>9</sup> My thanks to editor Brian Tabb for pointing this out.

<sup>10</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 528.

a mere metaphor. It seems in keeping with the point of the narrative to suggest that Moses's "face" reflected the glory of the one he spoke to "face-to-face." Hearing alone would not cause one's face to shine. Further, Scripture exhibits this exact phrase elsewhere to describe actual, visual, physical encounters with characters indistinguishable from God. Jacob, for instance, understood he saw God "face-to-face" after his wrestling match, calling the place פְּנֵי אֵל, the "face of God" (Gen 32:30).<sup>11</sup>

So, it seems that Moses probably saw something in the tent and that whatever he saw was glorious and intimate enough to be properly called God's "face." This has further defined the encounter, but it has not resolved the tension. Why did God deny his face on Sinai? The answer likely comes from thinking of God's face/glory/presence in terms of degree. Just like "face" is not a technical term for a part of God's anatomy, neither is it always referring to the totality of God's presence in some kind of one-to-one relationship. Otherwise, the tension of this passage still exists. However, Moses's face reflected glory both in seeing God's "face" in some way in the tent and in seeing God's "back" on Sinai. In both situations, he saw a heightened level of God's glory. What he desired was even more. As Robert Chisholm notes, it appears that God's face on Sinai refers to the fullness of his glory which he was not willing to allow Moses or anyone else to see.<sup>12</sup>

A third major question from this text surrounds this theophany. What exactly did Moses see? The text describes the "hand" and "back" of the Lord, both of which Moses could "see." Some are reluctant to allow that God visibly manifested himself for similar reasons as those who deny a visual encounter in the tent of meeting. J. Carl Laney believes this is metaphorical speech referring to God's revealing of his name and attributes.<sup>13</sup> However, this seems to strain metaphorical speech to its absolute limit. The Lord "descended," "stood with him there," "passed before him" (34:5), and placed him in the cleft of the rock and covered him (33:22). Additionally, following the same logic as the tent encounter, Moses's face coming down the mountain reflected the glory that he saw. Peter Enns is emphatic: "He most certainly does see something."<sup>14</sup> Yet going further to suggest what Moses saw goes beyond what this text on its own is willing to offer.

The veil compels one final question. Why did Moses veil his face? The text does not say directly, but it does imply that the reason is linked to the people's fear. Joshua Philpot describes Moses's descent from the mountain as a "contrast."<sup>15</sup> Moses carried the sheer difference between this encounter with God and every other in his face. The people were afraid because of another contrast evident in the broader narrative. The heights of glory Moses encountered made the people's terrible sin that much more apparent. This stark contrast inspired fear in the people. So, after Moses said what God told him to say, he covered himself for reasons the text does not nuance further.

In conclusion, Exodus 33–34 presents a contrast between a wicked people on one side and a holy God along with his servant Moses on the other. God's people could not stand in his presence. However, God allowed his servant Moses to experience his manifest presence without consequences. Moses saw

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<sup>11</sup> My thanks again to editor Brian Tabb for noting this play on words.

<sup>12</sup> Robert B. Chisholm Jr, "Theophany," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 817.

<sup>13</sup> J. Carl Laney, "God's Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6–8," *BSac* 158 (2001): 40.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Enns, *Exodus*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 456.

<sup>15</sup> Philpot, "Exodus 34:29–35 and Moses' Shining Face," 5.

God, or at least some form mediating God that could still be called “God.” In either case, Exodus 33–34 describes theophanies.

Yet the text also teaches that God can present varying degrees of his presence. Richard Gaffin notes that God’s presence, “without further mediation, will destroy his creatures, but which admits of mediated expressions involving the most intimate fellowship with him.”<sup>16</sup> Moses was able to enjoy intimate fellowship with God. Though the contrast is evident even here. At most, on Sinai, God was only willing to reveal to Moses his “back,” a “Hebrew idiom” akin to seeing almost nothing at all.<sup>17</sup> Yet even this restrained glory was too much for the sinful people, and so Moses veiled it from them.

## **2. 2 Corinthians 3:7–4:6**

Second Corinthians 3:7–4:6 provides a commentary of sorts on the events of Exodus 33–34. While respecting the text and events of Exodus 33–34, Paul reflects on the text as one who has seen the risen Christ. He knows in fullness and in detail that to which the OT Scriptures only pointed. Therefore, he cannot read this or any other Scripture without his new covenant knowledge, nor should he. This is why, here in 2 Corinthians 3:7–4:6, Paul evidently observes more than would have been apparent to the original readers of Exodus 33–34, yet in keeping with the text’s intention. As with the previous section, the following is a summary of the text. Interpretive questions that arise readily in the flow of the text will receive treatment along the way.

### **2.1. Context of 2 Corinthians 3:7–4:6**

This section nests inside a much longer section dealing with Paul’s defense and explanation of his apostolic ministry (2:14–7:4). Apparently, some in the Corinthian church were not impressed with Paul and his ministry, especially when compared to Moses. Paul responds by arguing that his ministry is superior because it is based on a greater covenant. Paul repeatedly goes to the old covenant and Moses to contrast its weakness, insufficiency, and resultant death with the strength, sufficiency, and resultant life that comes through Christ by the Spirit. Paul emphasizes that this new covenant has the power to change hearts. Beginning in 3:7, Paul continues this contrast by explicitly referencing the events of Exodus 33–34.

### **2.2. 2 Corinthians 3:7–11**

This section could be summed up with the phrase “greater glory.” Paul asks: if even Moses’s ministry came with such glory that the Israelites couldn’t look at it for long, how much more will Paul’s ministry bring even more glory? In this question, several aspects of Moses’s ministry come into focus. First, Moses’s ministry was indeed glorious. Though the point of Paul’s commentary is to highlight the greater glory of the new covenant, he does not lose sight of the fact that the old covenant *had* glory. This drives his point home even better. Being greater than something undesirable is nothing special. Being so desirable that something once thought desirable now seems comparatively undesirable is a feat. Winning a spelling bee in a small town comes with some glory. Embarrassing a chess grandmaster makes one a legend.

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<sup>16</sup> Richard B. Gaffin Jr, “Glory,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 508.

<sup>17</sup> Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC 2 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 709.

This is the second aspect of Moses's ministry Paul highlights. Comparatively, it is a "ministry of death," a "ministry of condemnation," and a glory "brought to an end" (καταργουμένην).<sup>18</sup> Perhaps this would have come as a surprise to the Jews. Again, the glory in Exodus 33–34 truly was glorious. Nothing in the text would suggest that this glory was inferior in any way. Yet Paul reasons that glory that ended must be inferior to glory that is permanent. Now that Jesus ended the era of the letter and began the permanent era of the Spirit, it is as if the old glory has no glory in comparison to this new glory.

Third, the glories Paul references are the glories of the old and new covenants. Moses, his ministry, and his shining face are stand-ins for the old covenant. Therefore, the comparison Paul makes is not so much between Moses and Paul. Rather, it is between the glory of the old covenant, which Moses represents, and the glory of the new covenant, which Christ actualizes. Based on this text, it would be right to argue that the glory of *Christ* is newer, better, greater, lasting, and life-giving.

### 2.3. 2 Corinthians 3:12–18

The hope that Paul has in this new covenant, the greater glory of Christ, makes Paul bold to proclaim the gospel. If the glory is better, then the message which proclaims the glory is also better. Moses was not likewise bold in proclaiming God's glory, as evidenced by his veiled face. The reason given for Moses's motivation is somewhat ambiguous. Moses veiled his face "so that the Israelites might not gaze [τὸ μὴ ἀτενίσαι] at the outcome [τὸ τέλος] of what was being brought to an end [τοῦ καταργουμένου]" (3:13). What does this mean?

Murray Harris catalogs numerous opinions, ultimately concluding that Moses was cognizant of the fact that the glory on his face would fade. His face in turn visualized the reality of the fading old covenant. Therefore, to prevent the Israelites from looking at him long enough that they would be able to peer into the "outcome" of the old covenant, Moses veiled his face quickly after delivering his message.<sup>19</sup> Harris's interpretation hinges on his understanding of the word "gaze." He notes that "ἀτενίζω occurs fourteen times in the NT, twelve times in Luke-Acts, and twice in 2 Corinthians (3:7, 13). Outside the present verse, it always depicts physical sight, never mental recognition: 'look intently at (something or someone),' never 'perceive,' 'understand.'"<sup>20</sup> On this view, Paul believes Moses did not want them to stare long enough to learn the bad news about the old covenant.

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<sup>18</sup> Some debate exists over the translation of this key, repeated term (3:7, 11, 13). Per BDAG, the gloss of the root καταργέω includes various ways of describing something coming to an end. Many translations have traditionally rendered this term "faded" (NASB, NLT). However, "faded" evokes a glory slowly flickering out. For this reason, Hamilton argues for a stronger "transient" or "transitory" to capture Paul's point that the old covenant was prepared to end abruptly, not simply fade away. Other translations include "set aside" (CSB) and even "made ineffective" (NET). Regardless of the translation, the debate can take the focus off of the fact that the verb καταργενω functions as "pejorative circumlocution" referring to the old covenant, as Garrett helpfully points out. Peter Balla believes that in this way, 3:14 functions as a thesis statement for 2 Corinthians 3, since it seems to make a play on words in referencing Christ's role in bringing to an end (καταργενω) the old covenant. See BDAG 525–26; Hamilton, *Exodus*, 546; Duane A. Garrett, "Veiled Hearts: The Translation and Interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3," *JETS* 53 (2010): 750; Peter Balla, "2 Corinthians," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 759.

<sup>19</sup> Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 298.

<sup>20</sup> Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 298–99.

Paul Barnett and Duane Garrett argue along similar lines by focusing on another key term. They render τέλος as “purpose” or “goal.” On this reading, Moses did not want the Israelites to see the intended purpose of the old covenant, Christ. Why would Moses want to veil the purpose of the covenant? 3:14 provides a clue: the Israelites had hard hearts. Barnett believes that the veil acts as a kind of judgment. Because they did not see the new covenant realities the old covenant pointed toward, they were no longer allowed to see even the fading glory for very long.<sup>21</sup> Garrett attempts to string together Paul’s logic by positing that the Israelites must have been so distracted by the glow on Moses’s face that they missed the point of the old covenant.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Moses veiled his face because they couldn’t handle the temptation to appreciate the show without losing its meaning.

Each of these options contain some truth. However, they all share a major flaw. Nothing in the Exodus text would lead the reader to believe that Moses or the Israelites believed the glory they saw was transient. If Paul indeed makes this argument, he ascribes knowledge and intentions to Moses that arise somewhere external to Exodus. Scott Hafemann, however, believes Paul has a different meaning that remains faithful to what could have been known by Moses.

Hafemann takes τέλος to refer to “what the glory would have brought about had it not been veiled.”<sup>23</sup> On his view, the τέλος of the old covenant is to show the judgment that results when wicked people behold a holy God.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, Moses veiled his face as an act of mercy, shielding the people from the judgment reflected in his face.<sup>25</sup>

Hafemann’s view is compelling for several reasons. First, he recognizes the broader story of Exodus 33–34 that highlights Moses as the mediator of God’s presence to sinful Israel.<sup>26</sup> He argues that Paul undoubtedly has this entire section in mind, even though he only references a handful of verses. Second, the context of Paul’s letter aids in this interpretation as well. Paul juxtaposes his own ministry of “life” against Moses’s ministry of “death” and “condemnation.” These adjectives only make sense if they describe the typical effect they have on the recipients of the ministry. Though Moses could stand the glory of the ministry of death, the hard-hearted Israelites could not.<sup>27</sup> Finally, this view seems to fit with the logic of the remainder of 2 Corinthians 3:14–18. Paul argues that even to this day, Jews do not see the glory of the old covenant because of their hard hearts. This necessitated Moses’s protection in the form of a veil. Now, however, if anyone turns to Christ, they have their hearts softened to see not only the glory of the old covenant without being destroyed but also the glory to which it pointed.

So, unlike Paul, Moses veiled the glory of his message because his message would only bring destruction to people whose hearts were hard. This again paints a stark contrast between the old and

<sup>21</sup> Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 113.

<sup>22</sup> Garrett, “Veiled Hearts,” 755.

<sup>23</sup> Scott J. Hafemann, “The Glory and Veil of Moses in 2 Cor 3:7–14: An Example of Paul’s Contextual Exegesis of the Old Testament—A Proposal,” *HBT* 14 (1992): 41.

<sup>24</sup> Hafemann, “The Glory and Veil of Moses in 2 Cor 3,” 42.

<sup>25</sup> Hafemann, “The Glory and Veil of Moses in 2 Cor 3,” 35.

<sup>26</sup> Hafemann, “The Glory and Veil of Moses in 2 Cor 3,” 35.

<sup>27</sup> For a direct response to these claims, see Garrett, “Veiled Hearts,” 755 n. 63. Garrett does not believe that the Exodus narrative insinuates that Moses’s face was dangerous. He instead ties the glow to the revelation of God’s goodness and the renewal of the covenant. However, this is exactly the point Paul argues. Moses’s face indeed reflects the glow of God’s goodness, which is destructive to those who reject it. Paul argues that, if even this glory was glorious, how much more a glory that effects life?

new covenants. Even the glory of the old covenant was futile to overcome sinful hearts. However, the glory of the new covenant can change hearts. This is the thesis of 3:14–18.

The key to interpreting this section is to pinpoint the precise identity of each veil. In between 3:14 and 3:15, the placement of the veil switches. Through 3:14, the veil stays over Moses's face. Beginning in 3:15, the veil covers both darkened minds and hard hearts. Though some have seen three veils in Paul's commentary, both in 3:15 refer to the lack of spiritual perception on the part of the reader of the OT. Two veils are therefore probable.<sup>28</sup> These two veils are separate, though share in their "effect of obscuring vision or hindering perception" and Paul can therefore rightly call them the same.<sup>29</sup> However, his introduction of a second veil makes a profound point. The veil of unbelieving Israel made necessary Moses's veil. The problem was not Moses's veil, as if they somehow just needed to look past the veil to see the glory of the old covenant. The problem was that the veil over their own hearts made them unable to even look at the glory of the old covenant. Where then should they look to have the veil lifted? Paul states emphatically: "when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed" (3:16).

Paul equates this Lord who removes the veil with the Spirit, and the Spirit with freedom (3:17). Therefore, though the old glory was hidden behind two veils, new covenant believers behold this new glory, "the glory of the Lord," freely with an unveiled face. This glory, instead of destroying the wicked, transforms the beholder into the likeness of the one they behold. For this reason, some have suggested that "beholding" might be better translated as "reflecting." Christians do not just see a better glory in Jesus. They reflect him as divine image-bearers.<sup>30</sup>

One final question surrounds the phrase "from one degree of glory to another." Does this refer to progressive sanctification, the process of being transformed more and more into Christ's likeness? While in some sense, believers experience a kind of moving from glory to glory in their walk with Christ, this is probably not the best interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3:18. Instead, Dane Ortlund believes that this phrase refers to the movement between the "two different eras in redemptive history."<sup>31</sup> On this interpretation, the sheer magnitude of the difference between the two covenants is again put on display. Moses looked, unveiled, upon a glory that was great, but still immeasurably less than what believers now "see."

In summary, 2 Corinthians 3:12–18 teaches that everyone must look to Jesus to have the veil over their hearts removed. This has one final implication relevant to a study on theophanies. If one must turn to Jesus to have the veil removed, then Jesus is not identical to the glory behind Moses's veil. If he were, then Paul would be condemning the Israelites for refusing to look at what Moses did not allow them to see. Stated differently, if Jesus were identical to the glory Moses saw on Sinai, then Moses refused the Israelites the opportunity to have the veil over their hearts removed when he veiled his face. This does not seem to be the logic of Paul. Instead, Paul implores all people to do what they *can* do: look to Jesus.

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<sup>28</sup> Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 302.

<sup>29</sup> Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 301–2.

<sup>30</sup> Laura Tack, "A Face Reflecting Glory: 2 Cor 3:18 in Its Literary Context (2 Cor 3:1–4:15)," *Bib* 96 (2015): 85–112.

<sup>31</sup> Dane C. Ortlund, "From Glory to Glory: 2 Corinthians 3:18 in Biblical-Theological Perspective," *CTJ* 54 (2019): 30.

## 2.4. 2 Corinthians 4:1–6

Therefore, Paul says, considering the whole previous discussion of his greater ministry, believers should persevere in sharing the message of the new covenant. He has eschewed sinful tactics, boldly declaring God's truth with a clear conscience. Yet he knows the Corinthians may have a question. If Paul makes this immeasurably great glory so clear, why do some not believe? Paul goes back to the veil over the hard hearts of these unbelievers. Satan is responsible for the veil. Unbelievers are "blind" in a sense because they see life through a veil. The veil filters the gospel and makes the message it communicates seem unappealing. Yet for others, God pierces the veil with the light of the glory of the new covenant, which this passage makes clear is the "glory of Christ" (4:4). Only God can change hard hearts, represented by the veil, and he does so through the message of the greater glory in Jesus Christ (4:6).

Two terms in this final section become important for further defining new covenant glory: image and face. Paul links these terms to the phrases "glory of Christ" and "glory of God," which based on his preceding argument should be seen as synonymous. Second Corinthians 3:4 states that the gospel attests to the glory of Christ, who is himself the *image* (εἰκών) of God. What does it mean for Christ to be the image of God? Commentators such as Harris and Barnett focus on Jesus's physical visibility, his corporeality.<sup>32</sup> Though not claiming that invisibility exhausts the meaning of εἰκών in this passage, they reference several other texts (Phil 2:6; Col 1:15, 19; 2:9) that speak of God's supposed invisibility. I examine God's invisibility later, but for now, it is sufficient to note that 2 Corinthians 3:7–4:6 does not attempt to argue that Jesus is the visibly manifest glory of God. Instead, it argues that Jesus makes God's glory in the new covenant known more fully. Therefore, Jesus's role as the εἰκών of God is not so much to make God seen but rather to make him fully known.

Paul also asserts that the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God" has come to be made known "in the face" (ἐν προσώπῳ) of Jesus Christ." In what way does Jesus's "face" make God's glory known? Barnett again stresses an interpretation of this term that focuses on the visual.<sup>33</sup> Jesus is the way we "see" God. Murray, on the other hand, recognizes that ἐν προσώπῳ must signify more than visible representation. He attempts to tie this phrase to the argument of 2 Corinthians 3:7–4:6. Just as Moses reflected the old glory, Jesus reflects the new glory. Because of this parallel, the reader must think primarily of Jesus's "face" as the one reflecting glory in contrast to Moses. He rejects an alternative understanding of πρόσωπον that allows the term to function as a "synecdoche" for the whole person.<sup>34</sup>

However, this view that Harris rejects is most convincing, and it has implications for interpreting Exodus 33–34. First, as noted above and as will be discussed later, Jesus's visibility does not seem to be in view in this passage. Second, the language of 2 Corinthians 4:4 and 4:6 equates the glory of God with the glory of Jesus. In what sense is Jesus's glory simply "reflected" on his face? Third, in keeping with the flow of the argument, Jesus is put forward as the fullness of new covenant realities. His entire person, represented by his "face," is the newer, better, greater, lasting, and life-giving manifestation of the glory of God (cf. Heb 1:3). Paul undoubtedly references the Exodus account in his use of "face." Just like God's "face" represented his manifest presence, so Jesus's "face" represents the fullness of God's glory previously denied to Moses but revealed in the new covenant.

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<sup>32</sup> Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 331; Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 123.

<sup>33</sup> Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 125.

<sup>34</sup> Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 336.



## 2.5. The Inappropriateness of OT Christophanies

Given Paul's commentary on Exodus 33–34, the argument against OT Christophanies boils down to a simple formula: If Jesus is the glory of the new covenant, it would be inappropriate for him to be the glory of the old. This simple formula, however, deserves unpacking.

Second Corinthians 3:7–4:6 argues consistently and from many angles that the new covenant glories are fundamentally different from the old. One brought death, the other brought life. It also specifically associates Jesus with the glory of the *new* covenant. Jesus is the “image of God” and the true “face” of God. Therefore, given Paul's emphasis on the stark contrast between old and new, even Christians with NT Trinitarian knowledge need good reasons for finding this greater glory walking amidst the old.

If any theophany qualifies to potentially fit these criteria, it is the Sinai theophany. However, even the Sinai theophany fails to pass the test. As previously stated, Paul takes great pains to contrast the glory on Sinai with the glory in Jesus. Additionally, the argument of 2 Corinthians 3:7–4:6 and the narrative of Exodus 33–34 conspire to imply that the Sinai theophany should not be associated with a particular manifestation of the Son. In his discussion of veils, Paul implores the reader to look *away* from the glory of the Sinai theophany, the glory shining on Moses's face, toward the glory of Jesus. Also, Paul makes clear that Jesus is the true “face” of God, the full manifestation of God's presence. Yet this “face” is exactly what God withheld from Moses.

Therefore, by a greater to lesser argument, this precludes any other Christophany. If the Son was not revealed in one of God's grandest OT manifestations, then it seems inappropriate to argue that the Son was revealed in lesser manifestations. Instead, Paul's argument leads me to believe it would be better to assume that God would save the revelation of the Son until the incarnation.

As a caveat, this does not mean that the Son is somehow absent from OT theophanies. Indeed, some NT passages identify Christ's presence at specific points in Israel's history (John 12:41; 1 Cor 10:4, 9; Jude 5). For this reason, I stop short of saying that the Son “cannot” be the glory of the old covenant, preferring instead to argue that it would be inappropriate to assign this glory to the Son particularly. Due to inseparable operations, the triune God is present in any action attributed to God, even those that Scripture appropriates to a specific person in the Trinity. However, the debate over Christophanies centers around the question of whether readers of the OT can see actions and appearances *distinctly appropriated* to the second person of the Trinity. Though Christ is present in OT theophanies, I am arguing that it seems inappropriate that the Son would have a distinctly elevated role in these theophanies due to his association with the greater glory of the new covenant.

Additionally, this argument does not preclude finding distinct operations of the Son in the OT. It does, however, temper expectations for finding visible encounters with the pre-incarnate Christ. The NT contains a treasure trove of retrospective Trinitarian revelation. However, at least in the case of 2 Corinthians 3:7–4:6, I believe the NT casts a suggestive vote *against* OT Christophanies.

## 3. Counterarguments

This final section addresses three potential counterarguments from those more willing to appropriate at least some OT theophanies to the Son. The first counterargument points to the Father's supposed invisibility. Many assume that one of Jesus's roles is to visibly reveal the Father. Therefore, it seems perfectly appropriate that Christ would do the same in the OT. The second counterargument considers the Angel of the Lord. Some identify this “angel” as a manifestation of God yet distinct from

God. Who else could this shadowy figure be but Christ himself? The final objection relates to divine accommodation. Namely, the question of why Jesus could not have accommodated himself in the OT if he did in the NT.

### 3.1. Counterargument 1: The Invisibility of God the Father

Proponents of Christophanies find God's supposed invisibility a key axiom in their argument. For instance, Walt Kaiser assumes that Moses could not have seen God's actual glory "since God is Spirit and has no form."<sup>35</sup> Kaiser and others draw this inference from several biblical proof-texts. As previously discussed, Exodus 33:20 states bluntly that no one can see God's face and live. The NT seems to suggest the same, inserting Jesus as the one by whom believers can see God. First Timothy 1:17 states plainly that God is "invisible." John proclaims that no one has ever "seen" God, rather Jesus makes him known (John 1:18). Perhaps most definitively, Jesus is the image of God (Col 1:15) and his exact representation (Heb 1:3).

If God is invisible, yet Jesus became flesh, then Christophanies follow as a natural conclusion. However, if God is not invisible, then this straight line to Christophanies becomes blocked. Andrew Malone offers several reasons to doubt the traditional understanding of God's invisibility.

After looking at these NT proof-texts more closely Malone concludes that the "invisibility" these passages supposedly teach refers not to whether God can be seen. Instead, "invisibility" refers to "a culturally appropriate way of depicting God as 'beyond common earthly experience.'"<sup>36</sup> He argues this based on the emphasis of the biblical authors in each proof-text. In each instance, he observes that the NT authors do not seem to be addressing God's physical visibility but rather the level to which he makes himself known.

For instance, John 1:18 intentionally parallels Exodus 33–34. In doing so, John contrasts the revelation made to Moses with the revelation made through Jesus. In this way, John's statement, "no one has ever seen God," refers to the inferior revelation available to Moses in comparison to the fullness of revelation found in Jesus. Therefore, John argues that Jesus makes God known, not visible.<sup>37</sup> Other statements in John's writings follow similar avenues (John 6:46; 1 John 4:12). Likewise, 1 Timothy 1:17 highlights God's incomparable greatness rather than his visibility.<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, Malone tackles passages that identify Jesus as God's "image" (εἰκὼν). As demonstrated above, Paul uses εἰκὼν in 2 Corinthians 4:4 to declare that Christ makes God's glory fully known. Paul seems to be making a similar point in Colossians 1:15. Here, Paul puts Christ forth as Lord over all creation. In that way he fully images God. While Malone does not preclude the possibility that Colossians 1:15 could also be referencing God's incorporeality, he does urge caution before reading too much into the term "invisible."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "Exodus," in *Genesis–Leviticus*, revised ed., EBC, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 653.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Malone, *Knowing Jesus in the Old Testament? A Fresh Look at Christophanies* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 79.

<sup>37</sup> Andrew S. Malone, "The Invisibility of God: A Survey of a Misunderstood Phenomenon," *EvQ* 79 (2007): 318–19.

<sup>38</sup> Malone, "The Invisibility of God," 322.

<sup>39</sup> Malone, *Knowing Jesus in the Old Testament?*, 57–58.

Finally, Malone notes the theological impossibility of attributing invisibility to the Father alone.<sup>40</sup> Since each person of the Trinity is fully God and shares the same attributes, either all three persons are invisible, or none are invisible. In denying God's invisibility, we do not attribute to God a "form." However, we do recognize that each person of the Trinity, as well as the totality of the triune God, has the *potential* to manifest bodily.

If Malone's arguments hold, then Christophanies cannot be argued based on God's invisibility. The most one could argue is that, based on the incarnation, the Son is the person of the Trinity *most likely* to manifest. My argument, however, is that his greater glory revealed in the incarnation makes him *less likely* to manifest amidst the old covenant.

### 3.2. Counterargument 2: The Angel of the Lord

Some view the Angel of the Lord as a pre-incarnate manifestation of the Son. Throughout the OT, a messenger from Yahweh (מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה) repeatedly appears to people at key moments in redemptive history. Yet some of these messengers seem to be indistinguishable from Yahweh. For instance, when the "angel of the Lord" appears to Moses as a burning bush (Exod 3:2–10), this "angel" identifies himself *as* Yahweh (3:6). Dating back to the early church, some conclude that the only person who can meet these criteria is the pre-incarnate second person of the Trinity.<sup>41</sup> Thus appearances of the Angel of the Lord in the OT are Christophanies.

Though I can appreciate the connection between the Angel of the Lord and Yahweh, I believe we should refrain from qualifying the Angel's appearances as Christophanies based on my overall argument. The thesis of this article is that *no* manifestation of God in the OT can be equated exclusively with the Son. If a theophanic high point like Exodus 33–34 cannot be equated with the Son, then any lesser manifestation cannot either. Additionally, I believe we have other options outside of concluding that the Angel of the Lord is Christ.

First, we should note that not everyone concludes that these "angels" are Yahweh. Another stream of interpretation dating back to Augustine views the "messengers" as just that: messengers who speak on God's behalf.<sup>42</sup> Second, even if we were to conclude that these messengers are Yahweh, we would not be required to draw a straight line to Christ. As previously discussed, any member of the Trinity up to the entire triune God is just as capable of taking a visible form as Christ. Why not the Holy Spirit (Matt 3:16)? Yet perhaps we could argue for a "fittedness" to the Son's being "sent" due to eternal relations in the Trinity. If the Son eternally generates from the Father, then does it not seem appropriate that he would be the most likely to be sent by the Father to represent the Father similar to how the Father sent the Son at the incarnation? Again, we would be hard-pressed to argue that the Spirit is not equally likely to be "sent" (John 14:26; 15:26). It was only fitting for the eternally generated Son to become permanently incarnate because in doing so he fully revealed the Father (John 1:14, 17).

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<sup>40</sup> Malone, "The Invisibility of God," 314–15.

<sup>41</sup> Justin Martyr emphatically equates Christ with the "angel" in the bush. Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 62–63, in *The First and Second Apologies*, trans. Leslie William Barnard, Ancient Christian Writers (New York: Paulist Press, 1997).

<sup>42</sup> See René A López, "Identifying the 'Angel of the Lord' in the Book of Judges: A Model for Reconsidering the Referent in Other Old Testament Loci," *BBR* 20 (2010): 1–18.

Third, some believe the NT makes the Angel of the Lord connection explicit. For instance, Michael Heiser believes Jude 5 undeniably identifies the “angel” in Exodus 23:20–23 as Christ.<sup>43</sup> However, what seems on the surface to be a straightforward connection requires several steps. We must first believe that Jude intends to associate Jesus with the angel in Exodus 23:20–23. Yet this “angel” is not identified as the Angel of the Lord in Exodus 23:20–23, nor does he compel the same association with Yahweh apart from the vague comment that God’s “name is in him.” Next, we must assume Jude wants us to *identify* Jesus as the angel, rather than simply acknowledging his *presence*. Again, the Son has always been present in each of the triune God’s divine actions. Finally, we must argue that this angel, if he is Christ, was visible to the people of Israel at the same time that God withheld Christ from Moses on Sinai (Exod 33:2). If we are convinced of my thesis *and* that the Angel of the Lord is Yahweh, we have the option of following Malone in being satisfied with labeling these appearances “God unspecified.”<sup>44</sup> Perhaps we might go further and highlight the way these theophanies “foreshadow” Christ’s incarnation.<sup>45</sup>

However, my treatment of the Angel of the Lord thus far assumes that my overall thesis trumps all other arguments for Christophanies. What if the evidence for viewing the Angel of the Lord as a Christophany was so great that it pressed upwards, compelling us to find a way to view Exodus 33–34 as a Christophany? Foreman and Van Dorn’s recent treatment of the Angel of the Lord makes this argument. As evidenced by their quote in my introduction, Foreman and Van Dorn put great weight on Yahweh’s tendency to reveal himself through the Angel of the Lord, whom they identify as the Son. In their chapter on Exodus 33, they argue that the theophanies in the tent of meeting and on Sinai *are* the Angel of the Lord.<sup>46</sup>

To make this argument, they take three steps. First, they recognize that פָּנֶיָה has at least a double meaning of “face” and “presence.” Therefore, when Moses asks to see Yahweh’s “face” after regularly speaking with Yahweh “face-to-face,” he appeals to Yahweh for a greater revelation of his presence.<sup>47</sup> Second, they assert that when Yahweh revealed his פָּנֶיָה, Moses *saw* someone. Moses does not describe mere anthropomorphism.<sup>48</sup> Third, they argue that פָּנֶיָה is consistently used throughout Scripture as a technical term referring to the Son, the Angel of the Lord.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, when Moses asked to experience more of Yahweh’s presence, Yahweh revealed his Son, the “face” of Yahweh.

If this argument were true, it would of course severely undermine my thesis. However, I believe there are fatal inconsistencies in Foreman and Van Dorn’s argument. First, the logic does not hold. They assert that the Son is the “face” of Yahweh and therefore the one who reveals himself on Sinai. Yet Yahweh explicitly rejects Moses’s request to see his face, showing his back instead. To summarize what they imply more succinctly, it would be as if Moses asked to see Yahweh’s face/Son, to which Yahweh replied, “no, but here’s my Son.”

<sup>43</sup> Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2015), 270.

<sup>44</sup> For Malone’s argument regarding his preferred “candidate” for the identity of the Angel of the Lord, see *Knowing Jesus in the Old Testament?*, 93–105.

<sup>45</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God’s Appearing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 417.

<sup>46</sup> Foreman and Van Dorn, *The Angel of the Lord*, 80.

<sup>47</sup> Foreman and Van Dorn, *The Angel of the Lord*, 76.

<sup>48</sup> Foreman and Van Dorn, *The Angel of the Lord*, 79.

<sup>49</sup> Foreman and Van Dorn, *The Angel of the Lord*, 79.

Second, they struggle to keep their referents clear. It seems that the authors have unintentionally doubled the referent of “face.” It appears that they view the Son himself as the “face” of God yet argue that Moses saw the Son because Moses did not see God’s actual, physical face but rather his back. Further, they point to Yahweh’s covering Moses from Yahweh as evidence of two divine persons yet seem to identify the Son as both the hand who covers and the back who was revealed. If the Son is both, it becomes hard to maintain that each Christophany is an appearance of *the* pre-incarnate Christ. If they argue that the Son is only the back, then they imply that God, the hand, can manifest himself. In conclusion, it does not seem that Foreman and Van Dorn give compelling reasons for viewing the theophany on Sinai, or any other theophany for that matter, as anything more precise than the triune God.

### 3.3. Counterargument 3: Divine Accommodation

My argument assumes that God can accommodate his transcendence. Indeed, as Malone notes, “any theophany requires a degree of ‘accommodation’: God tones down his full essence for human consumption.”<sup>50</sup> Otherwise, no one would survive the full blast of his glory, as evidenced by the many times someone in the OT sees God and believes they will die (e.g., Isa 6:5).

Additionally, my argument hinges on identifying Jesus with God’s greater glory reserved for the new covenant. However, some might wonder, “was not Jesus’s transcendence ‘toned down’ even post-incarnation?” If this is the case and even the NT contains varying degrees of God’s glory as visible through Christ, then why draw such hard lines prohibiting Jesus from accommodating further in the OT?

I acknowledge that accommodation occurs even post-incarnation. Indeed, as Malone notes, “accommodation is a central tenant of the Son’s incarnation.”<sup>51</sup> The transfiguration and resurrection revealed a greater glory than Jesus evidenced in his 30 years of pre-ministry obscurity. Even after the resurrection many still did not see him for who he is. Still now, the picture of Jesus in Revelation shows that more of God’s glory remains to be known. If Jesus doesn’t fully reveal God’s glory post-incarnation, what would prohibit him from previewing his incarnation and subsequent glorification in pre-incarnate appearances?

Two factors make this unlikely. First, the nature of accommodation is different in the OT and NT. In the OT, God did not reveal his full glory. He withheld part of himself, removing a few pieces from the puzzle to fill in later. In the NT, God began fully, though not completely, revealing himself through Jesus. Jesus embodied the image of God even when his transcendence was veiled from those who saw him. Christians see the whole picture God created, though they will continue to grow in their knowledge of him forever (1 Cor 13:12). In the OT, the glory itself is transient. In the NT, the glory is permanent.

Second, my argument is not based on possibility but rather on appropriateness. It is possible that Jesus further accommodated his glory in OT times. Yet it seems that the reasons for making this argument run counter to their purposes. The instinct to see Jesus in the OT is an instinct to magnify God’s glory in his tri-unity and his singular plan of redemption. However, this line of thinking assumes that the one who is the full revelation of God’s glory is the only one who could reveal his lesser glory. Instead, it seems best to err on the side of appreciating the uniqueness of God’s glory manifest in the incarnation.

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<sup>50</sup> Malone, *Knowing Jesus in the Old Testament?*, 70.

<sup>51</sup> Malone, *Knowing Jesus in the Old Testament?*, 70.

#### 4. Conclusion

Though God is, will be, and always has been triune, the OT reveals God's tri-unity to a lesser extent than the NT. To this statement, all will agree. However, the debate continues over just how wide a gulf this represents. My thesis is that Christophanies are a bridge too far. Though the NT sheds light on much Trinitarianism in the OT, at least in one, albeit important, circumstance, the NT actually tempers expectations for finding visible, particular manifestations of the Son in the OT.

The theophany on Sinai (Exod 33–34) provides one of the OT's best examples of theophany. Surely, if Christ is to be found in any theophany, it is this one. However, though Moses sees God's glory manifest, he is denied the opportunity to see more. Moses *hid* this glory from the Israelites due to their hard hearts. Second Corinthians 3:7–4:6 teaches that this greater glory is now available under the new covenant in the person of Christ. Jesus is the "image" of God—the way God is fully known. He is the "face" of God, the fullness of God's presence denied to Moses. He is the one believers look to, who removes their veil and allows them to see God's glory. The gulf between Jesus's glory and the glory Moses saw is immense.

Therefore, it would be inappropriate to equate Jesus and his greater glory with the glory of the old covenant age. The argument for Christophanies unintentionally draws this parallel. However, the Sinai theophany makes this parallel highly unlikely. To argue for a Christophany on Sinai, one must imply that in response to Moses's request to see a greater glory, God said "no" and showed him Jesus instead. If the Son was withheld in this great theophany, it follows that he would not manifest in lesser theophanies either.

Key objections include appeals to God's supposed invisibility, the Angel of the Lord, and the reality of Jesus's divine accommodation even post-incarnation. However, none stand under scrutiny. While the NT teaches that God is not seen, at least in his fullness, this is different than saying he cannot be seen. If the Son is not the only visible member of the Trinity, then the clean argument for Christophanies gets murkier. In turn, God's ability to be seen impacts one's interpretation of the Angel of the Lord. If God reveals himself on Sinai yet does not reveal his Son, then it follows that any other theophany, including those attributed to the Angel of the Lord, does not seem likely to be the Son either. Finally, Jesus accommodated the manifestation of his glory to various degrees even in the NT. Why would it be impossible for him to do the same in the OT? To this, I reiterate that Christophanies are not impossible. Rather, they are inappropriate. Christ's manifestation in the NT was fundamentally different than God's in the OT. In the NT, the greater glory of the Son is revealed yet to various degrees. In the OT, God withholds the revelation of his greater glory.

If God chose to withhold the manifest revelation of the Son in the OT, what are the implications? Does this argument only serve to pour cold water on genuine hopes to see Christ in all of Scripture? I will close with the key benefit I have found from exercising caution regarding Christophanies. If God indeed withheld the revelation of the Son until the incarnation, how much more glorious is the incarnation? Even Moses was not allowed to see anywhere close to what we now see. How much I delight in this wonderful truth that I, though a sinner, get to partake in a glory so vastly superior simply because I am positioned historically on this side of the cross.

# “You are the Salt of the Earth” (Matthew 5:13): Influence or Invitation?

— Ken B. Montgomery —

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**Abstract:** Jesus identifies the disciples as “the salt of the earth” (Matt 5:13), which many commentators understand as a call for believers to be a part of preserving and influencing human society for the good. This article argues that “salt of the earth” is to be read as the church’s calling to participate in the flavor of the redemptive kingdom of heaven, and by extension to invite those outside to share in the feast of the new creation reality. This reading interprets the metonymic “salt” saying in light of the new temple theme in the Sermon on the Mount.

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Samin Nosrat in her terrific culinary book *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat* writes, “James Beard, the father of modern American cookery, once asked, ‘Where would we be without salt?’ I know the answer: adrift in a sea of blandness. If only one lesson of this book stays with you, let it be this: *salt has a greater impact on flavor than any other ingredient.*” Nosrat asserts, “in fact, we’re hardwired to crave salt to ensure we get enough of it.”<sup>1</sup>

Christians understand “the salt of the earth” as one of the master-metaphors of our relationship to wider human society. Whenever the church’s witness with respect to the unbelieving world is discussed, our calling as “salt and light” is often one of the first identifications to be invoked, and rightly so. The Lord Jesus designates his disciples as the “salt of the earth” and “light of the world” (Matt 5:13–14) immediately following the mountain-top benediction he pronounces upon them in the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1–12). If the Beatitudes are the kingdom constitution, then being “salt and light” is how the citizens of the kingdom are to walk in holy-distinction from the course of a world that has its own charter centered in the sinful self with its deceitful desires (cf. Eph 2:2, 4:22).

Because it is such a foundational image, understanding the nature and purpose the image of “salt” in Matthew 5:13 is vital. In this article I argue that the church fulfills her calling as “the salt of the earth” in serving as the taste of the kingdom of heaven, and that in doing so the body of Christ invites the world to the feast of life in the kingdom. Put differently, “you are the salt of the earth” is not referring to the flavor and seasoning believers bring to human life and society. It is rather to be taken as signifying the beginnings of the heavenly banquet whose foretaste is found in the church of Christ. Like the

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<sup>1</sup> Samin Nosrat, *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 20–21 (original emphasis).

pomegranates, figs, and grapes brought back to Israel in the wilderness by the spies (Num 13:23, 26), believers' communion in life as the 'salt of the earth' is a proleptic experience of the fullness of the age to come.<sup>2</sup>

The related designation in Matthew 5:14, "you are the light of the world," is consistent with the invitational dimension I will argue also applies to the salt in 5:13. What is the purpose of the light, and why is the "city set on a hill"? The answer: "that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (5:16 ESV). In other words, the goal is for those who see the light reflected in the disciples will add their voices to the kingdom chorus and join the procession to Zion. Those in the darkness who encounter the lighthouse are to ascend the hill to the source of the shining: "For behold, darkness shall cover the earth; and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations *shall come to your light*, and kings to the brightness of your rising" (Isa 60:2–3, emphasis mine). Meredith Kline asserts: "the mission of the old menorah-temple and that of the new menorah-church alike is to summon men out of all nations to the holy city on Har Magedon (whether the old earthly, typological Jerusalem or the new, heavenly Jerusalem), to call them on a faith pilgrimage to the altar of atonement and the throne of grace. The mission of the menorah community, old and new, is to light the way to the Father's house."<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the purpose of the disciples acting as salt is to call the nations to come to the table-fellowship of the kingdom of God. Here too Jesus is fulfilling the word of the prophets in announcing the beginning of the eschatological banquet: "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined" (Isa 25:6). Later in the Gospel, Jesus announces in light of the Gentile centurion's faith, "I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 8:11). Thus I maintain that the salt-keeping life of the disciples is an invitation for this grand final feast, just as the shining of the light is a glimpse of the eternal light of the Lamb in glory (cf. Rev 19:7; 21:23).

### *1. Salt as Fertilizer?*

Anthony Bradley in a provocatively titled article, "You Are the Manure of the Earth," makes the case that the agricultural use of salt-as-fertilizer is the best way to take Luke 14:34–35 (a parallel passage to Matt 5:13). Bradley states, "If we are supposed to be salt in the agricultural sense, that means we are supposed to get messy and to go where nothing is growing right now."<sup>4</sup> But is scattering salt on the ground (like Johnny Appleseed scattering seeds hither and yon) really a plausible way to take this metaphor? Wouldn't scattering seed (cf. Matt 13:1–23) be the more fitting metaphor if fecundity and growth is in view? Bradley reaches this conclusion partly because Jesus says that if the salt has lost its taste, "it is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away" (Luke 14:35). It is clear however that Jesus is referring in verse 35 not to *good* salt but to *bad* salt. In a manner of speaking, flavorless salt is of no benefit whatsoever, not even to be used as fertilizer. But it does not follow that the

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<sup>2</sup> I am reminded of Sandra McCracken's song: "And from the garden to the grave/ Bind us together, bring *shalom*.... We will feast in the house of Zion/ We will sing with our hearts restored. He has done great things, we will say together/ We will feast and weep no more" (Integrity Worship Music, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Meredith Kline, *Glory in our Midst*, reprint ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 139.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony B. Bradley, "You are the Manure of the Earth," *Christianity Today* 60.8 (October 2016): 72–76.



“good salt” was originally intended to be utilized as plant food. The Lukan teaching is that the ‘worth’ of salt-less salt is even *less* than manure.

Regarding taking the image of salt as a form of fertilizer, W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann comment, “Though salts of various kinds are necessary to the fertility of the soil, oversalination can and does effectively render land infertile—as evidenced by the ancient primitive action of sowing an enemy’s land with salt.”<sup>5</sup> The reading of salt as fertilizer then would depend on a distinction in the quantity of the salt sprinkled on the ground: too much would bring death, not life! With respect to sprinkling salt, neither a soldiers’ martial act nor a farmers’ applying a form of ‘miracle-grow’ to the soil is in view in Matt 5:13 or Luke 14:34–35.

## 2. Salt as Preservation?

Based on the salt as seasoning approach, there is a fairly strong tradition of taking “salt” in Matthew 5:13 as a preservative agent. Before modern refrigeration, salt was one of the primary means by which meat was kept in edible condition. Stemming from this, there is a reading which proposes the church serves in a sustaining and upholding function, so that because of believers’ “faithful presence,” the world organized around unbelief does not become as rotten as it otherwise would. Augustine comments on Matthew 5:13: “If ye, *by means of whom the nations in a measure are to be preserved [from corruption]*, through the dread of temporal persecutions shall lose the kingdom of heaven, where will be the men through whom error may be removed from you, since God has chosen you, in order that through you He might remove the error of others?”<sup>6</sup> Origen likewise observes,

Salt is useful for many purposes in human life! What need is there to speak about this?

Now is the proper time to say why Jesus’ disciples are compared with salt. Salt preserves meats from decaying into stench and worms. It makes them edible for a longer period. They would not last through time and be found useful without salt. So also Christ’s disciples, standing in the way of the stench that comes from the sins of idolatry and fornication, *support and hold together this whole earthly realm.*<sup>7</sup>

John Stott in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount also reflects this perspective:

God has established certain institutions in his common grace, which curb man’s selfish tendencies and prevent society from slipping into anarchy. Chief among these are the state (with its ability to frame and enforce laws) and the home (including marriage and family life). These exert a wholesome influence in the community. Nevertheless, God intends the most powerful of all restraints to be his own redeemed, regenerate, and righteous people.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 26 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 54. Cf. the OT reference to a place being “sown with salt” as in Judges 9:45.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *Sermon on the Mount* 1.6.16 [NPNF<sup>1</sup> 6:8, emphasis mine].

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Manlio Simonetti, *Matthew 1–13*, ACCSNT 1A (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 92, emphasis mine.

<sup>8</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 59. A recent article by David Hall entitled “Salt and Light in America” published on Reformation21 maga-

R. V. G Tasker comments, “The disciples are to be a moral disinfectant in a world where moral standards are low, constantly changing, or non-existent.”<sup>9</sup> In this paradigm, there is a “staying power” that the church exercises, in that God through his people stays certain deleterious effects of evil and the degradation that would otherwise occur without the presence of the salt.

To take this a step further, others maintain the salt image “means simply to make an impact on the world.”<sup>10</sup> The statement underscores that “disciples are to make the world a better place.”<sup>11</sup> Some in the Neo-Calvinist tradition in particular suggest that salt has not only preservative qualities but even transformative potency. Scott Hoezee exclaims, “The result of all your piety must be pouring yourself out onto this earth so as to bring out life’s complex and beautiful flavors.”<sup>12</sup> From this vantage point, salt (supernaturally) activates the latent goodness in human culture, and awakens the dormant potentialities within it: Christians then would legitimately expect to “bring out the best” in others.

There are some considerable objections that can be raised against taking salt in Matthew 5:13 to refer to societal preservation (or transformation). For one, in the Noahic covenant, God had already promised to uphold the basic order of society. The Lord by providence through this covenant keeps steady the pillars of the earth and its inhabitants (cf. Ps 75:3). David VanDrunen writes,

In Genesis 9 God entered into a covenant with both the natural order and the human race, promising to uphold and preserve his creation, albeit in fallen form. God promised to uphold the regularity of the cosmic order and reaffirmed the nature of humanity as his own image, and thereby continues to reveal his law by nature. Genesis 9 indicates that this natural law provides at least a basic, minimal ethic designed for the preservation of the social order.<sup>13</sup>

To view the church as one of the pillars of “common grace” both undersells its holy status and calling and also fails to appreciate the basic terms of restraint and stability previously established by God in the covenant with all creation instituted after the Noahic flood.

Secondly and more pointedly, for the metaphor of the “salt as seasoning for culture” to work, the second half of the metaphor, “the earth” must be understood as the ‘meat’ (or fish or other victuals) that prior to seasoning is in essentially edible condition in the first place. After all, for all its potency, salt cannot make flavorful or consumable what are already spoiled goods. This dilemma is exemplified in Martyn Lloyd-Jones’s comments on Matthew 5:13:

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zine also shares this supposition: “While the secular cant seeks to ward off much, if any, impact of real piety on politics, a longer stretch of history shows that religion and preaching have frequently shaped the basic moral issues facing various nations.” <https://www.reformation21.org/blog/salt-and-light-in-america> (Accessed December 1, 2020)

<sup>9</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961), 63.

<sup>10</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 175. Also, Turner writes, “Salt is thus a metaphor for exercising a beneficial influence on the world.” *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 155

<sup>11</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 174.

<sup>12</sup> Scott Hoezee, “Mixing In without Blending In,” <http://yardley.cs.calvin.edu/hoezee/2002/matt5Youth.html>.

<sup>13</sup> David VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order: Emory University Studies in Law and Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 19.

“Ye are the salt of the earth.” What does that imply? It clearly implies rottenness in the earth; it implies a tendency to pollution and to becoming foul and offensive. That is what the Bible has to say about this world. It is fallen, sinful and bad. Its tendency is to evil and to wars. It is like meat which has a tendency to putrefy and to become polluted. It is like something which can only be kept wholesome by means of a preservative or antiseptic.<sup>14</sup>

The distinction between *being* rotten and *tending* to rottenness would seem critical in light of how Lloyd-Jones understands the purpose of the salt-image:

The principal function of salt is to preserve and to act as an antiseptic. Take, for instance, a piece of meat. There are certain germs on its surface, perhaps in its very substance, which have been derived from the animal, or from the atmosphere, and there is the danger of its becoming putrid. The business of the salt which is rubbed into that meat is to preserve it against those agencies that are tending to its putrefaction.<sup>15</sup>

But how can it be maintained on the one hand that the earth (i.e., the fallen world) is spoiled in sin, while at the same time advancing the notion that salt *prevents* spoilage? If the point of preservation is to keep the edible goods fit for consumption, then even a minimal amount of decomposition and decay would be unacceptable. If the salt metaphor of Matthew 5:13 is indeed intended as a preservative, the salt could not be applied to already rancid meat, because then like the flavorless salt of v. 13b, the meat too would be worthless and have to be thrown out.

### 3. *Leavening the Earth?*

Ulrich Luz writes, “salt is not for itself; it is seasoning for food. In the same way the disciples are there not for themselves but for the earth.”<sup>16</sup> Grant Osborne also takes τὸ ἄλας τῆς γῆς as an objective genitive: “the earth is ‘salted’ by the believer.”<sup>17</sup> So too Craig Blomberg: “in light of the countercultural perspectives enunciated in the Beatitudes, it would be easy to assume the Jesus was calling his followers to a separatistic or quasi-monastic life-style. Here Jesus proclaims precisely the opposite. Christians must permeate society as agents of redemption.”<sup>18</sup>

In my own Reformed tradition, Abraham Kuyper also adopts the salt-as-leavening idea.<sup>19</sup> In his *Stone Lectures* delivered at Princeton University in 1898, he states, “Here is a city, set upon a hill which every

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<sup>14</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:151.

<sup>15</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 152.

<sup>16</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 206.

<sup>17</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 175.

<sup>18</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC 22 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1992), 102.

<sup>19</sup> “For Kuyper the church was a free, voluntary body called out of the larger society to be, inter alia, a witness to and leaven in that society.” James Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 154. In summarizing Kuyper’s views of common grace, Bratt states, “The middle domains registered the fact, in Kuyper’s opinion, that particular grace strengthened and best realized the possibilities of common grace.... Thus Christianity, starting out everywhere as a doughty minority, could not help but change society for the better as its witness drew more people into its ranks and so shed its influence into its local setting. Where the process had worked longest—i.e., in Europe—the effects were most profound. It was the intensifying

man can see afar off. Here is a holy salt that penetrates in every direction, checking all corruption.”<sup>20</sup> And later, he asserts “There must be a science which will not rest until it has thought out the entire cosmos; a religion which cannot sit still until she has permeated every sphere of human life; and so also there must be an art which, despising no single department of life adopt, into her splendid world, the whole of human life, religion included.”<sup>21</sup> This is related to Kuyper’s conception of the church as organism, which is the basis for “the Christian metamorphosis of the common phenomenon of general human life.”<sup>22</sup>

Some writing in the vein of the ‘leavening’ perspective appeal to the image of the kingdom in Matthew 13:33: “He told them another parable. ‘The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.’” This is a parable that speaks to the present hiddenness of the kingdom of God in Jesus’s ministry, waiting for the disclosure following Christ’s death and resurrection, as in the previous parable of the mustard seed and the tree. When will the kingdom be revealed and made manifest? When all is accomplished. The leaven’s presence for a time flies under the radar but its presence will at the proper time show its potency. The metaphor of leavening in this parable is then not about permeation and diffusion but about concealment and unveiling. The power of the leaven is shown in the rising and baking of the bread.<sup>23</sup> One of the points of the parables in Matthew 13 is that we should not despise the day of small things (Zech 4:10).

In my estimation, it is best to take salt in Matt 5:13 as an example of metonymy.<sup>24</sup> For example, God’s “right hand” stands for his incontestable power (cf. Pss 98:1; 108:6). To hear of the Lord’s “right hand” is to be summoned to consider the royal strength and sovereignty of the Most High. “Salt” rhetorically speaking opens the door to the setting of the kingdom table: “Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her beasts, she has mixed her wine; she has also set her table” (Prov 9:1–2). Jesus has already in Matt 5 introduced the image of appetite and provision: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (Matt 5:6). Salt according to the terms of this “language game”<sup>25</sup> is not found in the cupboard or in the shaker, waiting to be dispensed; instead, it belongs to the flavor all ready to be tasted on the chef’s table—that is, already present in the life of the new creation reign of God in Christ.

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effect of particular grace in the workings of common grace, Kuyper claimed, that accounted in no small part for the West’s achievement of global supremacy” (p. 203).

<sup>20</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, reprint ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 43.

<sup>21</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 147.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper*, 186. Bratt suggests that Kuyper’s repeated emphasis on the church as “organism,” developing from a single root and governed by its internal law, borrows from Friedrich Schelling, “perhaps making Schelling the instrument by which he could finally reconcile Schleiermacher and Calvin” (p. 184).

<sup>23</sup> A passage that does reference salt as “seasoning” is Colossians 4:6: “let your speech always be gracious, *seasoned with salt*, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” In this text the act of seasoning (ἡρτυμένος) is explicit, but its purpose is likewise connected to “flavor”: ὁ λόγος ὑμῶν πάντοτε ἐν χάριτι—our speech is to be ‘en-graced’ in union with Christ. Cf. Psalm 45:2, “You are the most handsome of the sons of men; grace is poured upon your lips.”

<sup>24</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), s.v. “metonymy” defines “metonymy” as “(A figure of speech characterized by) the action of substituting for a word or phrase denoting an object, action, institution, etc., a word or phrase denoting a property or something associated with it.”

<sup>25</sup> Taken from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1953).

One of the unhappy conclusions that follows from the preservationist/leavening interpretation is that in the end, the salt stands in need of the earth (i.e., as a receptacle or object for seasoning). However, the teaching of Matthew 5:13 in the context of the Sermon on the Mount directs us to the very opposite conclusion: it is the earth that stands in need of the salt! That is, the earth is flavorless and lifeless and is to find the flavor of life outside of itself in the kingdom of heaven. Christ’s declaration concerning the identity of his followers is thus by extension an indictment of those who do not heed his message, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 4:17). Salt and the earth therefore do not so much exist in a complementary relationship (as do the salt and roast beef on the dinner table). Rather, salt stands for the feast of the heavenly kingdom as opposed to the famine of the earthly domain; it stands for the fullness and abundance of life in Christ (cf. John 10:10) in contrast to the “food desert” of this world.<sup>26</sup>

John Calvin writes,

When Christ calls the apostles “the salt of the earth,” he means, that it is their office “to salt the earth” because men have nothing in them but what is tasteless, till they have been seasoned with the salt of heavenly doctrine. After having reminded them to what they are called, he pronounces against them a heavy and dreadful judgment, if they do not fulfill their duty. The doctrine, which has been entrusted to them, is shown to be so closely connected with a good conscience and a devout and upright life, that the corruption, which might be tolerated in others, would in them be detestable and monstrous. “If other men are tasteless in the sight of God, to you shall be given the salt which imparts a relish to them: but if you have lost your taste, where shall you obtain the remedy which you ought to supply to others?”<sup>27</sup>

Calvin’s point is instructive, as he sees “salt” as necessarily contrasting with “what is tasteless” and is marked by “corruption”—the pattern and attributes of “the earth” in this present evil age. “The earth” (τῆς γῆς) then must be read contextually as including those who persecute the disciples (Matt 5:11–12).<sup>28</sup> This also connects to the “you” of verses 10–12: the same people who are persecuted are those who are named as “salt.” They who are “salt” are those who are maligned and reviled, who live as separate from and in important respects antithetical to the pattern of this age. Given this, what is the condition of “the earth”? It is in an adversarial relationship to the kingdom of heaven. The earth (i.e., the unbelieving world) does not happily or readily receive the salt.

Being salt must be understood as compatible with being “hated” (Matt 10:22). Saltiness does not diminish in persecution but is instead enhanced. The presence of the salt is mysteriously operative when the salt-bearers die for the sake of Christ, holding to the “word of their testimony” (Rev 12:11). According to Douglas Farrow, “Martyrdom, as the Apocalypse teaches, is the truest manifestation of Jesus’ heavenly session, which—as the effecting in all things of the recapitulation he has accomplished—is a mystery that cannot otherwise declare itself except in the resurrection.”<sup>29</sup> Stephen proved himself

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<sup>26</sup> “They loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death” (Ps 107:18).

<sup>27</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Gospels*, trans. William Pringle, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 270.

<sup>28</sup> This is in parallel with “the world” (τοῦ κόσμου) of verse 14.

<sup>29</sup> Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 272. Those who interpret salt as a preservative are

part of the company of the “salt of the earth” when he interceded for those who put him to death, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60), thus carrying out the instruction of Christ: “pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44).

In short, a responsible explication of Matthew 5:13 must account for the fact that “the earth” is comprised of the “evil” and “unjust” (5:45) and is in fact characterized by corruption and theft (“where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal,” 6:19). The earth does not need a little seasoning here and a bit of leavening there: what is required is nothing short of cosmic regeneration (παλιγγενεσία, 19:28).

#### 4. Flavor and the Danger of “Becoming Foolish”

Like the purloined letter in Poe’s story, the function of the salt of Matthew 5:13 is hidden in plain view. There are various functions salt serves, but the particular aspect the salt to which Jesus is referring is its taste: “if the salt *has lost its flavor*” (μωρανθῆν). If the danger is for the salt to become tasteless or flavorless, then by implication the Lord is commanding the disciples to keep their distinct flavor. And what is that flavor? To continue to walk in the way of blessedness as unpacked in verses 1–12. This is the way to exhibit the “salt life” of God’s redemptive kingdom. Don Garlington helpfully writes,

Because they exhibit the qualities signaled by the indicatives of Matt 5:3–12, the disciples are proof positive that the kingdom is a reality in the world. It is just in their capacity as “the poor in spirit,” “those who mourn,” “the meek,” “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” “the merciful,” “the pure in heart,” “the peacemakers,” and the “persecuted” that Jesus’ followers are salt and light and, as such, the eschatological reality of the kingdom is actualized in their persons as the subjects of his reign.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, Jesus is not referring to salt penetrating or permeating the earth, so that his disciples show forth a “sweetening and wholesome influence.”<sup>31</sup> Instead, the salt represents the savor of the age to come, and the presence of the disciples in walking in the ways of the kingdom of God are calling those from the kingdom of this world to leave the bitter course of the place of darkness (cf. Matt 4:15–16). Thus, there is an implicit invitation contained in the “salt of the earth” image: as the nations are being discipled (28:19), they share in the “salt life” of the new order inaugurated in Christ. Schnackenburg concludes, “Together with the image of the lamp, it [the salt] is an appeal to the community of disciples to bear witness to the gospel, in the midst of a world still averse to it, by living a life in conformity with Jesus’ instructions.”<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, the flavor of the salt will be to practice the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 5:20). This fits with one of the larger themes in the Sermon on the Mount: the kingdom that Christ is inaugurating stands in continuity with “the Law and the Prophets”—as Jesus

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remarkably reticent about martyrdom as an expression of saltiness, as it is hard to imagine how the death of followers of Jesus would somehow contribute to the “common good.”

<sup>30</sup> Don Garlington, “‘The Salt of the Earth’ in Covenantal Perspective,” *JETS* 54.4 (2011): 730–31.

<sup>31</sup> W. S. Wood, “The Salt of the Earth” *JTS* 25 (1924): 170.

<sup>32</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, trans. Robert Barr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 2002), 51.

comes not to abolish but to fulfill them (5:17); at the same time, this kingdom supersedes the prior expression of God’s reign as revealed at Sinai (cf. 5:38–42).<sup>33</sup>

The warning of Jesus concerning the salt may be the most significant clue concerning the purpose of this image. There is a double entendre in μωρανθῆ: it is both “losing flavor” and “becoming foolish.”<sup>34</sup> Paul writes, “claiming to be wise, they became fools [ἐμωράνθησαν].” Robert Gundry, in a thorough study of “fools” and “foolish” in Matthew, concludes that “fool(ish)” always is associated with those who are outside of the kingdom of heaven.<sup>35</sup> It is possible for those who are called to be salt to lose flavor in severing themselves from Christ and the wisdom revealed in Him (cf. Gal 5:4; 2 John 8). Here the Lord appears to be hinting at the failure of Israel to maintain fidelity to the covenant. The order of the Beatitudes and the warning given in Matt 5:13 reflects the prayer of restoration of the Psalmist: “Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints; but let them not turn back to folly” (Ps 85:8).<sup>36</sup>

“If the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet” (Matt 5:13b). This serves to alert the disciples (the new Israel) to vigilance, and also as a harbinger of what will become of the old Israel that rejects Christ and his kingdom. John had earlier announced: “even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees” (3:10).<sup>37</sup> Jesus prophesies concerning the unbelieving Jerusalem and her inhabitants, who have definitively rejected his word: “They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be *trampled underfoot* by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Luke 21:24).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> David VanDrunen observes, “Thus, as the kingdom of heaven is something strikingly new, so the Sermon on the Mount, the ethic of this kingdom, proclaims a way of life that is eschatologically new. It is different from the way of life under Moses, though in a manner that accomplishes rather than thwarts God’s larger purposes in giving the law and the prophets.” From “Bearing Sword in the State, Turning Cheek in the Church: A Reformed Two-Kingdoms Interpretation of Matthew 5:38–42,” *Themelios* 34.3 (2009): 326.

<sup>34</sup> “‘Tasteless’ perhaps goes some way toward catching what may have been a more obvious double entendre in Hebrew and Aramaic, where the verb תפל can mean both to be tasteless and foolish.” France, *Matthew*, 175.

<sup>35</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 84. See also Psalm 107:17: “Some were fools through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities suffered affliction.”

<sup>36</sup> Foolishness and idolatry are regularly associated together in the Old Testament. “Every man is stupid (LXX: ἐμωράνθη) and without knowledge; every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols, for his images are false, and there is no breath in them” (Jeremiah 10:14).

<sup>37</sup> Similarly, N. T. Wright comments on Matt 5:14–15, “Israel, called to be a lighthouse for the world, has surrounded herself with mirrors to keep the light in, heightening her own sense of purity and exclusiveness while insisting that the nations must remain in darkness. But with Jesus’ work the way is open, for any Jews who will dare, to find out what being the true Israel is all about. By following him, by putting his agenda into practice, they can at last *be* true Israel.” N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 2 (London: SPCK, 1996), 289.

<sup>38</sup> Of the Gospel of Matthew, David VanDrunen writes, “One of its key themes is that Jesus’s coming results in judgment against the old people of God, as represented by their religious leaders and the city of Jerusalem, who reject Jesus. This old community has the ‘kingdom of God’ taken from it (Matt 21:33–36) stands under the curse of six ‘woes,’ (23:13–26) will see its house left ‘desolate,’ (23:37–39) and will face an unprecedented judgment (24:15–25).” “Jesus ‘Came Not to Abolish the Law but to Fulfill It’: The Sermon on the Mount and Its Implications for Contemporary Law,” *Pepperdine Law Review* 47 (2020): 543–44.

Later in Matthew, Jesus teaches in parables and likens the kingdom of heaven to a “king who gave a wedding feast for his son and sent his servant to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come” (22:2–3). Some are foolish (οἱ ἄφρονες οἱ οὐκ ἔχοντες ἑτοιμασμένον) in failing to be ready to meet the bridegroom (25:2). Those who fail to share in the joy of the messianic coming are culpably foolish. But though the original parties reject the invitation, the wedding feast will still be held: “The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you can find. And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests” (Matt 22:8–10). The salt which stands for the flavor and fullness of the kingdom of God will be tasted by many who are far off (cf. Rom 15:20–21; Eph 2:17).<sup>39</sup>

### 5. Temple Background

The Lord’s setting apart his followers and marking them as “the salt of the earth” cannot be rightly understood without taking into account the larger revelatory backdrop, both in terms of what precedes and what follows this statement in Matthew 5.

The Sermon on the Mount has motifs of a new temple theology. Jesus in Matthew 4 demonstrates himself to be the New Israel of God, having passed the wilderness probation period for 40 days (vv. 1–11), and leading a New Exodus complete with signs and wonders and chosen followers (vv. 12–25). The journey of the King from wilderness and the Sea (Matt 4:18) culminates in his coming to rest on a mountaintop, recapitulating Israel’s history which ended on the mount of glory and revelation in Jerusalem (cf. Exod 15:17; Ps 68:16). The Sermon on the Mount can rightly be read then as “The Sermon on the New Temple Mount,” with Jesus the King sitting on his throne and commanding his subjects “to observe all I have commanded you” (Matt 28:20).<sup>40</sup> In connection with “the light of the world” and “a city set on a hill” statement in Matthew 5:14, Jesus is clearly defining his disciples as part of a new temple community. Nicholas Perrin comments, “Those who are faithful to the messiah Jesus, precisely by virtue of the qualities just outlined in the Beatitudes, will likewise shine forth as the true Jerusalem and the true temple.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Richard Hays writes, “In view of this evidence, what can we say by way of summary about Matthew’s use of Scripture to situate the church in relation to the surrounding world? The most salient finding is that Matthew presents the pagan world as a *mission field* for the disciples of Jesus.” *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 185.

<sup>40</sup> “Since he is presenting Jesus as the ‘prophet like Moses,’ his book reaches its natural climax with Jesus on a mountaintop, at the fringe of the Gentile world, commissioning his disciples like so many Joshuas. But in that commissioning it is made clear that Jesus, unlike Moses, will not have to let go of the reins of authority as he departs to *his* hidden place of rest.” Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 20.

<sup>41</sup> Perrin, *Jesus as Priest* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 115. Again, there is an implicit contrast between the temple as constituted by Jesus and the temple built in Jerusalem, whose builders reject the messianic stone (cf. Matt 21:33–44). At the conclusion of the Sermon, Jesus teaches: “everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock” (Matt 7:24). N. T. Wright suggests, “The house built on the rock, in first-century Jewish terms, is a clear allusion to the Temple. Unless Israel follows the way that Jesus is leading, the greatest national institution of all is in mortal danger.” Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 292.



How does Jesus’s declaration, “you are the salt of the earth,” fit within the new temple reality? The background in the “covenant of salt” (cf. Lev 2:13; Num 18:19) appears operative here, as Don Garlington argues: “the most appropriate category here is that of salt added to the sacrifices as a token of table fellowship.”<sup>42</sup> Just as the light was always to be kept burning within the house of God, for God is light: so the salt was to be added to the grain offerings as a sign of communion with the Lord. For friendship with the Lord is at the heart of the revealed worship of the tabernacle/temple. Morales writes, “Yet, once more, atonement is a *means* to an end, a means to Israel’s fellowship and communion with YHWH God.”<sup>43</sup> The association of the disciples with the salt of the covenant also points to their role as a new priesthood, fulfilling the command given to the house of Aaron in Numbers 18:19: “All the holy contributions that the people of Israel present to the Lord I give to you, and to your sons and daughters with you, as a perpetual due. It is a covenant of salt forever before the Lord for you and for your offspring with you.”<sup>44</sup>

It is worth noting that in a parallel passage in Mark, Jesus teaches, “Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another” (Mark 9:50). In this verse, the salt is a communal and corporate agent of vitality and flavor.<sup>45</sup> Salt is an emblem of *shalom*; to partake in salt with another is similar to what we refer to as “breaking bread together.” It is not expected that mortal enemies would sit at table together. Those around a table together can be seen partaking in the act of friendship, as in Psalm 41:9: “Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread...” Fleddermann observes of Mark 9,

To share salt with someone is to share fellowship with him, to be in covenant with him. The discourse began with two situations of conflict and strife, the self-seeking arguing of the disciples about rank and the conflict with the strange exorcists. It went on to discuss the problem of scandal in the community. To all this Mark opposes the peace of covenant fellowship.<sup>46</sup>

The connection between Mark’s salt of reconciliation and living at peace with one another is echoed in Jesus’s teaching in Matthew 5:23–24: “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” In other words, the salt of being restored to one another is a prerequisite for the salt that is presented as part of the offering to the Lord. Obedience is better than sacrifice (cf. 9:13).

G. K. Beale argues that the new covenant church fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 66:20–21: “And they shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the Lord...and some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the Lord.” He writes,

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<sup>42</sup> Garlington, “‘The Salt of the Earth’ in Covenantal Perspective,” 741.

<sup>43</sup> L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus*, NSBT 37 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 125.

<sup>44</sup> “But those who do ‘lose saltiness’ (vs 13), he goes on to admonish, do so at the cost of their ongoing participation in the priestly covenant.” Perrin, *Jesus as Priest*, 119.

<sup>45</sup> This is against the backdrop of the judgment-image of “everyone will be salted with fire” (Mark 9:49). There is salt-as-curse in v. 49 and then salt-as-blessing in v. 50.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Garlington, “‘The Salt of the Earth’ in Covenantal Perspective,” 741.

In summary, all Christians are now spiritual Levitical priests (in fulfilment of Is. 66:21). Our ongoing task is to serve God in his temple in which we always dwell and of which we are a part. Our continual priestly tasks are what the first Adam's were to be: to keep the order and peace of the spiritual sanctuary by learning and teaching God's word, by praying always, and by being vigilant in keeping out unclean moral and spiritual things. We also continually offer sacrifices in order to keep the order of the spiritual temple's liturgy.<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, the subsequent teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus requires a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20), enjoins sacrificial giving (6:2–4), defines prayer that honors the Father (6:5–15), and describes the proper means of fasting (6:16–18)—these are all characteristics of a priestly people. Such activity corresponds to the Isaianic promise: “From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the Lord” (Isa 66:23).

As the disciples (soon to be apostles) form the foundation of the church, the words of Jesus by extension define the identity of the church which is built upon this apostolic foundation.<sup>48</sup> In Matthew's gospel, the church is uniquely set apart by Christ to steward the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 16:19); the church inherits the dominical promise and command: “whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (18:18). The redemptive presence of Christ is promised to those gathered in his name and teaching and observing his commandments (18:20, 28:20). The true “salt-life” is thus found in the “holy catholic church” and the “communion of saints.”

## 6. Conclusion: “Stay Salty, My Friends”

If indeed “the salt of the earth” metaphor is to be taken as the call for the church's continued testimony to and participation in the flavor of the kingdom of heaven, we should be wary of appropriating this verse as endorsing the idea that the church *qua* church exists to promote general human flourishing. Cultural influence and societal impact cannot be used as a barometer of the ‘saltiness’ enjoined in Matthew 5:13.<sup>49</sup> Inasmuch as the church is faithful in “making disciples of all nations: baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded

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<sup>47</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, NSBT 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 398.

<sup>48</sup> Commenting on Matthew 5:13–14, Perrin states: “The Greek emphasizes the ascription of an exclusive corporate identity, for in both sentences of Matt 5:13–14, the emphatic second-person plural pronoun occupies first position. Jesus' comments regarding ‘a city built on a hill’ (v. 14b) follow in train. In other words, Matthew's Jesus is essentially saying, ‘*You* are the salt of the earth; *you* are the light of the world; *you* are a city on a hill— *you* as opposed to some other group who might stake this same claim for themselves.” Perrin, *Jesus as Priest*, 114.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Gundry asks, “So I ask, are we overdosing on the this-worldly ethical, social, and psychological benefits of the gospel? Is it time for some Johannine counter-balancing that puts emphasis on other-worldliness, on the final fate of human beings, and on the authoritative Word from above more than on the merely suggestive words of human counsel that most ministers preach these days?” *Jesus the Word according to John the Sectarian: A Paleofundamentalist Manifesto for Contemporary Evangelicalism, especially Its Elites, in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 91.

you” (28:19–20), the unparalleled flavor of the kingdom of God, with the Savior-King himself, will be present to the end of the age.

# Seeing Is Not Believing: Apocalyptic Epistemology and Faith in the Son of God in Mark's Gospel

— Hallur Mortensen —

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**Abstract:** Following recent discussions on the nature of apocalyptic, this article argues that apocalyptic primarily has to do with revelation of hidden things. This means that at the core of apocalyptic is epistemology, and it is thus argued that the Gospel of Mark is apocalyptic essentially in its epistemology rather than eschatology. Mark's parable theory, and hence the responses to Jesus, is examined in this light. The question as to why some respond in faith in Jesus as the Son of God, while others respond with fear, hardness of heart, and unbelief is answered by Mark's apocalyptic epistemology: Jesus's divine sonship must be revealed in order to be believed.

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The question of Jesus's identity is central to the Gospel of Mark and the author has structured his Gospel along the three statements of Jesus's divine sonship at the baptism (1:11), the transfiguration (9:7), and the crucifixion (15:39).<sup>1</sup> While this has often been noted, how this is connected with the widely acknowledged inability of Jesus's disciples—as well as others—to understand and believe in who Jesus is, is nonetheless frequently left unaddressed.<sup>2</sup> To frame the question differently: why do some people quickly demonstrate faith, while others—even after repeated encounters—fail to believe and recognize Jesus's divine sonship? The answer, I will argue, lies in the apocalyptic epistemology of Mark's Gospel, the hermeneutical significance of which has been under-appreciated.

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<sup>1</sup> Hallur Mortensen, *The Baptismal Episode as Trinitarian Narrative: Proto-Trinitarian Structures in Mark's Conception of God*, WUNT 2/535 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 139, 147; Richard Bauckham, 'God's Self-Identification with the Godforsaken in the Gospel of Mark', in *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 263–64. Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 390–91.

<sup>2</sup> Suzanne Watts Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, SNTSMS 135 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 205–9; Frank J. Matera, 'The Incomprehension of the Disciples and Peter's Confession (Mark 6,14–8,30)', *Bib* 70 (1989): 153–72; Camille Focant, 'L'Incompréhension des disciples dans le deuxième évangile', *RB* 82 (1975): 161–85.

## 1. Mark's Apocalyptic Epistemology

To describe the Gospel of Mark as apocalyptic is not uncommon. For instance, Perrin and Duling state concerning Mark: 'in many respects this gospel is an apocalypse' or an 'apocalyptic drama'.<sup>3</sup> In N. T. Wright's view, 'Mark's whole telling of the story of Jesus is designed to function as an apocalypse',<sup>4</sup> while Crispin Fletcher-Louis calls it 'thoroughly apocalyptic'.<sup>5</sup> However, while each of these uses the label 'apocalyptic' what they mean exactly is not necessarily identical. While Mark 13 is often considered the apocalyptic section of Mark *par excellence*,<sup>6</sup> it will instead be argued that Mark's Gospel is apocalyptic particularly in its *epistemology* rather than in its eschatology.

Before proceeding it is necessary to briefly delineate what is meant by 'apocalyptic' and especially 'apocalyptic epistemology'. There is much that could and has been said about apocalyptic, apocalyptic eschatology, apocalyptic worldview, and apocalypticism, and only a fraction can even be mentioned here. There was such a variety in the usage of the word 'apocalyptic' by 1970 that Klaus Koch could write a book with the title *Ratlos vor der Apokalypitik*.<sup>7</sup> After this, significant definitional work was done by, among others, Paul D. Hanson,<sup>8</sup> the SBL Apocalypse Genre Project<sup>9</sup> and the Uppsala colloquium.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, it became common to distinguish between (1) apocalypse as a genre, (2) apocalyptic eschatology and (3) apocalypticism as the social setting where the apocalypses originated.<sup>11</sup>

While the genre 'apocalyptic' may be established, though fuzzy on the edges, it is more precarious to speak of apocalyptic elements outside of the apocalypses proper—such as 'apocalyptic worldview' or 'apocalyptic eschatology'. Christopher Rowland showed that it is problematic to deem 'apocalyptic

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<sup>3</sup> Norman Perrin and Dennis C. Duling, *The New Testament: An Introduction, Proclamation and Parenthesis, Myth and History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 233, 237–39. For Perrin, this is because there is an imminent climax of history on the horizon.

<sup>4</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 1 (London: SPCK, 1992), 395.

<sup>5</sup> Crispin Fletcher-Louis, 'Jesus and Apocalypticism', in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, ed. Tom Holmén and Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 2882; Cf. Christopher Rowland and Christopher R. A. Morray-Jones, *The Mystery of God: Early Jewish Mysticism and the New Testament*, CRINT (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 99; Adela Yarbro Collins, 'Apocalypses and Apocalypticism: Early Christian', in *ABD* 1:289; Burton L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 325–31; Howard C. Kee, *Community of the New Age* (London: SCM, 1977), 64–76; Elizabeth E. Shively, *Apocalyptic Imagination in the Gospel of Mark: The Literary and Theological Role of Mark 3:22–30*, BZNW 189 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 5, 21; N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 3 (London: SPCK, 2003), 620; Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 390–96; On the contrary, Mark is 'deeply anti-apocalyptic' according to Siegfried Schulz, 'Mark's Significance for the Theology of Early Christianity', in *The Interpretation of Mark*, ed. William R. Telford (London: SPCK, 1985), 166.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin W. Bacon, 'The Apocalyptic Chapter in the Synoptic Gospels', *JB* 28 (1909).

<sup>7</sup> Klaus Koch, *Ratlos vor der Apokalypitik* (Gütesloh: Mohn, 1970). Although the English edition is rendered *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic*, more literally 'ratlos' means 'helpless' or 'perplexed'.

<sup>8</sup> Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

<sup>9</sup> See John J. Collins, 'Toward the Morphology of a Genre: Introduction', *Semeia* 14 (1979): 1–20.

<sup>10</sup> David Hellholm, ed. *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism*, Uppsala, August 12–17, 1979, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> Paul D. Hanson, 'Apocalypses and Apocalypticism: The Genre', *ABD* 1:282.

eschatology' as core to apocalyptic as in the SBL 'apocalypse' Genre Project, and he argued that such eschatology is neither unique to the apocalypses nor consistently present.<sup>12</sup>

Rather, foundational to the meaning of apocalyptic is the notion that the apocalyptic seer is revealed things hitherto unknown and unknowable by regular human sensory perception and reason.<sup>13</sup> As Rowland writes, 'Apocalyptic seems essentially to be about the revelation of the divine mysteries through visions or some other form of immediate disclosure of heavenly truths'.<sup>14</sup> In apocalyptic, the revelation of divine mysteries is a constant, but the content and the modes revelation are varied.<sup>15</sup>

This view of apocalyptic accords with the usage of the word in Revelation 1:1 as well as other NT texts (1 Cor 14:26; 2 Cor 2:10; 12:1; Gal 1:12, 16; 2:2).<sup>16</sup> In Revelation 1:1, the Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ is used as a title and content description of the book and refers to the revelation from God given to Jesus to show his servants and which then comprises most of the remainder of the book.<sup>17</sup> This also seems to be the usage in the title and postscript in the oldest manuscript of the *Protevangelium Jacobi* (Bodmer Papyri V, 3rd or 4th century) which reads ΓΕΝΕCIC ΜΑΡΙΑC ΑΠΟΚΑΛΥΨΙC ΙΑΚΩΒ.<sup>18</sup> Here 'Birth of Mary, Revelation of James' is used as a title instead of the usual *History of James*. Although this proto-Gospel has nothing to do with eschatological violence, it is still called an ἀποκάλυψις. On the contrary, there is a consistent theme of angelic revelation: to Anna (4:1), to the high priest (8:2–3), to Joseph (9:1; 14:2), to Mary (11:1–3), to the Hebrew midwife (19:2), to the three wise men (21:4) and to Symeon (24:4). Furthermore, the angelic revelations are called 'mysteries' in 12:3 and Joseph has a vision in which he glimpses the vault of heaven and the earth from afar and sees everything in the state of motionlessness (18:2). This indicates that in the earliest Christian centuries ἀποκάλυψις referred in essence to a mode of knowing divine mysteries, rather than the specific content of the revelations given, let alone the eschatological catastrophic end of the world.

The essence of apocalyptic is the revelation of divine mysteries. Rowland explains, 'Truths which are beyond man's capacity to deduce from his circumstances are revealed directly by means of the manifestation of the divine counsels'.<sup>19</sup> This being the case, what then are these 'divine secrets'? According to Rowland, the content can fall into the four categories prohibited in Mishnah Hagigah 2:1: 'Whoever reflects upon four things would have been better off had he not been born: what is above, what is below,

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1982), 23–37.

<sup>13</sup> Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, 75; Cf. Mortensen, *The Baptismal Episode*, 115–19.

<sup>14</sup> Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, 70; Cf. Gunther Bornkamm, 'μυστήριον in the New Testament', *TDNT* 4:815: 'The disclosure of divine secrets is the true theme of later Jewish apocalyptic'.

<sup>15</sup> Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, 71. See also C. K. Barrett, 'New Testament Eschatology', *SJT* 6 (1953): 138.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Crispin Fletcher-Louis, 'Jewish Apocalyptic and Apocalypticism', in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, ed. Tom Holmén and Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 1588.

<sup>17</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 183; David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, WBC 52A (Dallas: Word, 1997), 12; Craig R. Koester, *Revelation*, AB 38A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 222; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, revised ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 40; Wilfrid J. Harrington, *Revelation*, SP (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008), 43.

<sup>18</sup> See image at <https://bodmerlab.unige.ch/fr/constellations/papyri/mirador/1072205366?page=006>.

<sup>19</sup> Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, 17; Cf. Rowland and Morray-Jones, *The Mystery of God*, 5, 108; Ithamar Gruenewald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 44–45, 52.

what is before, and what is beyond. And whoever has no concern for the glory of his Maker would have been better off had he not been born.<sup>20</sup> Rowland argues that the mysteries that are *above* include the heavenly world of God and his angels, the exalted figures such as the Son of Man and Melchizedek, as well as astronomy. The mysteries *below* concern especially the position of man. The *past* mysteries cover the history of Israel, the history of the world, and protology. Finally, the eschatological events, the end of the present age, and the coming of the messiah constitute the *future* mysteries.<sup>21</sup> A similar conclusion was also reached by Martin Hengel, who argued, ‘The epistemological basis of apocalyptic is the notion of the “revelation” of special divine “wisdom” about the mysteries of history, the cosmos, the heavenly world and the fate of the individual at the eschaton, hidden from human reason.’<sup>22</sup> Apocalyptic is thus concerned with both the *horizontal* and the *vertical* dimension of reality, with the past and the future, especially as it impinges on the present.<sup>23</sup> The conclusion is, therefore, that the essence of apocalyptic is the revelation of secret mysteries, which means that apocalyptic is epistemological at its core.

If then the core of apocalyptic is the revelation of things hitherto kept secret, this has ramifications for calling elements of non-apocalyptic texts *apocalyptic*. For instance, Benjamin E. Reynolds argues that the eschatological definition of apocalyptic has precluded the identification of the apocalyptic flavour of the Gospel of John.<sup>24</sup> While Rudolf Bultmann argued that ‘revelation’ is foundational to the Gospel of John—though arguing for a Mandaean origin<sup>25</sup>—Reynolds rather argues that this has a ‘close affinity’ to the Jewish apocalypses.<sup>26</sup> Though not an apocalypse, he calls John an ‘apocalyptic’ gospel,<sup>27</sup> being a ‘Gospel in genre but apocalyptic in mode.’<sup>28</sup>

The Gospel of Mark is also ‘apocalyptic,’ not so much as pertains its eschatology but rather its epistemology. But what is the content of this revelation? As argued elsewhere in more detail, the Gospel of Mark reveals the elusive identity of Jesus’s divine sonship, both to the human characters in the narrative and to the reader; with the baptism episode, the transfiguration, and the Centurion’s

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<sup>20</sup> Translation by Jacob Neusner, cited in Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, 75.

<sup>21</sup> Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, 75–189; Cf. Michael E. Stone, ‘Lists of Revealed Things in the Apocalyptic Literature,’ in *Magnalia Dei, the Mighty Acts of God: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright*, ed. Frank Moore Cross (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 414, 418; Rowland and Morray-Jones, *The Mystery of God*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 1:250. Cf. Joel Marcus, ‘Mark 4:10–12 and Marcan Epistemology,’ *JBL* 103 (1984): 558 n. 4; Lorenzo DiTomasso, ‘Apocalypses and Apocalypticism in Antiquity (Part 2),’ *CurBR* 5 (2007): 408, emphasis original; J. P. Davies, *Paul among the Apocalypses? An Evaluation of the ‘Apocalyptic Paul’ in the Context of Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic Literature*, LNTS 562 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 39.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, 2; Barrett, ‘New Testament Eschatology,’ 138–39; Fletcher-Louis, ‘Jewish Apocalyptic and Apocalypticism,’ 1577; John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 6, 23; Rowland and Morray-Jones, *The Mystery of God*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin E. Reynolds, *John among the Apocalypses: Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition and the ‘Apocalyptic’ Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 30–31.

<sup>25</sup> Reynolds, *John among the Apocalypses*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Reynolds, *John among the Apocalypses*, 14–15, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Reynolds, *John among the Apocalypses*, 120–29, 137–42.

<sup>28</sup> Reynolds, *John among the Apocalypses*, 20.

confession as key apocalyptic moments.<sup>29</sup> In Mark, Jesus is both the revealer and the one revealed; both proclaimer and the one proclaimed.<sup>30</sup> As shall be seen, there are many witnesses who see Jesus's extraordinary deeds, yet did not perceive. Without using the category of apocalyptic Martin Dibelius hence called Mark '*a book of secret epiphanies*'.<sup>31</sup> The hidden identity of Jesus is revealed in such a way as not to be perceived.<sup>32</sup> As J. P. Davies writes, 'Mark's apocalyptic epistemology underlines the importance of revelation and the insufficiency of human cognition alone.'<sup>33</sup> The recognition, or lack thereof, of Jesus's true identity demonstrates the apocalyptic epistemology of this Gospel.<sup>34</sup>

## 2. A Key to the Parables (Mark 4:11–12)

In the first extended teaching block in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus himself gives the epistemological key for understanding his parables, and by implication the rest of his teaching. This whole section includes the Parable of the Sower (4:3–9), its explanation (4:14–20), the Parable Theory (4:11–12), and the Parable of the Lamp (4:21–25). This early collection of parables, sayings, and explanation, provides the key for understanding the epistemology of Mark's Gospel, and elucidates why some understand and believe, while others simply look without seeing.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Mortensen, *The Baptismal Episode*, 147, 139; See also Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 393–96. Michael F. Bird, 'Tearing the Heavens and Shaking the Heavens: Mark's Cosmology in its Apocalyptic Context', in *Cosmology and New Testament Theology*, ed. Jonathan T. Pennington and Sean M. McDonough, LNTS 355 (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 53; Grant Macaskill, 'Apocalypse of the Gospel of Mark', in *The Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition and the Shaping of New Testament Thought*, ed. Benjamin E. Reynolds and Loren T. Stuckenbruck (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 77; Fletcher-Louis, 'Jesus and Apocalypticism', 2882; Marcus, 'Mark 4:10–12', 563.

<sup>30</sup> At the baptism, Jesus both received a vision and is the content of the vision. Mortensen, *The Baptismal Episode*, 178; Macaskill, 'Apocalypse of the Gospel of Mark', 76; also Leslie A. Baynes, 'Jesus the Revealer and the Revealed', in *The Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition and the Shaping of New Testament Thought*, ed. Benjamin E. Reynolds and Loren T. Stuckenbruck (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 15–16, 30. Bultmann wrote in a different context: 'He who had formerly been the *bearer* of the message was drawn into it and became its essential *content*. The *proclaimer became the proclaimed*.' Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1952), 1:33, emphasis original.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (Cambridge: James Clark, 1971), 230, emphasis original; See also Richard J. Dillon, 'Mark 1:1–15: A 'New Evangelization'?', *CBQ* 76 (2014): 18; Lamar Williamson Jr., *Mark, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983), 35; Ludger Schenke, *Das Markusevangelium* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1988), 109. I argue elsewhere that the whole baptismal episode is also an 'epiphany' (for the reader) and a 'hidden epiphany' (for the story's characters) in Mortensen, *The Baptismal Episode*, 123–24, 146.

<sup>32</sup> See also Williamson, *Mark*, 35; Schenke, *Das Markusevangelium*, 109.

<sup>33</sup> J. P. Davies, 'Apocalyptic and the History of God: Possibilities from Mark's Epistemological *Inclusio*', in *One God, One People, One Future: Essays in Honour of N. T. Wright*, ed. John Anthony Dunne and Eric Lewellen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 521–22.

<sup>34</sup> J. P. Davies, 'Apocalyptic Topography in Mark's Gospel: Theophany and Divine Invisibility at Sinai', *JTI* 14 (2020): 147.

<sup>35</sup> Birger Gerhardsson rightly stresses that the parable of the sower is hermeneutically fundamental in 'The Parable of the Sower and its Interpretation', *NTS* 14 (1968): 165. Marcus, 'Mark 4:10–12', 557; Thomas E. Boomer-shine, 'Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages in Paul, Jesus, and Mark: Rhetoric and Dialectic in Apocalyptic and the New Testament', in *Apocalyptic and the New Testament: Essays in Honor of J. Louis Martyn*, eds. Joel Marcus and Marion L. Soards, reprint ed., LNTS 24 (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 158–59.



Of special importance are verses 11–12, which introduce the so-called parable theory, and many suggested solutions to the perceived difficulties of these verses have been offered. For example, scholars have argued that ἵνα in verse 12 is a mistranslation of the Aramaic *de*,<sup>36</sup> that ἵνα introduces a citation,<sup>37</sup> that the emphasis is on ‘result’ rather than ‘purpose’,<sup>38</sup> or that the Greek has obscured the original Aramaic which meant that for outsiders ‘everything is obscure’ rather than ‘everything is in parables’,<sup>39</sup> or finally that Jesus is here simply being sarcastic.<sup>40</sup> Notwithstanding these difficulties, Mark 4:11–12 states that there will be many who will hear Jesus’s parables, but still fail to understand. The reason being that they have not been given the secret of the Kingdom of God. Thus 4:11–12 evidently distinguishes between two groups of people, those to whom the mystery has been given (τὸ μυστήριον δέδοται τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ) and those from whom the divine mystery of ‘perceiving’ has been withheld. The latter are further characterised as ‘those outside’ (ἐκείνοις δὲ τοῖς ἔξω). Mark 4:12 alludes to Isaiah 6:9–10;<sup>41</sup> although in abbreviated form, and as Andrew Johnson rightly notes, the Isaiah 6:9–10 passage and thus Mark 4:11–12 on its own is epistemologically pessimistic.<sup>42</sup> This passage illustrates the operating epistemology: that rightful knowing is given by God, and if no insight is given one will look without seeing, and listen without understanding. This is also indicated by the passive construction of δέδοται (‘given’) in 4:11<sup>43</sup> and by the negative counterpart given in 6:52: ἀλλ’ ἦν αὐτῶν ἡ καρδιά πεπωρωμένη (‘but their hearts were hardened’). Thus, according to this saying, one cannot simply decide to hear, since revealing and concealing are the activities of God.<sup>44</sup> In Mark’s apocalyptic epistemology, the perception of the gospel, the coming of the kingdom of God, and the true identity of Jesus all depend on divine revelation. As Joel Marcus states, ‘to recognize vital truth, an act of God is necessary.’<sup>45</sup>

The difference between seeing and perceiving is the faith of the beholder. Thomas R. Hatina rightly points out that in 4:11–12, βλέπω (‘see’) and ἀκούω (‘hear’) are contrasted with ὁράω (‘perceive’)

<sup>36</sup> E.g., T. W. Manson, cited in Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, AB 27 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 299.

<sup>37</sup> E.g., Bruce Chilton mentioned by Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 299. See also discussion in R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 199.

<sup>38</sup> As argued by Peisker, cited in Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 299.

<sup>39</sup> Joachim Jeremias, cited in Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St Mark*, BNTC (London: Black, 1991), 128.

<sup>40</sup> Noted in Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 167.

<sup>41</sup> E.g., Aage Pilgaard, *Kommentar til Markusevangeliet* (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2008), 144; France, *Mark*, 199–201; Hooker, *Mark*, 127.

<sup>42</sup> While the allusion to Isaiah 6:9–10 in Mark 4:12 is typically discussed, the allusion to Deuteronomy 29 is less frequently noted. Andrew M. Johnson has pointed out that the only two texts in the Old Testament that have this connection between heart, ears, and eyes are Isaiah 6:9–10 and Deuteronomy 29:4 (MT 29:3). The ‘unique coupling’ of κρυπτός and φανερός only appears together once in the entire Old Testament (Deut 29:29 [MT 29:28]); and in New Testament they only appear in Mark 4:22 (and its parallel, Luke 8:17). The two texts also make use of the phrase ‘ears to hear’ (ὦτα ἀκούειν). It is noteworthy that when Paul uses the same motif in Romans 11:8 he clearly alludes to Deuteronomy 29:4. Andrew M. Johnson, ‘Error and Epistemological Process in the Pentateuch and Mark’s Gospel: A Biblical Theology of Knowing from Foundational Texts’ (PhD thesis, University of St. Andrews, 2011), 138–47.

<sup>43</sup> Hooker, *Mark*, 128. Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 298; Macaskill, ‘Apocalypse of the Gospel of Mark’, 65.

<sup>44</sup> Marcus, ‘Mark 4:10–12’, 562, 566; See also Bornkamm, ‘μυστήριον in the New Testament’, *TDNT* 4:818.

<sup>45</sup> Marcus, ‘Mark 4:10–12’, 559.

and συνίημι ('understand'). Συνίημι is used only five times (4:12; 6:52; 8:17, 21; 7:14) and is a 'more profound or deeper understanding of a given event or saying'<sup>46</sup> while 'όράω refers to a higher level of comprehension which is commensurate with faith.'<sup>47</sup> Thus William Lane was on the mark when he stated that here 'Jesus called attention to the contemporary situation of belief and unbelief, of revelation and veiledness.'<sup>48</sup> How this relates to faith in Jesus will be examined below.

### 3. *The Hidden Lamp (Mark 4:21–22)*

If understood in isolation, Mark 4:11–12 should be understood pessimistically and as referring to two irrevocable or predestined groups. However, these two groups are not necessarily hard and fast, and even the disciples are perilously close to be among those 'outside' (8:17, 21);<sup>49</sup> who are by definition seeing without perceiving.<sup>50</sup> In this first extended teaching block of this Gospel, 4:11–12 is closely connected to 4:21–22, which follows immediately after the explanation of the Sower parable.<sup>51</sup> That this is a parable of the epistemology of the kingdom becomes clear by the similarities of the strangeness of speaking in order that the listeners will not understand and of hiding something in order for it to be revealed.<sup>52</sup> These two texts need to be taken together, so that the pessimism of 4:11–12 is not allowed to stand alone, but is modified by the logic of 4:21–22; that the light will not be hidden indefinitely.<sup>53</sup>

These verses begin with μήτι ἔρχεται ὁ λύχνος ἵνα... 'Does the lamp come in order to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light.' This apparently odd expression ἔρχεται ὁ λύχνος is often masked by the rendering *Is the lamp brought...*<sup>54</sup> However, in this context this saying is about the hermeneutics of knowing; in other words *epistemology*. But how shall this lamp that is coming be identified? It could be the secret of the kingdom of God as argued by R. T. France and Ernst Lohmeyer,<sup>55</sup> or as Camille Focant argues, the lamp could be an allusion to the 'word' which is sown in the previous parable; and thus possibly an allusion to the 'word' being a 'lamp' in the Old Testament

<sup>46</sup> Thomas R. Hatina, *In Search of a Context: The Function of Scripture in Mark's Narrative*, JSNTSup 232 (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 221.

<sup>47</sup> Hatina, *In Search of a Context*, 221.

<sup>48</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 159; cf. Boomershine, 'Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages', 158–59.

<sup>49</sup> C. F. D. Moule, 'Mark 4.1–20 Yet Once More', in *Neotestamentica et Semitica: Studies in Honour of Principal Matthew Black*, ed. Earle E. Ellis and Max Wilcox (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1969), 99.

<sup>50</sup> Moule, 'Mark 4.1–20', 100.

<sup>51</sup> Various structures of Mark 4:1–34 have been proposed, but Camille Focant—relying on Joanna Dewey, B. Standaert, and Jan Lambrecht—shows that vv. 21–25 stand at the structural centre of this whole discourse. Camille Focant, *L'évangile selon Marc*, Commentaire biblique Nouveau Testament 2 (Paris: Cerf, 2010), 156.

<sup>52</sup> Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 318.

<sup>53</sup> See e.g., France, *Mark*, 208–9; Mary Healy, *Mark: Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 89.

<sup>54</sup> E.g., ESV, NRSV, NASB95, NET, CSB, NIV, NASB20; Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 100–101.

<sup>55</sup> France, *Mark*, 208; Ernst Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Markus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957), 85. Cf. Lars Hartman, *Markusevangeliet 1:1–8:26*, KNT 2A (Stockholm: ESE, 2004), 156.

(e.g., Ps 119).<sup>56</sup> In Mark, however, it is always Jesus himself who is the subject of the lemmata φανερόν and φανερώω. When the unclean spirits declare openly his divine sonship in 3:11–12, Jesus commands them not to make him known (φανερόν), while in 6:14 it refers to Jesus's name having become known.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, as James R. Edwards points out, the 'reference to the lamp *coming* (Gk. *erchetai*) is more suitable of a person than an object'.<sup>58</sup> This suggests that the lamp 4:21–22 is not simply the word *about* Jesus, or even the kingdom, but Jesus himself.<sup>59</sup> Thus, as Edwards adds, 'Jesus is the lamp of God who has come to bring light and revelation'.<sup>60</sup>

Richard Hays thus rightly notes that in this context the parable of the lamp 'is surely to be understood as a figurative discourse about the hermeneutics of hearing and understanding the word'.<sup>61</sup> Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom is for all (1:15) and while his identity is hidden and unperceived, the hiddenness is not intended to be permanent.<sup>62</sup> As argued above, the core of apocalyptic is epistemology, meaning the hiding and revealing of divine mysteries.<sup>63</sup> However, in apocalyptic, the purpose of secrets and mysteries is that they are eventually revealed through a chosen medium, and the revealed content is generally the content of the apocalypses. In Mark 4:21–22, Jesus is the lamp that is hidden, but hidden in order to be revealed in the proper manner and at the right time. As Hays comments, 'the hiddenness somehow belongs to the revelatory purpose, or even promotes the revelation'.<sup>64</sup> While the 'full disclosure will occur only in the age to come',<sup>65</sup> as Marcus points out, the disciples oscillate between understanding and failure, until the final turning point at the crucifixion/resurrection of Jesus.<sup>66</sup> Thus the text itself contains a trajectory from hiddenness to full revelation, and the narrative demands an epistemology which is not entirely pessimistic.

This is also the point of 4:24–25, which begins with the admonition to pay attention to what one hears: Βλέπετε τι ἀκούετε. Why? Because to the one who has, more will be given. But to the one who does not have, also that which he has will be taken from him. The subject of these verses is not material wealth, but rather epistemology. If one receives the revelation, more revelation will be given, however, if one will not receive it, further blindness will ensue, for the rejection of the words of Jesus will mean

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<sup>56</sup> Focant, *L'évangile selon Marc*, 176–78. Cf. Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 318.

<sup>57</sup> In the longer ending of Mark (16:12, 14) it is Jesus who appears (φανερώω) to the disciples.

<sup>58</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 139.

<sup>59</sup> E.g., Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark* (London: SPCK, 1970), 100; Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 100–101. Healy, *Mark*, 89; Lane, *Mark*, 166–67; C. E. B. Cranfield, *Gospel According to Saint Mark*, CGTC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 164–65; Hooker, *Mark*, 133–34.

<sup>60</sup> Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 139.

<sup>61</sup> Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, 100.

<sup>62</sup> David E. Garland, *A Theology of Mark's Gospel*, Biblical Theology of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 356; Hatina, *In Search of a Context*, 229; Joachim Gnllka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus 1: Mk 1–8.26*, EKKNT (Zürich: Benziger Verlag, 1978), 180.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Marcus, 'Mark 4:10–12', 560.

<sup>64</sup> Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, 100.

<sup>65</sup> Marcus, 'Mark 4:10–12', 567.

<sup>66</sup> Marcus, 'Mark 4:10–12', 569–72.

rejection from God.<sup>67</sup> Thus while Marcus correctly states that ‘people will receive insight according to the measure of their attentiveness’,<sup>68</sup> it needs to be added that it is not simply a matter of paying attention, but especially of responding in faith. To this point we now turn.

#### 4. *The Disciples’ Failure*

There some who are ‘outside’ and to whom is not given to see the divine mystery of the coming kingdom of God in Jesus. The resistance of the Pharisees is attributed to their hardness of heart (3:5), for they have both seen and heard with neither perceiving the true identity of Jesus nor responded in faith. Also, when the people of the Gerasenes reject Jesus after his setting free the demoniac, their dismissal is attributed to their *fear* of him (5:15). Furthermore, when the people reject Jesus in Nazareth, Jesus is amazed at their *unbelief* (6:5–6). In this final example, it is *prima facie* unbelief in the ability of Jesus to heal, even after they have seen him performing miracles. However, their unbelief is not restricted to this particular point, for in the wider context of this Gospel, his identity as the Son of God is also in view, for they recognize him only as the ‘son of Mary’ (6:3) and not as the Son of God, which is how God identifies him (1:11; 9:7). Their unbelief in his ability is connected with their lack of perception of Jesus’s divine sonship. The implication is that Jesus’s true identity is not perceivable by sight alone, including miracles, but only by revelation and a faith response.

But in Mark’s Gospel even the disciples themselves are in danger of being included in the category of those who will indeed listen but will not understand, and who will look but not perceive (4:12). Throughout the Gospel, the failure of the disciples is a running theme,<sup>69</sup> and their failure is described as hard heartedness, fear, lack of understanding, lack of perception, and unbelief.<sup>70</sup> As Michael Bird states, ‘The misunderstanding and failure of the disciples are narrative devices in Mark about *epistemology* and discipleship.’<sup>71</sup> Most illuminating is Jesus’s critique of his disciples in 4:40: ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’ They have just witnessed Jesus command the wind and the waves (4:39), but rather than faith, they had fear, which in Mark is frequently contrasted with faith. Likewise, the synagogue leader in 5:36 is admonished to have ‘faith’ not ‘fear’ (μὴ φοβοῦ, μόνον πίστευε).<sup>72</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Hatina, *In Search of a Context*, 229; Larry W. Hurtado, *Mark*, Understanding the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker Books), 76.

<sup>68</sup> Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 320.

<sup>69</sup> For more extensive explorations on this theme see Theodore J. Weeden, *Mark: Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); Ernest Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, JSNTSup 4 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981); Ernest Best, *Disciples and Discipleship: Studies in the Gospel according to Mark* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986); John R. Donahue, *The Theology and Setting of Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1983).

<sup>70</sup> Gregg S. Morrison, *The Turning Point in the Gospel of Mark: A Study in Markan Christology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), 8: ‘When one understands the identity of Jesus properly, the natural response is to follow in discipleship.’

<sup>71</sup> Michael F. Bird, ‘Mark: Interpreter of Peter and Disciple of Paul’, in *Paul and the Gospels: Christologies, Conflicts and Controversies*, ed. Michael F. Bird and Joel Willitts, LNTS 411 (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 34, emphasis mine; cf. David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 56.

<sup>72</sup> In Mark ‘fear’ needs to be qualified, however, for in 5:33 when the woman with haemorrhage touched Jesus’s cloak, fear is associated with faith.

This is not the only epiphany on the sea in Mark's Gospel, for in 6:47–52 the disciples again struggle in the boat, but this time Jesus is not with them. When he comes to them walking on the water, he intends to pass them by; an inter-textual reference that suggests an epiphany.<sup>73</sup> The disciples' lack of perception has up to this point been described as *lack of understanding, fear, and lack of faith*. But in 6:52 they get the same diagnosis as the Pharisees in 3:5: their hearts are hard. The concluding comment that they failed to understand about the loaves (6:52) shows that they have indeed been seeing, but still they have not perceived the truth about Jesus, echoing the epistemological key given in 4:11–12. They have already witnessed much, but their faith did not correspond to what they had witnessed (cf. 4:24–25).

This same epistemological dynamic is found in 8:17–18, 21, where Jesus rather mysteriously warns them of the bread of the Pharisees and of Herod (8:15), and asks his disciples whether they have eyes, yet do not see, and ears and yet do not hear, and have hardened hearts and thus still do not understand. These are the identifying characteristics of those outside (4:11–12). This question is prompted by their discussion of having no bread (8:17), even after Jesus had just previously fed both the 5,000 and the 4,000.<sup>74</sup> They *still* (οὐπω, vv. 17 and 21) do not understand who Jesus is. At the first sea crossing (4:35–41) Jesus also criticizes the disciples for *still having no faith* (v. 40: οὐπω ἔχετε πίστιν). Although it has been argued that they should have had faith to command the wind themselves,<sup>75</sup> or should be less concerned about what to eat, it seems rather that in the context of both 8:17–18 and 4:40–41, the real issue is their lack of perception and faith in who Jesus actually is (4:41). Rather than being a memory lapse, their failure to understand about the bread is attributed to hard hearts and lack of faith. 'Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?' (8:17b–18).

Therefore, the disciples who have witnessed not only healings and the casting out of demons but also the two sea epiphanies, have seen without perceiving. Their failure is due to a lack of faith resulting in hardness of hearts. These events are not just examples of the disciples' mental bluntness in the face of an epiphany, but an outworking of Mark's apocalyptic epistemology.<sup>76</sup> Each of the three sea-crossing episodes in the Gospel (4:35–41; 6:47–52; and 8:14–21) serve as illustrations of this epistemology in relation to Jesus's identity. In each of these episodes there is a spectacular failure to recognize who Jesus truly is—the Son of God.

Thus, while according to Frank Matera 'the root cause of the disciples' incomprehension is hardness of heart',<sup>77</sup> it seems that this is not the whole story since 'fear' and 'lack of understanding' and especially 'unbelief' are important factors which cannot be separated from the former, and indeed even precede it. Both the disciples and the synagogue leader are admonished to have 'faith' rather than 'fear' (4:40; 5:36 μὴ φοβοῦ, μόνον πίστευε). Similarly, in hearing the parable of the vineyard, the chief priests, scribes, and pharisees respond in 'fear' (12:12) rather than 'faith' after Jesus refers to himself as the υἱὸς ἀγαπητός of

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<sup>73</sup> Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, 70–73.

<sup>74</sup> Joel Marcus called the feeding of the 4,000 'a secret epiphany' in *Mark 1–8*, 497. Cf. Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 286.

<sup>75</sup> See David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 90.

<sup>76</sup> J. P. Davies rightly argues the same in relation to the disciples' response to the transfiguration. Davies, 'Apocalyptic Topography', 143.

<sup>77</sup> Matera, 'Incomprehension of the Disciples', 157.

the Lord (κύριος, 12:6, 9) in the parable. Thus, although they did ‘hear’ they did not ‘understand’ (4:12) and by not believing they positioned themselves with those ‘outside’.

### 5. Faith and the Revelation of Divine Sonship

But what is this faith that the disciples lack? Is it simply a lack of faith in Jesus’s miraculous ability to heal? Or in his proper understanding of the Scriptures?<sup>78</sup> Is this belief, as Loader argues ‘*less focused on his person than on his power*’?<sup>79</sup> In this Gospel that commences with the statement that Jesus is messiah and Son of God (1:1),<sup>80</sup> where Jesus is identified with the Lord in the opening Isaiah citation (1:2–3),<sup>81</sup> and which then moves swiftly to the baptism where Jesus is identified as the Son of God, it seem unlikely that his power can be separated in any meaningful way from his person and identity. Thus, when Jesus stills the storm, the demonstration of his power leads unavoidably to the question, ‘who is this?’ (4:35–41). Faith in his ‘power’ cannot be disassociated from faith in ‘who he is’. Therefore, when Jesus demonstrates his healing power by healing the paralysed man, the climax of the narrative concerns Jesus’s ability to forgive, and particularly what that means for his own identity (2:5) *vis-a-vis* God.

Why then do people not recognise Jesus’s divine sonship, even when given abundant evidence? The epistemological principle of 4:11–12 has already been noted: those *outside* will look, but not perceive, for to them the secret of the kingdom of God has not been given (4:11–12). The repeated passive voice—‘be disclosed’, ‘will be measured’, ‘will be added’, ‘will be given’, ‘will be taken away’ (4:21–25)—indicates that this is the work of God.<sup>82</sup> However, revelation and insight will also be given in accordance with the axiom that the lamp comes in order to be seen and to give light (4:21–22), and with the reciprocal response principle of 4:24–25, that those who look without perceiving have not responded appropriately to the light that they have received. The ‘hidden lamp parable’ thus reveals a trajectory from hiddenness to revelation; from unbelief to faith. The narrative itself also demands an epistemology which is not

<sup>78</sup> Mary Ann Beavis, ‘Mark’s Teaching on Faith’, *BTB* 16 (1986): 139–42; William Loader, ‘The Concept of Faith in Mark and Paul’, in *Paul and Mark: Comparative Essays Part 1: Two Authors at the Beginnings of Christianity*, ed. Ian Elmer, David C. Sim, and Oda Wischmeyer (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 429, 433–34.

<sup>79</sup> Loader, ‘The Concept of Faith’, 436, emphasis mine.

<sup>80</sup> The originality of ‘Son of God’ in 1.1 is textually disputed. See further discussion in Mortensen, *The Baptismal Episode*, 186–87 n. 209.

<sup>81</sup> Mortensen, *The Baptismal Episode*, 82–92; Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 39; Christian Rose, *Theologie als Erzählung im Markusevangelium: Eine narratologisch-rezeptionsästhetische Untersuchung zu Mk 1,1–15*, WUNT 2/236 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 84–85; Simon Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 244; Rikki. E. Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark*, BSL (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1997), 87; Sigurd Grindheim, *Christology in the Synoptic Gospels: God or God’s Servant?* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 97–98; Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, 63–64.

<sup>82</sup> There a number of places in Mark where God’s action is accomplished by a divine passive. Gustaf Dalman, *The Words of Jesus: Considered in the Light of Post-Biblical Jewish Writings and the Aramaic Language* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902), 224–26; Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 320; Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *Neutestamentliche Theologie: Erster Teil, Die Verkündigung Jesu* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1971), 20–24. John R. Donahue, ‘A Neglected Factor in the Theology of Mark’, *JBL* 101 (1982): 566 n. 15.

entirely pessimistic. There are those who against the odds do perceive and understand because they respond in faith.<sup>83</sup>

The secret of Jesus's identity as Son of God<sup>84</sup> is not penetrated unless and until it is revealed by God and apprehended by faith. As Matera writes, 'Hardness of heart paradoxically points to God's revelation which cannot be grasped apart from divine assistance'.<sup>85</sup> The passive givenness of revelation in 4:11–12 is mirrored by the passive hardness of hearts in 6:52 and 8:17. Matera adds, 'Hardness of heart is a situation in which human beings find themselves in face of God's revelatory action if God does not provide assistance to comprehend it'.<sup>86</sup> The key for understanding the epistemology is introduced in 4:11–12 and modified by 4:21–25: some will be given insight but this insight will have to be responded to by faith.

While one could argue whether the hardness of heart and unbelief is the work of God<sup>87</sup> or Satan,<sup>88</sup> in Mark's Gospel Satan is clearly an opponent who interferes with the revelatory process. After the exchange following Peter's confession of Jesus's messiahship, Jesus speaks the startling 'get behind me, Satan' (8:33) because he does not 'think the things of God' (but of man). Likewise, in the parable of the Sower (4:1–20), the failure of the seed/word to grow is attributed to three varying factors, including Satanic opposition which is the first to be named (4:15). There is thus human failure to understand that is, at least partly, tied to satanic interference.

The command to faith is the central message of Jesus: 'repent and believe in the good news' (1:14–15). The 'good news' which is to be believed concerns Jesus himself—who he is as well as what he does. It is not simply a message about his powerful deeds. However, witnessing the deeds of Jesus should lead to a faith response, but as has been seen, one can easily see with neither perception nor faith. The disciples, the Pharisees, and the crowds who are witnesses to both his miracles and his teaching may get a 'general understanding' of him, but this is not perception, especially if the response is hardness of heart or fear. One could ask why the onlookers in 3:11–12 do not recognise Jesus's divine sonship after the demons had declared it openly, or why the religious elite do not believe when they hear his parable of the vineyard (11:27; 12:1–12) where he refers to himself as the 'beloved son', or even why the High Priest, who clearly knows what had been claimed of Jesus, fails to believe in him (14:61). As

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<sup>83</sup> Apocalyptic epistemology is not necessarily mutually exclusive to other sources of knowledge, such as evidence, scripture or wisdom. It is often unnecessarily supposed, especially in relation to Paul, that apocalyptic and salvation-history are mutually exclusive conceptions. Davies, *Paul among the Apocalypses?*, 40–63, esp. 55; Davies, 'Apocalyptic and the History of God', 519–26; Fletcher-Louis, 'Jewish Apocalyptic and Apocalypticism', 1577; Markus Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity*, WUNT 2/36 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990), 1, 26–27; Shively, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 21–26, 37; Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 251; N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 52; Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 281.

<sup>84</sup> On 'the secret of divine sonship' vs 'the messianic secret' see Mortensen, *The Baptismal Episode*, 183–89.

<sup>85</sup> Matera, 'Incomprehension of the Disciples', 158.

<sup>86</sup> Matera, 'Incomprehension of the Disciples', 158–59; Cf. 162. See also Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, AB 27A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 609 (on 8:33).

<sup>87</sup> Marcus, 'Mark 4:10–12', 561; Ira Brent Driggers, *Following God through Mark: Theological Tension in the Second Gospel* (London: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 2.

<sup>88</sup> Walter Wink, 'The Education of the Apostles: Mark's View of Human Transformation', *RelEd* 83 (1988): 284.

Eugene Boring notes, ‘The identity of Jesus is a matter of revelation, not deduction.’<sup>89</sup> Morna Hooker also pointed out concerning the ‘confession’ of the evil spirits, ‘no one in the story hears them, the truth they utter remains hidden—as it must, to all whose eyes and ears have not been opened: their words are intelligible only to those who already believe that Jesus is what they declare him to be—the Son of God.’<sup>90</sup> Although the claim of divine sonship has been both made and heard, it is still shrouded in secrecy. It remains undisclosed. If it is not grasped by faith, it is not grasped at all.<sup>91</sup>

On the topic of apocalyptic epistemology in 2 Corinthians 5:16–17, J. Louis Martyn argues that the believer undergoes an apocalyptic epistemological crisis, so that believers no longer see in the old way of seeing based on sense-perception, while rather in a new way based on revelation.<sup>92</sup> This is also what happens in the Gospel of Mark to those who have faith. In Mark there is not a straight link between *seeing* and *believing*. Jesus warns in 13:21–22 about belief which is based on seeing alone and which can only result in faith in false christs. This is also the problem of the request at the cross in 15:32, when the chief priests and scribes demand a miracle before they will believe: ‘Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe [ἵνα ἴδωμεν καὶ πιστεύσωμεν].’ As Voelz points out, ‘In this strange and perplexing Gospel, seeing is *not* believing; on the contrary, seeing *follows from* believing.’<sup>93</sup> In Mark there is no perception without believing.

The revelation of divine sonship is most clearly expressed by the centurion who confesses ἀληθῶς οὗτος ὁ ἄνθρωπος υἱὸς θεοῦ ἦν (15:39). On a narrational level, a human being finally perceives the true identity of Jesus as the Son of God.<sup>94</sup> Some have argued that the centurion’s conversion is too unrealistic,<sup>95</sup> but this is missing the point, for in Mark *seeing* and *perceiving* have been contrasted, while *faith* and *revelation* are companions. The centurion has no good reason to confess Jesus’s divine sonship and does

<sup>89</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 46.

<sup>90</sup> Hooker, *Mark*, 67.

<sup>91</sup> Bornkamm, ‘μυστήριον in the New Testament’, *TDNT* 4:818. Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, WBC 34A (Dallas: Word, 1989), 410.

<sup>92</sup> J. Louis Martyn, ‘Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages’, in *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 95–96, 108. In the context of Galatians, Martyn argued that the old way of seeing *kata sarka* contrasts with the new way of seeing which is not simply *kata pneuma*, but *kata stauron*. The failure of the Corinthians is a ‘failure to view the cross as the absolute epistemological watershed’; Cf. Douglas A. Campbell, ‘Apocalyptic Epistemology’, in *Paul and the Apocalyptic Imagination*, ed. Ben C. Blackwell, John K. Goodrich and Jason Maston (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 78.

<sup>93</sup> James W. Voelz, *Mark 1:1–8:26*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2013), 55, emphasis original.

<sup>94</sup> It has sometimes been argued that the text should be translated as ‘a son of God’ or ‘a son of a god’ because the Greek lacks the definite article and that this indicated a Gentile and incomplete perception of Jesus’s identity. Rudolf Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium*, HThKNT (Freiburg: Herder, 1977), 2:500; Earl S. Johnson Jr., ‘Is Mark 15.39 the Key to Mark’s Christology?’, *JSNT* 10 (1987): 3–22; Whitney T. Shiner, ‘The Ambiguous Pronouncement of the Centurion and the Shrouding of Meaning in Mark’, *JSNT* 22 (2000): 3–22. E. C. Colwell argued, ‘Definite predicate nouns which precede the verb usually lack the article’. Though, if context demands it such words can be understood as indefinite. E. C. Colwell, ‘A Definite Rule for the Use of the Article in the Greek New Testament’, *JBL* 52 (1933): 20–21; Cf. Johnson, ‘Is Mark 15.39 the Key to Mark’s Christology?’, 6–7. Note, for example, the absence of the article in 1:1. Cf. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 766. Adela Yarbro Collins, ‘Mark and His Readers: The Son of God among Greeks and Romans’, *HTR* 93 (2000): 93.

<sup>95</sup> Johnson, ‘Is Mark 15.39 the Key to Mark’s Christology?’, 13.



not appear to see the tearing of the veil from top to bottom.<sup>96</sup> Here many see the same event, but the centurion sees it differently, with insight, with revelation, and thus ultimately sees with faith.<sup>97</sup>

In Mark's Gospel revelation thus requires a response in faith. Jesus's divine sonship must not only be revealed in order to be believed, but it must also be believed in order to be revealed. This accords with the reciprocal response principle of 4:25; to the one to has more will be given. As Marcus states, 'In Mark there is a 'mysterious interpenetration' between faith and the grace shown in revelation.'<sup>98</sup> Faith and revelation belong together, and thus a mere statement of Jesus's sonship is neither faith nor revelation. Thus, in Mark's narrative many have heard and even been witnesses to the secret of Jesus's divine sonship, yet have failed to perceive it, for revelation is only given to those who respond in faith.<sup>99</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

This article argues that Jesus in Mark's Gospel is especially identified as the Son of God, and that this identity remains hidden from human perception unless it is revealed. This revelation is not based on a particular seeing alone but needs to meet a faith-response. This dialectic between hiddenness and revelation, has its roots in Mark's apocalyptic epistemology, which is most clearly seen in 4:11–12. Resistance to faith and revelation is characterised as a lack of understanding, fear, unbelief, and hardness of hearts. However, the epistemological pessimism of 4:11–12 is moderated by the promise of 4:21–25, which states that the light does come in order to be revealed. Those who respond in faith even to the little they have received will be recipients of further revelation.

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<sup>96</sup> As in Matt 27:54. Cf. Brian K. Gamel, 'The Centurion's Confession as Apocalyptic Unveiling: Mark 15:39 as a Markan Theology of Revelation' (PhD diss., Baylor University, 2014), 98, 100; C. Clifton Black, 'The Face is Familiar—I Just Can't Place it', in *The Ending of Mark and the Ends of God: Essays in Memory of Donald Harrisville Juel*, ed. Beverly R. Gaventa and Patrick M. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); 43.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. Gamel, 'The Centurion's Confession', 167. On Peter's confession as revelation see Marcus, *Mark* 9–16, 612.

<sup>98</sup> In Marcus, 'Mark 4:10–12', 562 n. 20. Cf. 558–59; Christopher D. Marshall, *Faith as a Theme in Mark's Narrative*, SNTSMS 64 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 234.

<sup>99</sup> Hooker, *Mark*, 67.

# The Eagle Has Landed: 3 John and Its Theological Vision for Pastoral Ministry

— David Shaw —

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**Abstract:** This article argues that when 3 John is read in light of John’s Gospel, it can be seen to have rich theological foundations and to offer a vision for ministry which is the natural and fitting trajectory of the Gospel. These are especially evident in 3 John’s depiction of the ministry of individuals, the conflict their ministry provokes, their practice of hospitality, rejection of self-love, and the pattern of imitation in the life of the church.

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Third John feels a long way from John’s Gospel, and not just because they are separated by Acts and the Epistles in our Bibles. The Fourth Gospel is rightly regarded as a soaring work of theology; John is known as “the Divine”—that is, the theologian—and his Gospel is a rich source of Trinitarian and Christological reflection; it is a “spiritual gospel” in the view of Clement,<sup>1</sup> and he is symbolized by the eagle in Christian tradition, amongst other, more earth-bound evangelists.<sup>2</sup> That distinctive ability to reach theological heights in the beguilingly simple language of Father and Son, life and light, truth and love, endures as far as 1 John and 2 John. But by contrast, 3 John is thin on theology (as the shortest NT document, with no mention of Jesus by name) and thick with the dirt and dust of everyday life. Its concern is with hospitality to travelers and it depicts church life mired in strife and conflict.

At first glance, therefore, 3 John makes a curious terminus for John’s letters in the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as Fred Sanders has pointed out, one could have justifiably anticipated a trajectory towards evermore concentrated and compact statements of truth. John’s Gospel itself has distilled more material than the world could contain into twenty-one chapters (21:25); in 1 John 1:1–4 we can recognize

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<sup>1</sup> As reported in Eusebius in *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.7.

<sup>2</sup> It has been common to connect the four gospel writers with the four living creatures in Revelation 4 (cf. the four faces of the living creatures in Ezekiel 1), in part as a rationale for why there are four Gospels. There is some variation, but most commonly, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are said to correspond to the Man, the Lion, the Calf and the Eagle respectively. For the earliest reference (which has John as the lion and Mark as the eagle) see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.11.8.

<sup>3</sup> For a careful discussion of the apostle John as likely author of the three letters, see Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008). Karen Jobes helpfully tabulates the similarities in language across the three letters in *1, 2, and 3 John*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 25–27.

something of a summary of those twenty-one chapters; and the distillation continues in 1 John 1:5 where “the message we have heard from him and declare to you” can be boiled down to a single sentence: “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.” Those compact summaries rely on the longer forms to fill out their meaning but they demonstrate the remarkable capacity of the Christian good news to be expressed in simple and sublime ways.<sup>4</sup> And so one can imagine an alternate version of 3 John as the most distilled version of the Johannine material: perhaps a one verse summary of the 1 John 1:5 sort, or perhaps simply the fabled exhortation of John’s latter years “Little children, love one another.”<sup>5</sup>

Even without such hypotheticals, turning to the substance of 3 John can feel like a move from the sublime to the pedestrian. And yet the burden of this article is that 3 John is the fruition of so much that is anticipated in and resourced by John’s Gospel. Taken together, there emerges a strikingly theological vision for pastoral ministry. John remains the eagle, and here in 3 John we glimpse what happens when the eagle lands in the day-to-day trenches of life and ministry.

### *1. The Ordinary Ministry of Christian Believers*

The first observation to make is that 3 John navigates the transition to the post-apostolic age. We move quite seamlessly into the world of Gaius and Demetrius, a new generation of believers and an extending cast of co-workers in the truth. John’s stance within that transition is noteworthy. He does not present himself as the landmark apostle, an eagle amongst pigeons. Rather he presents himself as the elder writing to one who shares in his ministry. Gaius is loved in the truth (v. 1), is walking in the truth (v. 3) and is a co-worker in the truth in acts of hospitality (v. 8). Likewise, the unnamed brothers in verse 3 who testify approvingly concerning the loving ministry of Gaius take their place alongside those who testify concerning Demetrius, and John himself as he testifies to the quality of Demetrius. The language here provides a strong link back to John’s Gospel, which is characterized as John’s testimony (John 18:35, 21:24) and in which testimony to the truth and the identity of various figures is so central.<sup>6</sup> In one sense, John is the witness *par excellence*, and we receive in his testimony what he heard, saw, and touched, but 3 John also reflects the ways in which every believer is called to be a witness to the truth and to identify and affirm the ministry of those who walk in the truth.

Accordingly, John’s Gospel anticipates the ministry of many more than just the twelve. It is an exaggeration to say that John ignores ecclesiology or presents a radically egalitarian or individualistic

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<sup>4</sup> See Fred Sanders’s sermon, “Theology of the Trinity,” Talbot Chapel, 10 September 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7Gsfg1v\\_TY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7Gsfg1v_TY).

<sup>5</sup> Jerome reports that in John’s “extreme old age ... he could not muster the voice to speak many words,” and so “usually said nothing but, ‘Little children, love one another’” (*Commentary on Galatians* 6.10, trans. Andrew Cain, Fathers of the Church [Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010], 260).

<sup>6</sup> To take one of the major examples, John the Baptist is regularly and rightly re-characterized as John the Witness, given the prominence of testimony language in John 1:19–20, his concern to testify truly to the coming of Jesus, and to his own identity (being the first to answer questions about whether he is the Messiah and responding “I am not” some time before Jesus will answer with the affirmative “I am”). The classic studies are Andrew T. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000); Alison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness*, SNTSMS 31 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). Andreas Köstenberger persuasively highlights the trial motif as a unifying feature across the Johannine literature. See “The Cosmic Trial Motif in John’s Letters,” in *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, Biblical Theology of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 436–56.

vision of the church,<sup>7</sup> but nevertheless, these are features of the Gospel: there is a call to acknowledge and love all fellow believers within the household of God,<sup>8</sup> and the prominence of individual encounters with Jesus in John's Gospel is noteworthy, especially relative to the other Gospels. The Samaritan woman and the man healed of blindness are especially vivid examples of those who go on to a life of testifying to what they have experienced. Both of these themes are fleshed out further in 3 John. The welcome and affirmation of brothers is emphasized in verses 5–8 as a hallmark of walking in love. And in 3 John, Gaius and Demetrius take their place alongside the Samaritan Woman and the man healed of blindness as models of ministry within their communities and within the Johannine writings.

## 2. *The Contested and Ambiguous Nature of Ministry*

John's Gospel also previews and accounts for the contested nature of ministry and identity in 3 John. Life within those churches receiving and sending on the traveling workers is tense and ambiguous; the efforts of Diotrophes cast doubt on the ministries of the visiting brothers and of the elder himself. To be sure, many brothers, and the truth itself, commend Demetrius (v. 12) but in the present time the ambiguity of claim and counter-claim must be endured. In pastoral ministry this is a deeply painful and frustrating reality; in some cases the truth of the matter will be known to us but obscured and denied by others; in others, the truth will be less clear and we will have to live and act and persevere in the absence of clarity.

None of this is foreign to the Gospel of John, where contested identity is such a significant theme. The blind man's identity as well as his healing is contested in John 9 and so is his character as a truthful witness. The way in which his experience echoes that of Jesus (both are dismissed as sinners [9:16, 34] and both affirm their identity with "I am" statements [Jesus, famously and frequently; the blind man in 9:9]) means that John's Gospel has more to offer than sympathy. It offers a theological account of the claim and counterclaim, grounded in the darkness and its unwillingness to receive the truth, its recourse to lies, and its culpable blindness. With that account also comes a measure of comfort: the ambiguities that beset the church of Gaius and Demetrius or, for that matter, the contemporary church, are not signs that the church has fallen into crisis, but rather that crisis is always the atmosphere when light collides with darkness. In this regard, 3 John serves to highlight the reality that light and dark will commingle *within* the church.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This view is put most strongly by John Meier: "Jesus and Jesus alone stands in the spotlight of the Fourth Gospel; there is no room for anyone or anything else, including the church. And so it is not surprising that ecclesiology hardly makes an appearance on the stage.... High Christology is the black hole in the Johannine universe that swallows up every other topic, including the church." Quoted in Andrew J. Byers, *Ecclesiology and Theosis in the Gospel of John*, SNTSMS 166 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 13. More nuanced discussion can be found in Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1978); R. Alan Culpepper, "The Quest for the Church in the Gospel of John," *Int* 63 (2009): 341–54.

<sup>8</sup> This theme is helpfully developed by Mary L. Coloe, *Dwelling in the Household of God: Johannine Ecclesiology and Spirituality* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Stott's mind turns from Diotrophes to Article 26 of the Thirty-Nine Articles: "in the visible Church the evil be ever mingled with the good." John Stott, *The Letters of John*, 2nd ed., TNTC 19 (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 228.

### 3. *The Centrality of Hospitality*

The third major way in which 3 John relies upon and grounds the theology of John's Gospel is in its emphasis on hospitality for those who come in the Lord's name. The theme is often observed in 3 John, which explains its popularity as a text by which to encourage churches in their support of mission.<sup>10</sup> This use is entirely fitting, given John's language in 3 John 7, where those who go out "on behalf the name" echoes the description of those who have suffered for Jesus's sake in Acts 5:41, 9:16, 15:26, 21:13,<sup>11</sup> and, perhaps more significantly, evokes John's Upper Room where their identification with the name of Jesus is the cause of the disciples' suffering (15:21) and the source of their safety (17:11–12). Likewise, John's note about their lack of support from unbelievers in 3 John 7 calls to mind both Paul's unwillingness to depend upon those he seeks to reach (1 Cor 9:15–18) and Jesus's instructions to his disciples that they should entrust themselves to God's provision amongst those who receive them.

3 John places a very high premium on such hospitality. Although 3 John 11 contains the only formal imperative in 3 John, verse 8 also has that force: "we ought therefore to show hospitality to such people." And in the elder's earlier remarks, hospitality of that kind is a defining mark of what it means to walk in the truth. The elder relates the report that Gaius walks in the truth (verse 3) and expresses his delight in those walk in the truth (verse 4). What has Gaius done to merit such acclaim? Verse 5: in what he has done for the brothers. He has received them, strangers though they were, and the elder has every expectation that he will send them on again (verse 6). Certainly there is more to walking in the truth than showing hospitality, but it is paramount. By contrast, Diotrophes is not hospitable. In verse 9–10 he will welcome neither the elder, nor other believers and puts them out of the church.

Once again, the Gospel anticipates this experience. The blind man is thrown out (9:34) and his parents and others live under the threat of being put out of the synagogue (9:22, 12:42), just as believers here are expelled. Moreover, John's Gospel lays a path direct to 3 John by preparing Jesus's disciples for a similar experience in the world. This is explicit in passages such as John 16:2–4, and implicit in the way in which the blind man functions as a paradigmatic disciple, sent to the world and holding firm to his testimony in the face of blind hostility. In Leithart's generative reading, "the blind man is being healed by the Sent One in the pool of sending and thereby becomes one sent, a type of an apostle."<sup>12</sup>

The sending language here also reveals a deeper pattern where the treatment of believers at the hands of Diotrophes has its roots in the cosmic drama of John's Gospel. As early as the prologue, the world is characterized as inhospitable to the Word: "though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him" (1:10), indeed "even his own did not receive him" (1:11). In the course of the Gospel it is clear that rejection of the Sent Son is also rejection of the Sending Father and that this rejection is based on both ignorance—they do not know the Father—and self-love, since they refuse to glorify Father and Son and pursue their own glory. In John 5:44 comes the question "How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the Afterword in John Piper's *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 267–70.

<sup>11</sup> These references are supplied by Jobes, 1, 2, and 3 John, 303.

<sup>12</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 102. We have already noted the ways in which his identity is contested in the same manner as that of Jesus. The servant is not greater than his master (John 15:20)

God?” Subsequently, John will account for their rejection in light of that fact that “they loved human praise more than praise from God” (12:43).

This is the frame in which to interpret the conduct of Diotrophes. His love “to be first” (3 John 9) is of a piece with the desire for glory and praise revealed in the Gospel. Importantly, it does not render him inhospitable, but inhospitable to those who come in the name of Jesus. No doubt he is eminently hospitable to those who will praise his leadership, but it is a counterfeit hospitality that he might glorify and serve himself and not another.

Third John, therefore, provides a striking example of how Jesus’s followers will experience the same reception as he did and for the same reasons. It exemplifies John 15:20–21, and demonstrates how the dynamics observed in the sending of the Son can be recapitulated quite precisely in the life of the church. The elder is careful to endorse Demetrius as the bearer of his message because of the risk that Demetrius will be subjected to the same rejection as the Elder who sends him, just as the disciples were rejected because the Son sent them, and just as the Son was rejected because the Father sent him.

As we become attuned to these dynamics it is helpful to consider how we might navigate life and ministry as Gaius must. On the one hand, embracing the call to welcome those who come in the Name, simultaneously receiving the sent and the Sender. This is true hospitality, the love of the stranger—φιλόξενος—for the sake of Christ. On the other hand, we join Gaius in navigating the disputes of the church and seeking the wisdom to distinguish a Demetrius from a Diotrophes by the orientation of their love, either toward self, or towards Father, Son and those who come in their name.

#### *4. The Call to Imitation*

“Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good.” (3 John 11)

3 John places this exhortation in a particular context, sandwiched as it is between negative and positive examples: Gaius is to imitate not Diotrophes but Demetrius. Though the elder refrains from stating it, there is also an implicit call to imitate the elder himself. For the reader, we can also reflect on Gaius as worthy of imitation, given the exemplary character of his conduct. Once more, this is a remarkable endorsement of the post-apostolic generation; they, as much as the apostles, become worthy of imitation as they walk in the light.

It is also fruitful, however, to locate John’s exhortation in a wider context. Although this is the only place in John’s writings where imitation is commended explicitly with the verb μιμέομαι,<sup>13</sup> we have already seen how John’s characters are presented as models for imitation. Cor Bennema has championed this theme most helpfully:

The Johannine characters are representative figures in that they have a symbolic or illustrative value beyond the narrative.... The reader is invited to identify with (aspects of) one or more of the characters, learn from them and then make his or her own response to Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. also 2 Thess 3:7, 9; Heb 13:7, and the cognate noun “imitator” (μιμητής) in 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Eph 5:1; 1 Thess 1:6; 2:14; Heb 6:12.

<sup>14</sup> Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2009), 208. See also Christopher W. Skinner, *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, LNTS 461 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013).

This is true of the healed man in John 9, and the Samaritan woman in John 4. John the Baptist can be added to their number, as Bruner notes:

John the Baptist knows and confesses who he is not (a) I am not the Messiah (b) I am not Elijah; and (c) I am not the Prophet. John knows and confesses who he is: (a) I am a voice; (b) I am a baptizer in water; and (c) I am unworthy of the One Coming after Me. Christian witnesses and ministers ever since—all of us who believe and read this text—are invited to assess and affirm our own “I am not’s” and “I am’s” so that with a more healthy and clearly defined understanding of our limits and gifts, we too can move out into the world in faithful vocation and witness.<sup>15</sup>

Once again, though, this dynamic is rooted in the narrative of the Father sending the Son and the Son’s ministry in John’s Gospel. Bennema’s study of imitation within Johannine ethics focuses on the “just as ... so also” framing of the Father/Son relationship as a key indicator of the concept.<sup>16</sup> Thus “just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it” (5:21), and Jesus offers this as an example of wider pattern wherein “the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does” (5:19–20).<sup>17</sup> In similar fashion, Jesus says to his disciples that “as the Father has loved me, so have I loved you” (15:9) and “as the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (20:21).

Unsurprisingly, the movement does not culminate there. Jesus speaks of his imitation of the Father’s love, and he establishes a similar dynamic for his followers: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (13:34). As that verse makes clear, the process is not one of detached observation and imitation, but rather it is the *experience* of love (Father for Son, or Son for his friends) that is transformative. For the disciples this is part of what they are to understand from the footwashing in John 13; “I have set you an example that you should do *as I have done for you*” (13:15).

In sum there is a mimetic chain of love: the starting point is the Father’s love which is directed towards his Son; the Son imitates the Father and directs his love towards the disciples; and the disciples are to imitate Jesus and express this love towards one another.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 70. The characterisation of the beloved disciple and Peter also invite reflection, as does that of more ambiguous characters such as Nicodemus and Pilate. There are a variety of plausible arguments for why the author chooses to identify himself as the beloved disciple. Perhaps one reason is to provide a template for every beloved disciple in his faithful response to Jesus and proclamation of what he has received.

<sup>16</sup> A variety of constructions are in view, including καθώς/καθώς...καί/καθώς... οὕτως/ὥσπερ... οὕτως καὶ.

<sup>17</sup> It is not the case, though, that every comparative clause implies imitation. Bennema distinguishes between *existential* and *performative* senses. Existential claims would include the proposition that “just as the Father has life in himself, so too he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (5:26)

<sup>18</sup> Cornelis Bennema, *Mimesis in the Johannine Literature: A Study in Johannine Ethics*, Library of New Testament Studies 458 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 114. Bennema’s work is taken up and deployed further in Sookgoo Shin, *Ethics in the Gospel of John: Discipleship as Moral Progress* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

3 John may not directly allude to this “mimetic chain,” but we must read its exhortation to imitate the good in its light. It will direct our quest for the good that we might imitate to the life of God himself and the overflowing and life-transforming love which cascades from Father to Son to his people to their concern for one another. And it will ensure that our imitation of the good is fueled by our experience of a Lord who loved us to the end, taking the place of a servant and laying down his life for his friends.

In light of that concrete and Christological example of love, what should we make of 3 John’s somewhat abstract exhortation to imitate “the good”? Although it might seem a bland expression in light of the love of God on display at the cross, I suspect it is because that love is now on display in dispersed form in the lives of those who walk in accordance with the truth. Just as Jesus intended, the love of his disciples for one another is now a revelation one can find in many places, and is itself worthy of imitation. Taking John’s Gospel and third letter together, we can say that the “mimetic chain” must always look back up towards Father and Son, but by design it lengthens with every generation.

### *5. Closing Reflections*

Robert Yarbrough is not wrong to observe that “most churches could function a whole lifetime without 2 John or 3 John in their Bibles and never miss their absence.”<sup>19</sup> In defense of 3 John, where perhaps the absence would register least, we have sought to trace the links from the Gospel through to this brief letter. The benefits are several.

First, it teaches us not to be surprised by the contested and ambiguous nature of ministry, where conflict and uncertainty are a sad staple of church life. If Jesus’s prayer in John 17 teaches us to pursue unity and peace, 3 John leaves us in no doubt that this age will nonetheless be characterized by the conflict between light and dark, and between those who reflect the love of God and those who pursue the love of self. It offers the starkest reminder that one can be theological orthodox (there is no hint that Diotrophes is anything other) and yet pursue one’s own glory in the life of the church. Alongside that, however, and taking the rest of what we know of John’s life, it also holds out hope that one can be taught by the love of Christ to set aside personal ambition and learn the way of Christ. John himself once loved to be first (Mark 10:35–45), but now draws alongside a fellow brother in Gaius to encourage and strengthen him.

Second, it indicates that the natural trajectory of the highest and richest theology is its application in the life of the church. John’s Gospel already prepares the way for that, in its celebration of individuals testifying to the work of Jesus in their lives and in its preparation of the disciples for their trials in the world. But 3 John makes it inescapably clear that the drama of the Son sent into the world is recapitulated in the ways in which fellowship is experienced and hospitality extended in the local church.

On the one hand, this means we must affirm the deeply theological character of ministry. We cannot properly understand or navigate the complexity and controversies of church life without reference to the Father, Son, and Spirit, the nature of their action in the world; nor can we understand the character of the world’s reaction without John’s anthropological and demonological insights.

On the other, it means that theologically-educated ministers must not wistfully pine for a life soaring two hundred feet from the ground. The eagle must land. Or, in more Johannine language, the watershed moment is when the Word becomes flesh. It is abundantly clear from the experience of the first followers of Jesus in the Gospel and the first generations of the Christian church as reflected in 3

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<sup>19</sup> Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 7.



John, that the challenge is precisely to bring theological truth to bear in everyday life and its conflicts. Theological reflection thus becomes not a means of escape, but the source of a true apprehension of pastoral realities, and the means by which to sustain believers in their resistance to self-love, their cultivation of hospitable practices, and their persevering walk in the light.

# What Shall We Remember? The Eternality of Memory in Revelation

— Jared August —

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**Abstract:** This essay considers the concept of the eternality of human memory and what the Christian may expect to remember after death. Although numerous resources address the topic of the resurrected life, few consider the Bible’s teaching on the permanence of memory. By considering key passages from the book of Revelation, this study attempts a brief overview on the topic. It is proposed that Revelation depicts the believer’s eternal memory as consisting of details, corresponding to objective reality, experienced by community, and comforted by God.

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One of the prominent themes of both the Old and New Testaments is the importance of memory, in its various forms. The examples are numerous: Moses called the Israelites to remember the mighty acts of God they witnessed (Exod 13:3; Deut 5:15; 8:18), the Psalms exhort God’s people to praise the Lord by remembering his continued faithfulness (Pss 77:11; 103:2; 143:5), and the NT authors plead with their readers to remember how they ought to conduct themselves (2 Tim 2:14; Titus 3:1; Jude 5). The Christian faith itself is, after all, built on the necessity of remembering the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 11:23–25; John 14:26; Luke 22:18–20). For the Christian, this focus on memory raises the question as to what the believer will remember after death. Put simply, for the believer, is memory eternal?

Although there are numerous treatments of what the Bible teaches about heaven and the resurrected life,<sup>1</sup> few resources consider the Bible’s teaching on the permanence of memory at any length.<sup>2</sup> In one of

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see: Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2004); W. A. Criswell and Paige Patterson, *Heaven* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1991); Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman Jr., *Sense and Nonsense about Heaven and Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007); C. H. Spurgeon, *No Tears in Heaven*, revised ed. (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2014); Peter Kreeft, *Every Thing You Ever Wanted to Know About Heaven* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990); Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, *Heaven*, in *Theology in Community* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014); Alister E. McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003); and René Pache, *The Future Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1962).

<sup>2</sup> To be sure, memory is assumed in each of the above resources, particularly in reference to the reunion with friends and family who have died in Christ. About this idea, Charles Hodge comments, “The doctrine that in a future life we shall recognize those whom we knew and loved on earth, has entered into the faith of all mankind.

the most extensive discussions available on the eternity of memory, Charles Hodge in his *Systematic Theology*, answers this question in the affirmative:

The Bible clearly teaches that man is to retain all his faculties in the future life. One of the most important of those faculties is memory. If this were not retained there would be a chasm in our existence. The past for us would cease to exist. We could hardly, if at all, be conscious of our identity. We should enter heaven, as creatures newly created, who had no history.<sup>3</sup>

Hodge's reasoning is clear and straightforward: Since one's memory makes a person—in part—who they are, memory must be carried into eternity. It is one thing, however, to acknowledge that memory continues past death, yet it is quite another to consider what this memory involves. Building upon Hodge's assertion, the aim of this paper is to offer some initial thoughts on what the Bible teaches about the eternity of memory.

Some limitations are inherent. Given the extensive nature of any study on memory, this paper attempts something quite modest in scope. It does not offer a philosophical, psychological, or physiological evaluation of human memory, though each of these would be of considerable value in and of itself. Furthermore, I do not attempt a biblically exhaustive study on the topic, which again, would be of immense value,<sup>4</sup> but intentionally limit my focus to analyzing one biblical book, Revelation.

In view of its eschatological focus, key passages from Revelation are considered in an effort to develop John's view and understanding of what memory after death entails. In so doing, the hope is that this study might serve as a starting point for further research on the Christian perspective of the eternity of memory. Ultimately, I propose that the book of Revelation depicts the believer's eternal memory as consisting of details, corresponding to objective reality, experienced by community, and comforted by God.

### *1. Eternal Memory as Detailed*

Revelation 6:9–11 provides a description of the opening of the fifth seal, in which the martyred saints call out to God for vindication and God provides an answer. As the clearest example of a prayer

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It is taken for granted in the Bible, both in the Old Testament and in the New" (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 3:782). One resource that devotes more space to the topic is Alan W. Gomes, *40 Questions About Heaven and Hell* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2018), who offers a page and a half overview regarding memory in heaven (224–25).

<sup>3</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:782. Hodge comments that if the believer did not maintain his memory, "Then all the songs of heaven would cease. There could be no thanksgiving for redemption; no recognition of all God's dealings with us in this world" (3:782).

<sup>4</sup> Numerous studies have focused on various aspects of memory in Scripture, however, most of these studies center on Israel's corporate memory in the Old Testament. For example, see Brevard S. Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel*, SBT 37 (London: SCM, 1962); Mark S. Smith, *Memoirs of God: History, Memory and the Experience of the Divine in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004); C. L. Kessler, "The Memory Motif in the God-Man Relationship of the Old Testament" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1956); and J. Robert Cosand, "The Theology of Remembrance in the Cultus of Israel" (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1995).

of supplication in Revelation, this passage plays a prominent role in the book as a whole, as the Lord's response is ultimately revealed in the judgments recorded in the chapters that follow.<sup>5</sup>

In this passage, "the souls" (τὰς ψυχὰς) of those who had been slain for the word of God cry out, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will you keep from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (6:9–10). Although some claim that this passage should be taken metaphorically,<sup>6</sup> it seems best understood literally. In this view, the "souls" are the disembodied persons who had been martyred (σφάζω, lit. "slaughtered" or "killed violently") as a result of their testimony of Christ.<sup>7</sup> Given the context of Revelation, this scene in John's vision occurs in the intermediate state in heaven.<sup>8</sup> That is, these souls are the disembodied souls of believers who have not yet received their glorified bodies.<sup>9</sup> Though disembodied, these souls still maintain their identity, their individuality, and perhaps most important to this study, their memory.

These saints were put to death as a result of the witness they had received from Christ (cf. Rev 12:17; 20:4).<sup>10</sup> Beasley-Murray summarizes, "They had been put to death as propagators of lies and enemies of

<sup>5</sup> This is argued extensively by J. P. Heil, "The Fifth Seal (Rev 6,9–11) as a Key to the Book of Revelation," *Bib* 74 (1993): 220–43. Heil asserts that this prayer "sets the agenda for the remainder of the book, which provides various projections of the judgment and vindication for which the souls pray" (p. 242). See also Brian J. Tabb's treatment of the prayers of the saints in *All Things New: Revelation as Canonical Capstone*, NSBT 48 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 140–43.

<sup>6</sup> For example, G. K. Beale asserts that "slain" is likely "metaphorical and those spoken of represent the broader category of all saints who suffer for the sake of their faith" (*The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 390). In similar manner, Alan F. Johnson comments, "The Greek *psyche* has various meanings and probably stands here for the actual 'lives' or 'persons' who were killed rather than for their 'souls.' They are seen by John as persons who are very much alive, though they have been killed by the beast" ("Revelation," in *Hebrews–Revelation*, revised ed., EBC 13 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006], 654).

<sup>7</sup> Key to this view is the *quantitative*—rather than merely *qualitative*—description ("until the number ... should be complete"; 6:11), which does not easily lend itself to metaphor. Additionally, the expectation of time ("until"; 6:11) is difficult to reconcile with a metaphorical interpretation.

<sup>8</sup> Gomes comments, "This scene occurs in the intermediate state in heaven, and the 'souls' thus depicted are disembodied at this point" (*Heaven and Hell*, 225). Paige Patterson offers a similar assessment when he suggests, "These martyrs are in a disembodied state, having not yet received glorified bodies.... The souls of those who have been slain because of their testimony to Christ and because of their adherence to the word of God remain in a disembodied state until all the saints who are to be killed in the tribulation have completed their destiny" (*Revelation*, NAC 39 [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2012], 184).

Of course, debate exists as to *when* this scene occurs, though this is largely outside the scope of this paper's focus. Patterson, for example, follows a typical premillennial reading of Revelation and asserts that it takes place "during the tribulation period" (*Revelation*, 184). This is in contrast to others such as Beale who assert that it refers to "all saints who suffer for the sake of their faith" (*Revelation*, 390). This paper follows the premillennial approach.

<sup>9</sup> Robert G. Bratcher and Howard A. Hatton note that in this passage, the soul appears to refer to "the immaterial part of a person that lives on after death" (*A Handbook on The Revelation to John*, UBS Handbook Series [New York: United Bible Societies, 1993], 115). Bratcher and Hatton recognize the difficulty of the unusual language in this passage, yet still maintain the need for a literal reading. They comment, "Of course it is difficult to imagine how a soul puts on a robe; but this is figurative language describing things seen in a vision, and the figurative language should be maintained rather literally" (p. 117).

<sup>10</sup> Robert H. Mounce summarizes, "Those who died, therefore, are those who gave their lives in faithfulness to God as revealed in and through Jesus Christ" (*The Book of Revelation*, revised ed., NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 147). R. H. Charles notes that the expression εἶχον "implies a testimony that has been given them by

mankind.”<sup>11</sup> It is their identification with and belief in Christ that resulted in their unjust murders. As such, they cry out to the Lord for vindication (cf. Luke 18:7; 2 Thess 1:8).<sup>12</sup> These souls pray for a reversal of the world’s false justice and for the Lord to enact true and lasting justice.<sup>13</sup>

Of particular interest to this current study is the awareness that those who died in Christ have regarding how and why they were killed. As Gomes articulates, “These individuals demonstrate a vivid recollection of their martyrdom.”<sup>14</sup> Even the request of these souls reflects this reality, as the two terms used (“judging” and “avenging”) are specific to an equal and appropriate response. “Judging” (κρίνω) indicates a legal decision and evaluation (e.g., Matt 7:2; Luke 6:37; 1 Cor 4:5; Rev 20:12); “avenging” (ἐκδικέω) involves the infliction of an “appropriate penalty for wrong doing” (e.g., Luke 18:3, 5; Rom 12:19; 2 Cor 10:6; Rev 19:2).<sup>15</sup> Used together, these terms demand that the punishment fit the crime. The perpetrators are to be judged in correspondence to the specific deeds they had inflicted on these souls. Furthermore, the Lord’s response that these believers should wait until their fellow servants would “be killed *as they had*” (6:11) implies a correspondence between the types of deaths as martyrdom (cf. 6:9, σφάζω, “slaughtered”). The point is that the disembodied souls in this vision remember precise details regarding their earthly deaths and as such, request specific justice to be enacted.

Outside the book of Revelation, several passages indicate that those who die are aware of and remember their past deeds. For example, in Luke 16:19–31, Jesus recounts the details of the rich man and Lazarus, in which Abraham uses the imperative μνήσθητι (“remember”; 16:25).<sup>16</sup> The rich man’s response and the absence of any refutation indicates that he does indeed remember (16:27).<sup>17</sup> Similarly in Luke, when one of the criminals crucified with Jesus cries out, “Remember [μνήσθητί] me when you come into your kingdom” (23:42), Jesus responds in the affirmative (23:43). In this way, there is a recognition that details from this life are assumed to carry forward after death.<sup>18</sup> Beasley-Murray

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Christ and which they have *preserved*” (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, ICC [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920], 1:174).

<sup>11</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, NCB (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1974), 136.

<sup>12</sup> Bratcher and Hatton comment, “The martyrs ask that God declare the guilt of the murderers and punish them” (*Handbook on Revelation*, 116). This call for punishment is not vindictive, but rather expectant of God’s ultimate justice. Bratcher and Hatton continue by further describing this plea: “This cry of the persecuted people of God is a request, or demand, that God act at once” (p. 116).

<sup>13</sup> Beasley-Murray comments, “The prayer ... is a plea by the martyrs not for personal revenge, but for the vindication of the right and truth of the cause for which they gave their lives, which is Christ’s cause” (*Revelation*, 136). Beasley-Murray compares the martyrs’ cry with the cry of forgiveness of Jesus (Luke 23:34) and Stephen (Acts 7:60), noting, “It is not the individual perpetrators of the crime but the world’s judgment which is in view” (136 n. 1).

<sup>14</sup> Gomes, *Heaven and Hell*, 225.

<sup>15</sup> BDAG, s.v. “ἐκδικέω.”

<sup>16</sup> In Luke 16:25, Abraham comments, “Child, remember that you received your good things in your life, and Lazarus likewise bad things; but now he is being comforted here and you are in anguish.”

<sup>17</sup> As a parable, not all details of Luke 16:19–31 should be taken as historical events. As such, one ought not to build a doctrine of eternal memory solely from this account. That being recognized, the data found here is consistent with what is taught in other Scripture passages, as discussed above.

<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the theme of blood “crying out” is found in various passages throughout the OT and NT (e.g., Gen 4:10; Ezek 3:18, 20; 35:6; Matt 23:35).

observes that the theme of martyrs crying out for judgment after their death is “well known in Jewish apocalyptic writings.”<sup>19</sup> This is evident in passages such as 1 Enoch 47:1–2, 4<sup>20</sup> and 22:5, 7.<sup>21</sup>

In summary, the conclusions regarding Revelation 6:9–11 are fairly straightforward. Although this passage is specific to the intermediate state—and not to the new heaven and new earth (21:1–22:5)—it provides one of the clearest glimpses regarding the picture of eternal memory as *detailed*. It assumes that believers maintain a precise memory after death that reflects both personal knowledge as well as emotional experience. Not only do the souls who were killed remember that they were unjustly slain, but they call for God to be just in inflicting an appropriate level of punishment. Although the memories recorded in this passage are certainly negative, at the very least, Revelation 6:9–11 demonstrates that eternal memory is thorough and comprehensive; it is detailed.

## 2. *Eternal Memory as Reality-Correspondent*

Despite the current possibility of inaccurate or incomplete memory, John presents in Revelation that the believer’s eternal memory corresponds with objective reality. This builds upon the Revelation 6:9–11 idea that memory is detailed by specifying that eternal memory is accurate in its details. Scripture recognizes the potential inaccuracy of human memory in various ways, not only in the possibility of forgetfulness (Deut 6:4–9; Prov 3:1–4; 4:5; Ps 103:2), but also in the necessity of establishing multiple witnesses to verify a charge (Num 35:30; Deut 17:6; John 8:17; 2 Cor 13:1; 1 Tim 5:19; Rev 11:3). Despite this present frailty and potential inaccuracy, Revelation depicts human memory after death as corresponding to God’s authoritative standard of reality. Three passages in particular develop this concept: Revelation 11:17–18; 14:13; and 20:11–15.<sup>22</sup>

In 11:17–18, the twenty-four elders worship the Lord for his identity (11:17a) and his victorious accomplishment (11:17b–18). Of particular interest to this study is 11:18, which states that the time has come “for the dead to be judged, and to reward your servants, the prophets and the saints and those who fear your name, the small and the great, and to destroy the destroyers of the earth.”

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<sup>19</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 134.

<sup>20</sup> 1 Enoch 47:1–2, 4 is worth reproducing: “In those days, the prayers of the righteous ascended into heaven, and the blood of the righteous from the earth before the Lord of the Spirits. There shall be days when all the holy ones who dwell in the heavens above shall dwell (together). And with one voice, they shall supplicate and pray ... on behalf of the blood of the righteous ones which has been shed. Their prayers shall not stop from exhaustion before the Lord of the Spirits—neither will they relax forever—(until) judgment is executed for them.... The prayers of the righteous ones have been heard, and the blood of the righteous has been admitted before the Lord of Spirits.” Text taken from James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol 1. d (New York: Doubleday, 1983).

<sup>21</sup> 1 Enoch 22:5, 7 reads, “I saw the spirits of the children of the people who were dead, and their voices were reaching unto heaven until this very moment.... This is the spirit which had left Abel, whom Cain, his brother, had killed; it (continues to) sue him until all of (Cain’s) seed is exterminated from the face of the earth.”

<sup>22</sup> Each of these passages refer to final eschatological judgment, indicating that their referent is likely one and the same, the great white throne scene (see Mounce, *Revelation*, 227).

This passage focuses on the universal scope of the Lord's judgement.<sup>23</sup> The three concepts "to be judged" (κριθῆναι), "to reward" (δοῦναι τὸν μισθόν; lit. "to give the reward"),<sup>24</sup> and "to destroy" (διαφθεῖραι) are parallel in this passage, emphasizing the universality of this event. The Lord's "servants" receive their just payment, just as the "destroyers of the earth" receive their just payment (cf. 2 Thess 1:6–7). Regardless of one's recollection of their deeds (their memory), this passage indicates that earthly actions have a lasting impact. One is not judged merely on subjective recollections of this present life, but on the acts they actually committed. In other words, one's eternal payment corresponds directly with one's earthly deeds.<sup>25</sup> If, as above, one's memory is detailed, then it follows that these details correspond with the reality and rationale of the individual's just eternal recompense.

Revelation 14 offers a similar expectation about the future judgment of one's deeds. Subsequent to the "call for the endurance of the saints" (14:12), this verse reads, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' Yes,' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them'" (14:13).

Of particular interest is the last statement in Revelation 14:13: "for their deeds follow them" (τὰ γὰρ ἔργα αὐτῶν ἀκολουθεῖ μετ' αὐτῶν). The conjunction γάρ introduces the rationale as to why these dead saints are able to rest from their labors: their deeds (τὰ ἔργα, synonymous with labors [τῶν κόπων])<sup>26</sup> of loyalty unto martyrdom (cf. 6:9–11; 14:12) are not forgotten.<sup>27</sup> Osborne summarizes this passage aptly: "What we do for or against God is what we will receive from God.... The unbelievers will receive eternal torment for their evil deeds (14:9–11), and the faithful will receive eternal rewards."<sup>28</sup> In other words, the "rest" (ἀναπαύω, lit. "to cause someone to gain relief from toil")<sup>29</sup> experienced by these believers is directly rooted in God's faithfulness not to overlook or forget their endurance and testimony. God's character, namely his omniscience, is consistent with objective reality and provides believers the courage needed to suffer faithfully. God remembers all things and judges all people with perfect and

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<sup>23</sup> The statement in 11:15, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ," indicates the climactic, likely proleptic nature of this passage. Commenting on it (in particular, 11:19), George Eldon Ladd writes, "That this is a proleptic vision is seen from the fact that the temple is conceived as continuing to be in heaven (14:15, 17; 15:5; 16:17). The opening of the temple is a proleptic, symbolic act of the consummation which does not itself occur until chapters 21–22. In the consummation God himself dwells among his people and there will be no need of a temple" (*A Commentary on the Revelation of John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972], 163). About the future certainty of this passage, Mounce notes, "The event is so certain that throughout this section it is repeatedly spoken of as already having taken place" (*Revelation*, 226).

<sup>24</sup> Bratcher and Hatton note, "Rewarding here means that God will 'pay back,' 'recompense,' 'do good things to,' these people for what they have done" (*Handbook on Revelation*, 178).

<sup>25</sup> Of course, the whole of Revelation testifies to the reality that believers are justified based on Christ's accomplishment (e.g., Rev 1:5–6; 3:20; 5:9; 7:10). Mounce summarizes this well: "Although rewards are all of grace (Rom 4:4), they vary according to what each has done (1 Cor 3:8)" (*Revelation*, 227).

<sup>26</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 768. Likewise, Grant R. Osborne writes, "Here ἔργα is virtually synonymous with κόπων and means that all the hard work, not only their good deeds but also their faithfulness under persecution, will be recompensed by God" (*Revelation*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002], 546).

<sup>27</sup> Bratcher and Hatton summarize this verse: "The record or the result of their service as followers of Jesus Christ accompanies them" (*Handbook on Revelation*, 216).

<sup>28</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 546. Similarly, Mounce comments, "These deeds follow them in the sense that there can be no separation between what a person is and what that person does" (*Revelation*, 277).

<sup>29</sup> BDAG, s.v. "ἀναπαύω."

complete justice. In this way, 14:13 demonstrates that the believer's experience after death is directly correspondent to his actions in this life.

Lastly, 20:11–15 provides the most thorough explanation of God's decisive eschatological judgment in Revelation, the great white throne scene. There is debate as to who is present at this judgement, unbelievers or all people.<sup>30</sup> However, for the purpose of this study, the focus is primarily on the role of books/scrolls (βιβλίον): "books were opened" (20:12b), "another book was opened" (20:12c), "the book of life" (twice, 20:12c, 15). The dead are judged "by what was written in the books" (20:12d), "according to what they had done" (twice, 20:12e, 13). The concept of "books" recording all human deeds indicates the objectivity of reality.

The idea that all human deeds are recorded is frequently developed throughout Scripture, as Thomas notes, "Scripture makes consistent reference to a register of human actions (cf. Deut. 32:34; Ps. 56:8; Isa. 65:6; Dan. 7:10; Mal. 3:16; Matt. 12:37)."<sup>31</sup> That these actions are written in books/scrolls indicates the permanence of the record of human deeds. In this way, divine judgment is not arbitrary but rather corresponds with actual historical events.<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, one's eternal destiny depends on faith (or lack thereof) in Jesus Christ: "If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (11:15; cf. Rev 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 21:27).

In summary, even a cursory examination of the above passages (Rev 11:17–18; 14:13; 20:11–15) demonstrates the correspondence between an individual's deeds and their eschatological judgment. John's point is that no one will be puzzled by what they receive from the Lord. The dead will be judged, both the Lord's "servants" and the "destroyers of the earth" (11:18), believers are promised that "their deeds follow them" (14:13), and all people are assured that final judgment is based on "the book of life" (20:12, 15) and "what was written in the books" (20:12). Although one's present memory may be inaccurate or incomplete, John indicates the expectation that the believer's eternal memory in judgment corresponds with objective reality.

### 3. *Eternal Memory as Communal*

Although memory is recalled individually, Revelation presents eternal memory as experienced corporately by the community of believers. That is, believers are pictured as rejoicing in their unique status as the people of God as they share joy in mutually experienced knowledge and events. Just as individuals reminisce over shared knowledge and experiences in this life, Revelation pictures believers reminiscing over the same in the life to come. This is demonstrated in two ways: (1) the status and role

<sup>30</sup> On the one hand Patterson asserts, "The only people appearing ... are those who were not a part of the first resurrection and hence were outside of Christ. No believers are here" (*Revelation*, 359). Alternatively, Osborne claims that this judgment is "universal, beginning with the saints and then finishing with the sinners" (*Revelation*, 719).

<sup>31</sup> Robert Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 431. Likewise, Mounce comments, "The idea of a divine register is an ancient one" (*Revelation*, 376).

<sup>32</sup> Revelation 20:12 evokes the language of Daniel 7:10 (LXX): "And books were opened" (καὶ βιβλία ἠνοιχθησαν; Rev 20:12); "And books were opened" (καὶ βιβλίοι ἠνεώχθησαν; Dan 7:10). In both cases, eschatological judgment is in view. David E. Aune, provides an extensive comparison of the language of "books" in Revelation with various Jewish writings (*Revelation 17–22*, WBC 52C [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998], 1102).



of the people of God, and (2) the active praise by the people of God. Although closely connected, the second builds upon the first.

### 3.1. The Status and Role of the People of God

In Revelation 5:9–10, the twenty-four elders praise the Lamb who ransomed individuals “from every tribe and language and people and nation.” In view of the Lamb’s salvific work (“by your blood, you ransomed [ἀγοράζω; lit. “purchased”]”), this group has been made “a kingdom of priests to our God” who “will reign upon the earth.”<sup>33</sup> Here, there is a distinction between status and responsibility. As Osborne notes, “The redemption effected gives a new status.”<sup>34</sup> In turn, this new status (“kingdom of priests”) provokes a specific role (“they will reign upon the earth”).<sup>35</sup> As such, the progression follows: (1) redemption, (2) new status, and (3) new role. In this way, the future role of the believer depends directly on Christ’s accomplishment and the experience of embracing him as Savior and Lord (cf. 1:5–6; 3:20). The very idea of corporately “reigning upon the earth” presupposes the reasons why they reign: their shared knowledge and experience of Christ’s redemption (“by your blood you ransomed”) and their status as a “kingdom of priests.”

This concept of status leading to role is also found in 7:14–17. In this passage, those “coming out of the great tribulation” have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). This passage deals with a specific subset of the people of God who mutually experienced intense trial and persecution.<sup>36</sup> Due to their shared experience (“coming out of the great tribulation”), they are “before the throne of God” (7:15a), they “serve him night and day in his temple” (7:15b), and they are “sheltered” by the Lord’s presence (7:15c). They no longer hunger, thirst, or are struck by sun or scorching heat (7:16). They are led by the Lamb who wipes away all tears (7:17). In this way, the believer’s experience in heaven is intricately connected to and reflects their past experiences on earth. The shared experience (in this case, the “great tribulation”) has implications that carry on into eternity. As seen below, those in these roles praise the Lord in specific ways, echoing memory of their past experience.

### 3.2. The Active Praise by the People of God

Revelation pictures believers as praising God for his past work in a communal manner. One of the clearest passages that demonstrates this reality is Revelation 15:2–4, in which believers sing songs in praise of Christ’s accomplishment in salvation. The subset of believers who “conquered the beast” sing, “Great and amazing are your deeds.... Just and true are your ways.... All the nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.” Again, as with 7:14–17, the individuals described in this passage are a specific subset of the people of God who have shared knowledge/

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<sup>33</sup> Mounce makes the distinction between corporate and individual roles: “Corporately believers are a kingdom, and individually they are priests to God” (*Revelation*, 136).

<sup>34</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 260.

<sup>35</sup> Beale provides a helpful survey of the intertextual connections between these passages in Revelation and both Exodus 19:6 (“a kingly priesthood”) and Daniel 7:22 (“possessed the kingdom”), 27 (“they should rule”). See Beale, *Revelation*, 358–64.

<sup>36</sup> About this time period, Mounce writes, “It is that specific period of distress and cruel persecution which take place prior to the return of Christ” (*Revelation*, 164). These individuals, however, need not be understood as only martyrs, but as all those who endured this era. Osborne writes, “There is no stress here on martyrdom” (*Revelation*, 318), which stands in contrast to 6:9–11.

experience. Their mutual experience of “conquering the beast” (15:2) provides the reason for them to corporately worship the Lord together. Comparable events are described in 5:13; 7:9–12; 19:1–3, 6–8.

In summary, the book of Revelation envisions numerous instances of individuals serving and praising the Lord. In 5:9–10, believers receive the future role of corporately “reigning on the earth” because of Christ’s accomplishment and their belief in him. In 7:14–17, those who endure the “great tribulation” have the unique role of corporately serving before the Lord as they are sheltered by his presence. In 15:2–4, those who “conquered the beast” sing together a song that reflects their shared experience witnessing the Lord’s eschatological acts. In each of these passages, Revelation pictures the community of believers as keenly aware of past knowledge and experience as they corporately serve and praise the Lord. In this way, memory is not only detailed and reality-correspondent, but also enjoyed and experienced in community.

#### *4. Eternal Memory as Healable*

If eternal memory is detailed, reality-correspondent, and experienced by community, it raises the difficulty as to what will happen to negative memories. Will it be possible for one to forget sin-stained and unwanted memory? In discussing this concept, Gomes poses the practical question: “If we retain our memories of the past, including all the trauma and heart-ache we experienced in this life, then how could we be supremely happy? Would not our memory of those painful events generate renewed hurt and anguish?”<sup>37</sup> In response to the eternality of memory, however, John bases his hope in God as the true comforter who is able to console and heal painful and sorrowful memory.

Of particular interest to this topic is the expectation that the Lord will “wipe away every tear” (7:17; 21:4). This expectation that God will wipe away tears echoes back to Isaiah 25:8 (the Lord will “wipe tears away from all faces”).<sup>38</sup> Although some view this as anticipating tears of joy to be wiped away,<sup>39</sup> it seems better to take it as providing a unique comfort to those who experience specific pain. As Patterson comments about 7:17, “The emphasis here seems to be on the available comfort coming from the Lamb as a part of the heavenly package that includes provision.”<sup>40</sup> In its simplest understanding, 7:17

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<sup>37</sup> Gomes, *Heaven and Hell*, 224. Gomes continues, “How could God ‘wipe away every tear from [our] eyes’ (Rev. 7:17; 21:4) without also wiping out our memory of what caused those tears in the first place?” (p. 224). In response, he asserts: “We will remember *that* these hurts occurred, but they will no longer bring us pain but rather praise, as we contemplate how God has worked all for good (Rom. 8:28) and brought us ‘beauty for ashes’ and ‘the oil of joy for mourning’ (Isa. 61:3, KJV)” (p. 225).

<sup>38</sup> About this connection, Beale writes, “The picture of a Father gently wiping away his children’s tears is but another metaphor Isaiah used for the joyous relief of the coming restoration. Those who had faithfully endured suffering, including death, during the captivity would be comforted by God’s presence and rejoice in the salvation for which they had waited” (Isa. 25:8–9; cf. Jer. 31:16 for a similar metaphorical depiction of Israel’s restoration hope)” (*Revelation*, 443).

<sup>39</sup> For example, Mounce asserts, “The tears that God wipes away are not the tears of grief over a wasted life. Rather, like the tears of a child brought suddenly from sorrow to delight, they linger rather ridiculously on the faces of the redeemed” (*Revelation*, 167).

<sup>40</sup> Patterson, *Revelation*, 205. Patterson continues by commenting that in 7:17, “The Lamb who is the shepherd is seen as providing all that is needed through both provision and solace to those who lacked both provision and comfort in the midst of the great tribulation” (p. 205).

and 21:4 indicate that God provides a unique consoling and healing ministry to those who, for whatever reason, need it.

This is consistent with the entirety of Revelation. Throughout this book, it appears that those who experience more intense sorrow and endure deeper heart-ache in this life are actually the ones who receive greater and more personal comfort in the life to come. It is those who are slain for the Word of God (6:9) who are given a white robe (6:11); those who endure the great tribulation (7:14) who are sheltered with the Lamb's presence (7:15); those who die in the Lord (14:13a) who are given rest from their labors (14:13b); those who conquer the beast (15:2) who sing the song of Moses (15:3–4). Despite the undoubtedly painful experience of those who suffer throughout the book of Revelation, never do these sufferers make an objection nor do they protest. In an ironic twist, it is as if suffering and persecution is itself a blessing and privilege (cf. Matt 5:10–12; 2 Cor 1:4–5; 2 Tim 2:12; Jas 5:11; 1 Pet 3:14), as God promises that those who suffer will receive comfort directly correspondent to their pain. God's presence itself acts as a healing balm.<sup>41</sup> In this way, Revelation testifies to the expectation that God heals and comforts in the best, most effective, and most gracious manner.

### *5. Implications and Conclusion*

This brief study has sought to overview the significant passages in Revelation that speak to the eternality of human memory. In so doing, it has proposed that Revelation depicts the believer's eternal memory as consisting of details, corresponding to objective reality, experienced by community, and comforted by God. Far from being lost upon death, the believer holds the expectant hope that the memories and experiences of this life are able to be recalled in the future. Although Revelation primarily deals with painful memory (persecution, suffering, and death), it provides expectations regarding all memory.

That memory consists of details provides encouragement to Christians who long to remember the joyful parts of life long-forgotten: holidays with family, birthday celebrations, graduations, and other momentous occasions. That memory corresponds to objective reality provides the hope that even an inaccurate memory will one day be made right, that God remembers all and will reward a life lived in faithfulness to him. That memory is experienced by community provides the expectation of future reunions with friends and family in eternity. That memory is healable provides the assurance that even the darkest of pain will be comforted by the presence of the Savior.<sup>42</sup> As such, this study concludes with the words of Charles Hodge:

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<sup>41</sup> This concept of progressive healing is found also in Revelation 22:2 in that the leaves from the tree of life are "for the healing of the nations." Bratcher and Hatton translate this as, "the leaves ... are used to heal the wounds of all peoples" (*Handbook of Revelation*, 312).

<sup>42</sup> C. S. Lewis describes this concept artfully in his *The Great Divorce*, "Son,' he said, 'ye cannot in your present state understand eternity ... But ye can get some likeness of it if ye say that both good and evil, when they are full grown, become retrospective. ... That is what mortals misunderstand. They say of some temporal suffering, "No future bliss can make up for it," not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory. ... The good man's past begins to change so that his forgiven sins and remembered sorrows take on the quality of Heaven: the bad man's past already conforms to his badness and is filled only with dreariness. And that is why, at the end of all things, when the sun rises here and the twilight turns to blackness down here, the Blessed will say "We have never lived anywhere except in Heaven," and the Lost, "We were always in Hell." And both will speak truly" (*The Great Divorce*, reprint ed. [New York: HarperCollins, 2001]), 69.

Memory, however, is not only to continue, but will doubtless with all our faculties be greatly exalted, so that the records of the past may be as legible to us as the events of the present. If this be so, if men are to retain in heaven the knowledge of their earthly life; this of course involves the recollection of all social relations, of all the ties of respect, love, and gratitude which bind men in the family and in society.<sup>43</sup>

With this joyful anticipation in mind—where good memory is recalled with detailed accuracy and painful memory is uniquely comforted by the Savior—the believer is one who joins the call of John in Revelation, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (22:20).

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<sup>43</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:782.

# Christological Arguments for Compatibilism in Reformed Theology

— Randall K. Johnson —

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**Abstract:** Christian compatibilists believe that human freedom and moral responsibility are compatible with theological determinism, i.e., a robust account of divine sovereignty. Whereas most arguments for compatibilism stem from considerations about divine providence, human nature, or sin, we ought not to neglect christological arguments. In this paper, I present the christological arguments for compatibilism from three prominent theologians in the Reformed tradition: John Calvin, Francis Turretin, and Jonathan Edwards. I conclude with some reflections on the power of christological arguments for compatibilism.

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Compatibilists believe that human freedom and moral responsibility are compatible with determinism. Determinism is the notion that every event or effect in the world is determined by a previous cause or condition. *Theological* determinism claims that God himself determines every event or effect in the world. In other words, God's sovereignty ensures that everything happens exactly how God has decreed and willed it to be. Contemporary theological arguments for compatibilism tend to arise out of discussions about divine providence, anthropology, or soteriology. But compatibilism may also be derived from Christology. In this paper, I present the christological arguments for compatibilism from three prominent theologians in the Reformed tradition: John Calvin, Francis Turretin, and Jonathan Edwards. Christological arguments for compatibilism are powerful and compelling, so they ought not be neglected by compatibilists.

## *1. Historical Christological Arguments for Compatibilism*

Calvin, Turretin, and Edwards are representatives of the Reformed tradition's legacy of christological arguments for compatibilism. Their prominence as Reformed theologians, their writing and influence on free will debates, and their commitment to classical Christology make them appropriate representatives. By "classical Christology," I mean the teachings about the person of Christ found in Scripture and affirmed in the ecumenical creeds. Classical Christology maintains that Christ is one person subsisting in two natures. Because he is both God and man, he is the subject both of the divine will and a particular human will. Thus, classical Christology affirms dyothelitism (two wills) and the notion that his two wills

are never contrary to each other (what I call “volitional non-contrariety”). Classical Christology also affirms Christ’s impeccability: Christ cannot sin. Paul Helm writes, “Both Turretin and Edwards were classical theists, and adherents to Chalcedonian Christology. They were therefore committed to God’s infinite knowledge, power and wisdom, and the impeccability of the human nature of Jesus Christ. And both were explicitly committed to the freedom of God and of the Son of God incarnate, Jesus.”<sup>1</sup> Calvin was likewise committed to classical Christology, Christ’s impeccability, and the freedom of God and his Son.<sup>2</sup>

Christological arguments for compatibilism appear in three forms: (1) appeals to Christ’s wills and impeccability, (2) appeals to the necessity of the incarnation and the atonement, and (3) appeals to Christ’s teaching. First, Christ was unable to sin and unable to will contrary to the divine will, that is, he was unable to act otherwise than he did. Yet, he acted freely and willingly. Therefore, compatibilism is true. Second, because of the fact of sin and God’s nature, decree, and promise, the incarnation and atonement were made necessary. Jesus’s life and death were ordered by necessity. Yet, he acted freely and willingly. Therefore, compatibilism is true. Third, Jesus’s teaching about himself and about human nature implied compatibilism.

Each of the three argument forms may be found in Calvin, Turretin, and Edwards to some degree or other (whether explicitly or implicitly), but no theologian devotes equal attention to each. In what follows, I present these historical christological arguments, attending to each theologian’s own emphases.

## 2. John Calvin (1509–1564)

John Calvin has had a tremendous influence on both Christology and the free will debate.<sup>3</sup> Calvin’s writing on the nature of free will is less developed and organized than either Turretin’s or Edwards’s, so an explanation of his view requires a few more steps. Calvin is widely recognized as a theological determinist and a compatibilist, but his discussions of free will are predominantly related to humanity’s post-fall condition. In what follows, I present a sketch of Calvin’s multilayer view of free will and then show how he uses the words of Jesus to support his view.

### 2.1. Providence

Calvin taught that everything happens according to God’s meticulous will and providence—“nothing at all in the world is undertaken without his determination.”<sup>4</sup> He writes,

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Helm, *Reforming Free Will: A Conversation on the History of Reformed Views on Compatibilism (1500–1800)* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2020), 151.

<sup>2</sup> See Book 2 of John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960). For a summary of the Reformer’s contribution to Christology, see Robert Letham, “The Person of Christ,” in *Reformation Theology: A Systematic Summary*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 313–46.

<sup>3</sup> For Calvin’s Christology, see Henri Blocher, “The Atonement in John Calvin’s Theology,” in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical & Practical Perspectives: Essays in Honor of Roger Nicole*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 279–303; Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, rev. ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013), 220–31. For Calvin’s view of freedom, see Paul Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 157–83.

<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1.16.6.

But anyone who has been taught by Christ's lips that all the hairs of his head are numbered (Matt. 10:30) will look farther afield for a cause, and will consider that all events are governed by God's secret plan. And concerning inanimate objects we ought to hold that, although each one has by nature been endowed with its own property, yet it does not exercise its own power except in so far as it is directed by God's ever-present hand. These are, thus, nothing but instruments to which God continually imparts as much effectiveness as he wills, and according to his own purpose bends and turns them to either one action or another.<sup>5</sup>

This deterministic providence extends not only to inanimate objects, but to *all* events, including the thoughts and actions of human beings.<sup>6</sup> Yet, Calvin believed that his view of divine providence was consistent with God holding people morally accountable for their actions.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, God does not govern merely the morally appraisable actions of free creatures, he also governs the morally insignificant actions:

Even though we have touched upon the matter above, we have not yet explained what freedom man may possess in actions that are of themselves neither righteous nor corrupt, and look toward the physical rather than the spiritual life....

The force of God's providence extends to this point: not only that things occur as he foresees to be expedient, but that men's wills also incline to the same end. Indeed, if we ponder the direction of external things, we shall not doubt that to this extent they are left to human judgment. But if we lend our ears to the many testimonies which proclaim that the Lord also rules men's minds in external things, these will compel us to subordinate decision itself to the special impulse of God.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to note that Calvin was not a necessitarian; he preserved God's freedom despite the necessity of the world conforming to God's will. He writes, "But what God has determined must necessarily so take place, even though it is neither unconditionally, nor of its own peculiar nature, necessary."<sup>9</sup> Helm summarizes, "The particular outcomes that He wills are thus hypothetically or conditionally necessary, and those He does not choose may be conditionally impossible."<sup>10</sup>

## 2.2. The Soul

Calvin's deterministic view of divine providence is just one layer of his understanding of human freedom. The next layer concerns the faculties of the soul considered simply (apart from the fall, sin, and depravity).<sup>11</sup> Calvin posits two faculties of the soul: understanding (represented by the mind) and will (represented by the heart):

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<sup>5</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1.16.2.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1.16.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1.17.5.

<sup>8</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.4.6.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1.16.9.

<sup>10</sup> Helm, *Reforming Free Will*, 85.

<sup>11</sup> For Calvin's view of the soul, see Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, 129–56.

Thus let us, therefore, hold ... that the human soul consists of two faculties, understanding and will. Let the office, moreover, of understanding be to distinguish between objects, as each seems worthy of approval or disapproval; while that of the will, to choose and follow what the understanding pronounces good, but to reject and flee what it disapproves.... let it be enough for us that the understanding is, as it were, the leader and governor of the soul; and that the will is always mindful of the bidding of the understanding, and in its own desires awaits the judgment of the understanding.<sup>12</sup>

The will is dependent and subsequent to the understanding. The will must choose what the understanding judges to be good. This view of the soul's faculties is characteristic of Reformed compatibilism.<sup>13</sup> The will cannot do otherwise than the understanding dictates.

### 2.3. Bondage of the Will

The final layer to Calvin's compatibilism concerns the bondage of the will to sin. He writes, "Because of the bondage of sin by which the will is held bound, it cannot move toward good, much less apply itself thereto."<sup>14</sup> This bondage of sin does not take away the will but the "soundness of will."<sup>15</sup> Because of the fall and original sin, people sin necessarily, though not by compulsion. He explains the difference between necessity and compulsion by appealing to the necessity of God's goodness:

God's goodness is so connected with his divinity that it is no more necessary for him to be God than for him to be good. But the devil by his fall was so cut off from participation in good that he can do nothing but evil. But suppose some blasphemer sneers that God deserves little praise for His own goodness, constrained as He is to preserve it. Will this not be a ready answer to him: not from violent impulsion, but from His boundless goodness comes God's inability to do evil? Therefore, if the fact that he must do good does not hinder God's free will in doing good; if the devil, who can do only evil, yet sins with his will—who shall say that man therefore sins less willingly because he is subject to the necessity of sinning?<sup>16</sup>

The bondage of sin inclines the will toward evil and away from God. The will may be inclined toward God by God's grace alone, through regeneration by the Spirit. "Surely there is ready and sufficient reason to believe that good takes its origin from God alone. And only in the elect does one find a will inclined to good. Yet we must seek the cause of election outside men. It follows, thence, that man has a right will not from himself, but that it flows from the same good pleasure by which we were chosen before creation of the world (Eph. 1:4)."<sup>17</sup>

As I have shown, Calvin's view of free will is complicated by three layers: providence, the faculties of the soul, and the bondage of the will to sin. These three, interestingly, align with three of the "threats" to human freedom, namely, theological determinism, psychological determinism, and bondage of the will.

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<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.7; cf. 2.2.2.

<sup>13</sup> Helm, *Reforming Free Will*, 195–232.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.3.5.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.3.5.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.3.5.

<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.3.8.



#### 2.4. Christological Support for Bondage of the Will

Calvin supports his compatibilism from the very words of Jesus. On the bondage of the will toward evil, Calvin writes, “If the whole man is depicted by these words of Christ, ‘What is born of flesh, is flesh’ (John 3:6) (as is easy to prove), man is very clearly shown to be a miserable creature.”<sup>18</sup> “Flesh,” here, refers not particularly to the body but to whatever is opposed to the Spirit. The flesh is “so perverse that it is wholly disposed to bear a grudge against God [and] cannot agree with the justice of divine law, can, in short, beget nothing but the occasion of death.”<sup>19</sup> A person who is born of flesh cannot do good, and he must be born again, just as Jesus declares in John 3.

Jesus taught that regeneration by the Spirit is necessary in order to have a right understanding of God (mind) and a will inclined toward God (heart); “man’s mind can become spiritually wise only in so far as God illumines it.”<sup>20</sup> Calvin continues, “Christ also confirmed this most clearly in his own words when he said: ‘No one can come to me unless it be granted by my Father’ (John 6:44).... nothing is accomplished by the preaching him if the Spirit, as our inner teacher, does not show our minds the way. Only those men, therefore, who have heard and have been taught by the Father come to him.”<sup>21</sup> Apart from regeneration, people cannot but will evil: “Do you see that people can will only evil until by a wonderful transformation their will is changed from evil to good?”<sup>22</sup> Calvin shows that Jesus himself understood that God determines who will come to him: “Now can Christ’s saying (‘Every one who has heard ... from the Father comes to me’ [John 6:45, cf. Vg.]) be understood in any other way than the grace of God is efficacious of itself.”<sup>23</sup> Yet, God’s efficacious grace is not compulsion:

True, indeed, as to the kind of *drawing*, it is not violent, so as to compel men by external force; but still it is a powerful impulse of the Holy Spirit, which makes men willing who formerly were unwilling and reluctant. It is a false and profane assertion, therefore, that none are *drawn* but those who are willing to be *drawn*, as if man made himself obedient to God by his own efforts; for the willingness with which men follow God is what they already have from himself; who has formed their hearts to obey him.<sup>24</sup>

Jesus taught that all blessing comes from God alone, and apart from God’s efficacious government of our wills, we cannot do good.

Christ has given a testimony of his benefits clear enough so that they cannot be spitefully suppressed.... “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). He does not say that we are too weak to be sufficient unto ourselves, but in reducing us to nothing he excludes

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<sup>18</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.3.1.

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.3.1.

<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.2.20.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.2.20.

<sup>22</sup> Calvin, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defense of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice against Pighius* 3.308, ed. A. N. S. Lane, trans. G. I. Davies (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 110–11.

<sup>23</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.3.10. And God’s efficacious grace places a necessity on the receiver: “Again, as Christ formerly affirmed that men are not fitted for believing, until they have been drawn, so he now declares that the grace of Christ, by which they are drawn, is efficacious, so that they necessarily believe.” John Calvin, *John Calvin’s Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Altenmünster: Jazzybee Verlag, 1847), 1:183.

<sup>24</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on John*, 1:182.

all estimation of even the slightest ability. If grafted in Christ, we bear fruit like a vine—which derives the energy for its growth from the moisture of the earth, from the dew of heaven, and from the quickening warmth of the sun—I see no share in good works remaining to us if we keep unimpaired what is God’s.... Now Christ simply means that we are dry and worthless wood when we are separated from him, for apart from him we have no ability to do good, as elsewhere he also says: “Every tree which my Father has not planted will be uprooted” (Matt. 15:13, cf. Vg).<sup>25</sup>

Apart from Christ, our wills cannot be inclined toward good.

### *2.5. Christological Support for Moral Responsibility*

Even though Christ taught that people are born into flesh and are unable to incline their wills toward God apart from regeneration, people are still moral agents responsible for their actions. Calvin shows that Jesus himself taught moral responsibility.

First, even though anyone who does good, does so by the grace of God, people are rewarded for their good works:

While the Lord enriches his servants daily and heaps new gifts of his grace upon them—because he holds pleasing and acceptable the work that he has begun in them, he finds in them something he may follow up by greater graces. This is the meaning of the statement, “To him who has shall be given” (Matt. 25:29; Luke 19:26). Likewise: “Well done, good servant; you have been faithful in a few matters, I will set you over much” (Matt. 25:21, 23; Luke 19:17; all Vg., conflated). But here we ought to guard against two things: (1) not to say that lawful use of the first grace is rewarded by later graces, as if man by his own effort rendered God’s grace effective; or (2) so to think of the reward as to cease to consider it of God’s free grace.<sup>26</sup>

Calvin explains, “[God] rewards, as if they were our own virtues, those graces which he bestows upon us, because he makes them ours.”<sup>27</sup> The good works that God does through people are worthy of praise.

Second, despite the fact that no one can come to the Father unless he be drawn by the Father, Calvin shows that Christ still saw exhortation as important: “Christ does not neglect the teacher’s office, but with his own voice unremittingly summons those who need to be taught within by the Holy Spirit in order to make progress.”<sup>28</sup> That Christ saw exhortation as valid and necessary implies moral responsibility. If people are not morally responsible for their actions, they would not need to know how to live in a right relationship with God and their neighbor.

Third, Calvin addresses the objection that if people do not have the ability to do good on their own, then the reproofs in Scripture are pointless. Calvin points out that Jesus prays for his people: “Hence also Christ asks the Father to keep us from evil (John 17:15, cf. Vg.).”<sup>29</sup> That Christ prays for his people

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<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.3.9.

<sup>26</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.3.11.

<sup>27</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.5.3.

<sup>28</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.5.5.

<sup>29</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.5.11.

is evidence that the reproofs in Scripture are not pointless. And the fact that reproofs are important is evidence for moral responsibility.

Calvin sees a three-tiered determinism: God's efficacious providence, the understanding's determination of the will, and the bondage of sin. Calvin makes a christological argument for compatibilism by appealing to Jesus own teachings on the necessity of God's grace.

### 3. Francis Turretin (1623–1687)

Francis Turretin, like Calvin, was a theological determinist.<sup>30</sup> He argues that the divine decree necessitates all events in history: "All things were decreed of God by an eternal and unchangeable counsel; hence they cannot but take place in the appointed time; otherwise the counsel of God would be changed, which the Scriptures declare to be impossible (Is. 46:10; Eph. 1:9)."<sup>31</sup> Moreover, all things are preserved, concurred, and governed by God's will in providence.<sup>32</sup> But, he argues, "Predetermination does not destroy, but conserves the liberty of the will. By it, God does not compel rational creatures or make them act by a physical or brute necessity. Rather he only effects this—that they act both consistently with themselves and in accordance with their own nature, i.e., from preference (*ek proaireseōs*) and spontaneously (to wit, they are so determined by God that they also determine themselves)."<sup>33</sup>

Turretin makes both an implicit and an explicit christological argument for compatibilism. His implicit christological argument comes from the conjunction of the necessity of Christ's mediatorial work and his free and willing obedience. Turretin's explicit christological argument for compatibilism is in a discussion about free will considered absolutely.<sup>34</sup>

#### 3.1. Christ's Work as Necessary and Willing

Turretin argues that Christ's person and work were absolutely necessary—not a *simple* absolute necessity but a *consequent* absolute necessity, that is, following God's will to redeem humanity, the

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<sup>30</sup> There is a significant debate as to whether Turretin was, in fact, a theological determinist and compatibilist. Some scholars argue that Turretin was not a compatibilist; for example, Willem J. van Asselt, J. Martin Bac, and Roelf T. te Velde, eds., *Reformed Thought on Freedom: The Concept of Free Choice in Early Modern Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010); cf. Richard A. Muller, *Divine Will and Human Choice: Freedom, Contingency, and Necessity in Early Modern Reformed Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017). In response to Muller and the authors of *Reformed Thought on Freedom*, see Michael Patrick Preciado, *A Reformed View of Freedom: The Compatibility of Guidance Control and Reformed Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019); Helm, *Reforming Free Will*; Helm, "Francis Turretin and Jonathan Edwards on Compatibilism," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 12 (2018): 335–55. Turretin's arguments about the necessity of the incarnation and atonement and Christ's impeccability are, themselves, reasons to believe that he was a compatibilist.

<sup>31</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997), 1:320.

<sup>32</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* 1:501–5.

<sup>33</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* 1:508.

<sup>34</sup> Turretin writes, "Free will can be viewed either in the genus of being and absolutely (as belonging to a rational being in every state); or in the genus of morals and in relation to various states (either of sin or of righteousness)" (*Institutes* 1:665).

incarnation and atonement were absolutely necessary.<sup>35</sup> First, the incarnation was necessary on account of “sin and the decree of God concerning the redemption of men.”<sup>36</sup> The incarnation was necessary “as God cannot deny his own justice, he could not free men without a satisfaction being made first. Satisfaction could not be made to infinite justice except by some infinite ransom (*lystron*); nor could that infinite ransom (*lystron*) be found anywhere except in the Son of God.”<sup>37</sup> Moreover, God’s work of redemption could be performed only by the God-man.

Second, Turretin sees a necessity in the nature of Christ’s mediatorial work. It was necessary that Christ fulfill the threefold office of prophet, priest, and king: “the acts of a Mediator could not be performed otherwise. For two things were necessary: that he should act for us with God (*ta pros ton theon*) and for God with us (*ta pros hēmas*).”<sup>38</sup> His prophetic office is shown to be necessary “(1) From the necessity of a revelation because there can be no knowledge of God and divine things without a revelation ..., (2) From the method of salvation because no means of salvation was given except faith ..., (3) From the oracles of the Old Testament which promise that prophecy, which must necessarily be fulfilled.”<sup>39</sup>

Third, Turretin affirms that Christ’s satisfaction was necessary. Satisfaction was of “absolute necessity, so that God not only has not willed to remit our sins without a satisfaction, but could not do so on account of his justice.”<sup>40</sup> Christ legitimately takes the place of sinners and satisfies God’s wrath because he meets the following conditions:

- (1) A common nature that sin may be punished in the same nature which is guilty (Heb. 2:14).
- (2) The consent of the will that spontaneously and willingly (without compulsion) he should take that burden upon himself: “Lo, I come to do thy will” (Heb. 10:9).
- (3) Power and dominion over his own life so that he may rightfully determine respecting it: “No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (Jn. 10:18).
- (4) The power of bearing all the punishment

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<sup>35</sup> Turretin parts ways with Augustine, Aquinas, and many of the Reformers by rejecting a mere hypothetical necessity of the incarnation and atonement. For example, Augustine writes, “we must also show, not indeed that no other possible way was available to God, since all things are equally within his power ...” Augustine, *De Trinitate* 13.10, 2nd ed., trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 2015). Aquinas, likewise: “In the first way [i.e., the sense of necessity “when the end cannot be without it”] it was not necessary that God should become incarnate for the restoration of human nature. For God with His omnipotent power could have restored human nature in many other ways.” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III q.1 a.2, trans. Laurence Shapcote (Green Bay, WI: Aquinas Institute, 2012). Cf. Calvin, who writes, “Now it was of the greatest importance for us that he who was to be our Mediator be both true God and true man. If someone asks why this is necessary, there has been no simple (to use the common expression) or absolute necessity. Rather, it has stemmed from a heavenly decree, on which men’s salvation depended. Our most merciful Father decreed what was best for us.” Calvin, *Institutes* 2.12.1.

For Turretin, the incarnation and atonement were not necessary merely because of the divine decree to bring about an incarnation and atonement (i.e., on account of the divine will); rather, the incarnation and atonement were necessary because of the divine nature.

<sup>36</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* 2:301.

<sup>37</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* 2:302.

<sup>38</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* 2:394.

<sup>39</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* 2:398.

<sup>40</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* 2:408.

due to us and of taking it away as much from himself as from us.... (5) Holiness and immaculate purity, that being polluted by no sin, he might not have to offer sacrifice for himself, but only for us (Heb. 7:25–27).<sup>41</sup>

Christ's death, then, was both voluntary and necessary. Christ "willingly took the punishment upon himself."<sup>42</sup>

Turretin derives the necessity of satisfaction from the justice of God, the nature of sin, the sanction of the law, the preaching of the gospel, the greatness of God's love, and the glory of the divine attributes (namely, his holiness, justice, wisdom, and love).<sup>43</sup> The Christ event is not necessary merely for our salvation, that is, if we are to be saved, then God must save us. Rather, it was necessary that God act in this way for God to be God (given the fact God's decision to redeem humanity).

The fact that Christ's incarnation and mediatorial work were necessary is not a direct argument for or proof of compatibilism. But implicit to this necessity is that Jesus was incarnated at the right time, was perfectly obedient in his life and death, and was an appropriate satisfaction to God—and *that it could not have been otherwise*.

### 3.2. Indifference Not Required for Christ's Freedom

Turretin produces an explicit christological argument against the notion that freedom requires indifference. For Turretin, freedom consists in rational willingness, not in indifference. By "indifference" in this case, he means "in a compound sense ... whether the will (all requisites being posited; for example, the decree of God and his concurrence; the judgment of the practical intellect, etc.) is always so indifferent and undetermined that it can act or not act."<sup>44</sup> He denies that freedom consists in such indifference:

First, such an indifference to opposites is found in no free agent, whether created or uncreated: neither in God, who is good most freely indeed, yet not indifferently (as if he could be evil), but necessarily and immutably; *nor in Christ, who obeyed God most freely and yet most necessarily because he could not sin ....*<sup>45</sup>

Although, necessarily, Christ could not have sinned, he was still free.

Turretin poses the objection, "That Christ, although he never sinned, still was not absolutely unable to sin; and that it is not repugnant to his nature, will or office to be able to sin?"<sup>46</sup> In other words, the objection states that Christ was peccable; he could have sinned. He answers:

We answer that far be it from us either to think or say any such thing concerning the immaculate Son of God whom we know to have been holy (*akakon*), undefiled

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<sup>41</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* 2:421.

<sup>42</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* 2:422.

<sup>43</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* 2:422–25.

<sup>44</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* 1:666.

<sup>45</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* 1:666 (emphasis mine).

<sup>46</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* 1:666. Similarly, Wilhelmus à Brakel argues, "The Lord Jesus Christ could not will to be either obedient or disobedient to His Father. He could not do anything but be willing to obey His Father. Was not His will absolutely free? ... In all these things there is an absolute freedom of will, but there is no neutrality as far as being willing or not willing to do something, or to will a certain thing or its opposite. Thus, freedom of the will does not consist in neutrality, but is one of necessary consequence" (*The Christian's Reasonable Service*, reprint ed. [Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 1992], 1:409).

(*amianton*), separate from sinners; who not only had no intercourse with sin, but could not have both because he was the Son of God and because he was our Redeemer (who if he could have sinned, could not also have saved us).<sup>47</sup>

It is not the case that Christ merely did not sin; he *could* not sin. Turretin affirms Christ's impeccability according to both his person ("he was the Son of God") and his work ("he was our Redeemer").<sup>48</sup>

According to Turretin, freedom consists in "(1) the choice (*to proairetikon*) so that what is done is not done by a blind impulse and a certain brute instinct, but from choice (*ek proaireseōs*) and the previous light of reason and the judgment of the practical intellect; (2) the voluntariness (*to hekousion*) so that what is done may be done spontaneously and freely without compulsion."<sup>49</sup> Thus, being rational is coextensive with being free. "Hence it follows that it is an inseparable adjunct of the rational agent, attending him in every state so that he cannot be rational without on that very account being free; nor can he be deprived of liberty without being despoiled also of reason."<sup>50</sup> The obedience of Christ, then, consists not in his ability to obey or disobey (because he was "immutably determined to obey the Father") but that he obeys willingly.<sup>51</sup>

#### 4. Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758)

Jonathan Edwards is perhaps the most widely recognized defender of Reformed compatibilism.<sup>52</sup> In order to show that liberty of indifference was not necessary for moral responsibility, Jonathan Edwards argued that Jesus's actions were necessary, and yet, they were morally praiseworthy. In section 3 of part 2 in *Freedom of the Will*, he argues two points:

And, first, I would show, that his holy behavior was necessary; or that it was impossible it should be otherwise, than that he should behave himself holily, and that he should be perfectly holy in each individual act of his life. And secondly, that his holy behavior was properly of the nature of virtue, and was worthy of praise; and that he was the subject of law, precepts or commands, promises and rewards; and that he was in a state of trial.<sup>53</sup>

In what follows, I trace Edwards's argument.

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<sup>47</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* 1:666.

<sup>48</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* 1:666.

<sup>49</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* 1:667.

<sup>50</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* 1:667.

<sup>51</sup> Turretin, *Institutes* 1:667. Cf. Calvin, who writes, "And truly, even in death itself his willing obedience is the important thing because a sacrifice not offered voluntarily would not have furthered righteousness.... And we must hold fast to this: that no proper sacrifice to God could have been offered unless Christ, disregarding his own feelings, subjected and yielded himself wholly to his Father's will" (*Institutes* 2.16.5).

<sup>52</sup> For an introduction to Jonathan Edwards, see Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, eds., "Jonathan Edwards," in *Meet the Puritans: With a Guide to Modern Reprints* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 193–233. For more on Edwards's compatibilism, see Preciado, *A Reformed View of Freedom*, 183–216.

<sup>53</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey, The Works of Jonathan Edwards 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 281.

#### 4.1. *Jesus's Acts Were Necessary*

Edwards affirms the essential features of classical Christology, and in particular, dyothelitism, volitional non-contrariety, and impeccability. He writes, “It was impossible, that the acts of will of the human soul of Christ should, in any instance, degree or circumstance, be otherwise than holy, and agreeable to God’s nature and will.”<sup>54</sup> Edwards makes eleven points to support this position. Most of his points are appeals to God’s promises and their necessary fulfillments in Christ, but he also references Christ’s impeccability. Therefore, we might categorize Edwards’s arguments into the second and third forms of argument: appeals to Christ’s wills and impeccability, and appeals to the necessity of the incarnation and atonement.

First, “God promised so effectually to preserve and uphold him by his Spirit, under all his temptations, that he should not fail of reaching the end for which he came into the world; which he would have failed of, had he fallen into sin.”<sup>55</sup> “Through God’s help, he should be immovable, in a way of obedience, under the great trials of reproach and suffering he should meet with ....”<sup>56</sup> Edwards cites Isaiah 42:1–8; 49:7–9; and 50:5–9 as proof of God’s promise, and Matthew 12:18 as his promise fulfilled.

Second, likewise, God promised that the Messiah would be successful in his office of mediator (e.g., Pss 2:6–7; 110:4) which required perfect obedience. He writes, “God’s absolute promise of any things makes the things promised *necessary*, and their failing to take place absolutely *impossible*: and in like manner it makes those things necessary, on which the thing promised depends, and without which it can’t take effect.”<sup>57</sup>

Third, again, God promised “that God would give them a righteous, sinless Savior” (e.g., Jer 23:5–6; Isa 9:6–7).<sup>58</sup> The New Testament confirms the fulfillment of these promises, for example, “Luke 24:44: ‘That all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the Psalms concerning me.’”<sup>59</sup>

Fourth, these promises are meant for our comfort because they “show it to be impossible that Christ should not have persevered in perfect holiness.”<sup>60</sup> These promises were solemn and often made with an oath, for example, Genesis 22:16–17 wherein God swears by his own Name to bless the nations through the seed of Abraham. Edwards considers the argument of Hebrews 6:17, which comments on Genesis 22: “Wherein God willing more abundantly to shew to the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath; that by two *immutable* things, in which it was *impossible* for God to lie, we might have strong consolation.”<sup>61</sup> Edwards explains that in Hebrews 6, “the *necessity* of the accomplishment, or (which is the same thing) the *impossibility* of the contrary, is fully declared.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 281.

<sup>55</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 281.

<sup>56</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 282–83.

<sup>57</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 283.

<sup>58</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 283.

<sup>59</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 284.

<sup>60</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 284.

<sup>61</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 285.

<sup>62</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 285.

Fifth, “all these promises imply, that the Messiah should perfect the work of redemption; and this implies, that he should persevere in the work which the Father had appointed him, being in all things conformed to his will.... And therefore it was impossible, that the Messiah should fail, or commit sin.”<sup>63</sup>

Sixth, God promised Mary and Joseph that Jesus would save people from their sins (Matt 1:21; Luke 1:32–33). It would be impossible for Jesus to “fail of persevering in integrity and holiness” because that would be inconsistent with God’s promises to Mary and Joseph.<sup>64</sup>

Seventh, because God eternally decreed that Jesus would provide salvation, it would be impossible that Jesus would fail in his mission.

God could not decree before the foundation of the world, to save all that should believe in, and obey Christ, unless he had absolutely decreed that salvation should be provided, and effectually wrought out by Christ. And since ... a decree of God infers necessity; hence it became necessary that Christ should persevere, and actually work out salvation for us, and that he should not fail by the commission of sin.<sup>65</sup>

Eighth, God made a promise to the Son before the ages that through the Son, salvation would come to people (cf. Titus 1:2). It would be inconsistent with this promise for the Son to fail in holiness.

Ninth, in a related way, it would be inconsistent for the Son to fail to do the will of the Father on account of the Father’s promise to the Son. Edwards explains, “If the *Logos*, who was with the Father, before the world, and who made the world, thus engaged in covenant to do the will of the Father in the human nature, and the promise, was as it were recorded, that it might be made sure, doubtless it was *impossible* that it should fail; and so it was *impossible* that Christ should fail of doing the will of the Father in the human nature.”<sup>66</sup> Thus, Christ says, “Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book” (Heb 10:7; cf. Ps 40:7–8).

Tenth, Edwards argues that if it were possible that Christ should fail in holiness, then “the salvation of all the saints, who were saved from the beginning of the world, to the death of Christ, was not built on a firm foundation.”<sup>67</sup> He continues, “[I]f Christ’s virtue might fail, [David and, by extension, the saints of old] was mistaken: his great comfort was not built so sure, as he thought it was, being founded entirely on the determinations of the free will of Christ’s human soul: which was subject to no necessity, and might be determined either one way or the other.”<sup>68</sup>

Eleventh, Christ himself, was confident in his future glory even in the midst of trial and temptation. If Christ could have failed in holiness, he “would have been guilty of presumption, in so abounding in peremptory promises of great things, which depended on a mere contingency; viz. the determinations of his free will, consisting in a freedom *ad utrumque*, to either sin or holiness, standing in indifference, and incident, in thousands of future instances, to go either one way or the other.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 286.

<sup>64</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 286.

<sup>65</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 286.

<sup>66</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 287.

<sup>67</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 287.

<sup>68</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 288.

<sup>69</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 288–89.



#### 4.2. *Jesus's Acts Were Morally Praiseworthy*

Having shown that it would be impossible for Christ to have failed in holiness, Edwards proceeds to show that Christ's acts are indeed morally praiseworthy. Edwards poignantly states, "If there be any truth in Christianity or the holy Scriptures, the man Christ Jesus had his will infallibly, unalterably and unfrustrably determined to good, and that alone; but yet he had promises of glorious rewards made to him, on condition of his persevering in, and perfecting the work which God had appointed (Is. 53:10, 11, 12; Ps. 2 and 110; Is. 49:7, 8, 9)."<sup>70</sup> Christ was promised success and reward for his obedience, and his future success and reward were themselves motivation for his obedience (Heb 12:1–2; Rev 3:21).

Edwards finds it absurd to deny Christ's virtue on account of his not having liberty of indifference. He writes,

And how strange would it be to hear any Christian assert, that the holy and excellent temper and behavior of Jesus Christ, and that obedience which he performed under such great trials, was ... worthy of no reward, no praise, no honor or respect from God or man; because his will was not indifferent, and free either to these things, or the contrary; but under such a strong inclination or bias to the things that were excellent, as made it impossible that he should choose the contrary.<sup>71</sup>

And if Christ is not virtuous, then we ought not to imitate him. Yet, Scripture urges us to imitate Christ in his obedience and suffering in order to share in his reward (e.g., John 15:10; Rom 8:17; 2 Tim 2:11–12; 1 Pet 4:13).

Scripture teaches that God was pleased with the righteousness of Jesus. "The sacrifices of old are spoken of as a sweet savor to God, but the obedience of Christ is far more acceptable than they."<sup>72</sup> In addition to Isaiah 42:21, Psalm 40:6–8, and Matthew 17:5, Edwards partially quotes John 10:17–18 which I provide in full in a modern translation: "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father" (ESV). Edwards explains that in this text, "Christ tells us expressly, that the Father loves him for that wonderful instance of his obedience, his voluntarily yielding himself to death, in compliance with the Father's command."<sup>73</sup>

If Christ's acts were not praiseworthy, then the heavenly hosts were mistaken. Edwards cites Revelation 5:8–12:

The four beasts and the four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having everyone of them harps, and golden vials full of odors ... and they sung a new song, saying, thou art *worthy* to take the book, and to open the seals thereof; for thou wast slain ..., and I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne, and the beasts, and the elders, and the number of them was ten thousand times then thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, *worthy* is the Lamb

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<sup>70</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 289–90.

<sup>71</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 290–91.

<sup>72</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 291–92.

<sup>73</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 292.

that was slain, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing.<sup>74</sup>

God rewards Jesus “far above all his other servants” (e.g., Phil 2:7–9; Ps 45:7).<sup>75</sup> And there is no doubt that Jesus’s reward is a true reward: “a benefit bestowed in consequence of something morally excellent in quality or behavior, in testimony of well-pleasedness in that moral excellency, and respect and favor on that account.”<sup>76</sup>

Finally, in the same way that Adam was in a state of trial in the Garden of Eden, Jesus, too, was in a state of trial. “The last Adam, as Christ is called (1 Cor. 15:45; Rom. 5:14), taking on him the human nature, and so the form of a servant, and being under the law, to stand and act for us, was put into a state of trial, as the first Adam was.”<sup>77</sup> Jesus’s situation satisfied the conditions in which subjects are rightly considered to be in a state of trial, “namely, their afflictions being spoken of as their trials or temptations, their being the subjects of promises, and their being exposed to Satan’s temptations.”<sup>78</sup>

## 5. Reflection

Compatibilism is the dominant position in the Reformed tradition regarding free will.<sup>79</sup> Reformed theologians, with Calvin, typically see a three-tier determinism: a robust divine providence (theological determinism), a view of the soul that considers the will to be dependent on the final dictate of reason (psychological determinism), and a moral inability apart from grace (bondage of the will). Despite determinism, these theologians see human beings as significantly free moral agents—worthy of praise or blame.

Christological arguments for compatibilism are common in the Reformed tradition. These arguments come in three forms: (1) appeals to the teachings of Jesus Christ, (2) appeals to Christ’s wills and impeccability, and (3) appeals to the necessity of the incarnation and atonement.<sup>80</sup> I have shown that Calvin appeals to the teachings of Jesus Christ to support his view of humans’ inability to do good apart from the grace of God, and yet, humans are morally responsible agents. I have shown that Turretin and Edwards appeal to the necessity of the incarnation and atonement while simultaneously affirming Christ’s

<sup>74</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 292.

<sup>75</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 293.

<sup>76</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 293.

<sup>77</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 293.

<sup>78</sup> Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 293.

<sup>79</sup> For example, see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, new ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 106–8, 247–48; Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims On the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 355–62, 431–34; John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 148–68, 809–44.

<sup>80</sup> Each of these christological arguments may be found in contemporary Reformed theology. For the first appeal, see Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 79–81; John Frame, *The Doctrine of God, A Theology of Lordship* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 142; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 434.

For the second appeal, see D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension*, reprint ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1994), 157–60; Bruce A. Ware, “The Gospel of Christ,” in *Be-*

willing obedience. I have also shown how both Turretin and Edwards reject the notion that freedom requires indifference by appealing to Christ's impeccability and volitional non-contrariety. Although most contemporary arguments for compatibilism involve discussions about divine providence, human constitution and moral psychology, or sin and regeneration, there is a rich tradition of christological arguments for compatibilism in Reformed theology.

Christological arguments are especially powerful and compelling for several reasons. First, Jesus Christ is a real, historical person who is free and morally praiseworthy, and yet, he could not sin or act contrary to God's plan and promises. Jesus is a concrete example of the compatibility of freedom and determinism. No other person in history is as clearly morally praiseworthy; and no other person in history is as clearly determined to act unwaveringly according to God's design.

Second, the incarnation and atonement are the center of Christianity, the Bible, and the gospel. These are not peripheral matters but core doctrines and the focal point of all history. Because the incarnation and atonement are part of—indeed, central to—God's plan, the Bible uses the strongest language to describe their necessity, for example, “Jesus [was] delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23); “This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph 3:11); and “God decreed [the mystery of the gospel of Christ] before the ages for our glory” (1 Cor 2:7). The necessity and importance of the incarnation and atonement underscore the usefulness of christological arguments for compatibilism. To argue that Christ could have done otherwise than to live sinlessly, obey the Father, fulfill God's promises, and realize God's eternal plan is to undermine the foundation of Christianity.

Third, Jesus's teaching bears divine authority. If Jesus's teachings imply compatibilism, then God's own words imply compatibilism. Of course, all Scripture is inspired and authoritative, so this point is not to suggest that the book of Matthew, for example, is more important than, say, the letter to the Romans. Rather, this kind of christological argument for compatibilism is employed especially against those who might claim that Jesus was uninterested in or ambivalent to the issue of freedom and divine sovereignty—that only Paul was concerned with freedom—or, worse, that free will is a Hellenistic (or even modern) debate read into the text rather than out of it. For these reasons, Christological arguments for compatibilism ought not be neglected by compatibilists.<sup>81</sup>

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*yond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity*, ed. John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Kjoss Helseth (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 320–33; Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 94–95.

For the third appeal, see Paul Helm, *The Providence of God*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 213–16; Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*, 157–60; John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 518, 766–67; Ware, *God's Greater Glory*, 89–90; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 433.

<sup>81</sup> I would like to thank Steve Wellum, Bruce Ware, Paul Helm, Guillaume Bignon, and Torey Teer for comments and suggestions on earlier drafts.

# Christ For Us: An Analysis of Bonhoeffer's Christology and Its Implications for His Ethic

— Stephen Estes —

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the Christology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the famous German theologian who stood against evil in a day when his contemporaries failed. It traces the outline of Christology, including its dual emphasis on the transcendence and the immanence of God in Christ. Along the way, it also contrasts his theology with popular theologies of his day, including those who used the “Orders of Creation” as a theological defense of Nazism, and those within the Confessing Church who resisted but nonetheless did not recognize the importance of standing with the Jews in their persecution. This article concludes that Bonhoeffer’s exceptional ethic was the natural outworking of his robust Christology.

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In September of 1933, German Church delegates gathered in Wittenberg, many of them dressed in the brown-shirted SA uniform. During what subsequently came to be called the Brown Synod, “Ludwig Muller, the ‘German Christian’ Reich Bishop threw down the gauntlet to his church opponents. ‘The old has come to an end,’ he proclaimed. ‘The new has begun. The political church struggle is over. The struggle for the soul of the people now begins.’”<sup>1</sup> When in January of 1933 the National Socialists rose to power and ushered in the Third Reich, many Christians in Germany celebrated what they interpreted as a return to German significance and prosperity. Very few resisted any of the Nazi policies. Those who did resist the political encroachment into the affairs of the state church formed the “Confessing Church” in 1934, which would subsequently adopt the Barmen Declaration which embraced Christian orthodoxy and rejected the Nazi ecclesiological agenda. However, despite the pleas of a few voices, even the Barmen Declaration failed to stand against the racial purification of the German Church as ordered in the Aryan Clause of the “Law for the Re-establishment of the Professional Civil Service.” Hardly anyone saw sufficient reason to stand with their fellow Christians of Jewish descent against the

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<sup>1</sup> Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4.

rising political onslaught.<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one who did. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's biographer, Eberhard Bethge, understates the situation when he describes the summer of 1933 as "turbulent."<sup>3</sup> That year entailed the early persecution of the Jews in Germany, as a battle was waged for the nation and for the nation's Evangelical church. The church was at the heart of this conflict in 1933, and Bonhoeffer played a key role in the struggle for Germany's soul.

One key piece of Hitler's domestic policy was to resolve the "Jewish Question" through a "Law for the Re-establishment of the Professional Civil Service" that included an "Aryan Clause" that disqualified people of Jewish descent, specifically 'those of non-Aryan descent,' from holding any state office. Because the Evangelical Church in Germany was a state church, Christian pastors of Jewish descent were excluded by this prohibition. "Bonhoeffer helped formulate tracts and statements opposing the intrusion of the Aryan legislation into the church."<sup>4</sup> Some others also opposed the new government's intrusion into the church. "The leaders of the Pastors' Emergency League, spearheaded by the dynamic Dahlem, Berlin preacher Martin Niemöller, rejected the established Protestant Church (Reichskirche) and formed the Confessing Church in 1934."<sup>5</sup> According to Bonhoeffer scholar Victoria Barnett, "Some Christians, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, began to recognize that brutal treatment of Jews violated the Christian doctrine of love for one's neighbor. Bonhoeffer's early awareness of the deeper significance of the 'Aryan' laws prompted him to write a thorough analysis of the problem in 1933."<sup>6</sup> Barnett goes on to criticize Bonhoeffer's theological understanding of Judaism as antisemitic. Despite the criticisms which some contemporary scholars express for portions of Bonhoeffer's writings, even his critics agree that Dietrich Bonhoeffer's perceptive and passionate stance against Nazism was unique among his contemporaries. Another Bonhoeffer scholar, John de Gruchy observes that "Bonhoeffer was the first Evangelical theologian to attack the [anti-Jewish] legislation. In his essay on "The Church and the Jewish Question," written on May 7, he stated clearly what positions were open to the Church in relating to the State."<sup>7</sup> What prompted Bonhoeffer's ready response to the troubling questions of his day? The answer begins with a question.

"Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" This question famously emerges from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's letter to Eberhard Bethge as Bonhoeffer described his struggles while in a Nazi prison. This question was programmatic in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's thought throughout his life and work. Andreas Pangritz calls this question the "*cantus firmus* of Bonhoeffer's theological development from the beginning to the end,"<sup>8</sup> and James Woelfel aptly calls Christology "the golden thread which ties together his works from the first

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<sup>2</sup> Shelley Baranowski, "The Confessing Church and Antisemitism: Protestant Identity, German Nationhood, and the Exclusion of Jews," in *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust*, ed. Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 90–109.

<sup>3</sup> Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, trans. Eric Mosbacher et al., revised ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 219.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Zerner, "Church, State and the 'Jewish Question,'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 190–205.

<sup>5</sup> Zerner, "Church, State and the 'Jewish Question,'" 192.

<sup>6</sup> Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest against Hitler* (New York: Oxford, 1992), 125.

<sup>7</sup> John W. de Gruchy, "The Development of Bonhoeffer's Theology," in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, *The Making of Modern Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 1–42.

<sup>8</sup> Andreas Pangritz, "Who Is Jesus Christ, for Us, Today?," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 134–53.

to the last.”<sup>9</sup> Nowhere in the Bonhoeffer corpus does his Christology shine through quite as clearly as in his “Christology lectures,” which he delivered as privatdozent to students at the University of Berlin in the summer of 1933. Within these lectures Bonhoeffer answers the question, “who is Christ?” saying that “Christ is *pro nobis*, for us.”<sup>10</sup> Delivered mere months after Hitler’s installment as Chancellor, these lectures are a clear presentation of Bonhoeffer’s theology as well as a bold critique of radical nationalist ideals, when read in light of the ongoing German Church struggle and the political environment. It is ultimately Bonhoeffer’s Christology which led him to vehemently oppose the Nazi agenda and to thus distinguish himself from his German contemporaries. History is famously easy to evaluate in retrospect, and notoriously difficult to live. This paper will argue that Bonhoeffer’s Christology drove him to stand distinctively against Nazism and the suffering it caused.

### *1. Bonhoeffer’s Christology from Above*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s theological method begins with the assertion of Christ as the authoritative Logos of God. This Christology from above contradicted both the prevailing theological method of his contemporaries in Berlin and their theological justification of the Nazi movement via their doctrine of the orders of creation. Bonhoeffer’s high Christology enabled him to oppose Nazi policies that violated the command of Christ because his Christology begins with the authority of Christ as revealed from above.

#### **1.1. The Divine Logos against the Human ‘Logos’**

The introduction to Bonhoeffer’s Christology lectures contrasts starkly with the contemporary theological method at the University of Berlin. Bonhoeffer begins, not with a quest for the “historical Jesus,” in fact he concludes that all such quests have failed,<sup>11</sup> but rather he begins his Christology with the concept of Christ as the risen Word of God who reveals God to us today. Bonhoeffer contrasts the human logos with the divine Logos, who we can only approach through faithful attentiveness. “Christology, as the doctrine about Christ, is a rather peculiar area of scholarship, [to the extent that] Christ is the very Word of God. Christology is doctrine, speaking, the word about the Word of God. Christ is the Logos of God.”<sup>12</sup> In keeping with Karl Barth’s dialectical theology, Bonhoeffer emphasizes the transcendence of God and God’s revelatory Word that enters our existence with authority. This revelation, he explains, defies human efforts to classify and to question.

Every possibility of classification must fall short, because the existence of this Logos means the end of my logos. He *is* the Logos. He *is* the counter Word. We are now talking about “Being”! The question of “who” is the question about transcendence. The question of “how” is the question about immanence. But because the One who is questioned is the Son himself, the immanent question of “how” can never comprehend him.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> James W. Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer’s Theology: Classical and Revolutionary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 134.

<sup>10</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Lectures on Christology,” in *Berlin: 1932–1933*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 12 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 358.

<sup>11</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lectures on Christology,” Works 12:328.

<sup>12</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lectures on Christology,” Works 12:301.

<sup>13</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lectures on Christology,” Works 12:302 (emphasis original).

Bonhoeffer denies the possibility of the “how” question, which resists the authority of God’s revelation in order to comprehend and evaluate it, and in doing so elevates human reason, or “logos,” above the divine Logos. Instead, the Logos must be approached on his own terms. “That means that one can legitimately ask *who* only after the self-revelation of the other to whom one puts the question has already taken place.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, our *logos* is only possible in response to the divine *Logos*. Bonhoeffer not only denies the intellectual and ontological ability of the human logos to attain to the divine Logos; he also denies the moral ability of the human logos to abide the divine Logos when they meet. “Let us ask again what happens if the claim of the counter Logos is questioned. The human logos kills the Logos of God, the Word become human, which it has just questioned. Because the human logos does not want to die itself, the Logos of God, which is death to the human logos, must die instead.”<sup>15</sup> Far from being compatible, Bonhoeffer argues that human reason is actually opposed to divine revelation. But, because the divine Logos is divine, it overcomes human efforts to forcefully silence it.

But what happens when this counter Word, though it has been killed, raises itself from the dead as the living, eternal, ultimate, conquering Word of God, when it rises up to meet its murderers and rushes at them again, appearing as the Resurrected One who has overcome death? Here the question, ‘Who are you?’ becomes poignant. Here it stands, alive forever, over and around and within humankind. The human being can still fight against the Word become human and kill him, but against the Resurrected One the human being has no power.<sup>16</sup>

The human being is the one who must give account for himself to the divine Word, not the other way around. It is crucial to realize that with this methodological statement, Bonhoeffer is decisively rejecting the theological method of the Berlin theologians and standing instead within the Barthian camp. Bonhoeffer arrived at this theological methodology over the time since he first encountered Barth’s writings in 1927.<sup>17</sup> The key result being that his Christology stands firmly upon a conviction that the human logos must stand in silence before the authoritative Logos of God.

Bonhoeffer’s posture to the divine Logos is bound up in a rejection of the modernist belief in the capacity for humanity to discover the reality of God apart from God’s self-revelation. In this too, he shares Barth’s critique of Natural Theology. Against attempts to attain a true knowledge of God by historical and scientific investigation, Bonhoeffer argues that we can only know God by accepting God’s own self-revelation by faith. “There is only one possibility for me to be truly searching for God—that I already know who God is. There is no such thing as blindly setting out to search for God. I can only search for what has already been found.”<sup>18</sup> Bonhoeffer recognizes that the locus of God’s revelation is Christ himself, thus the subject of Christology is foundational for all true knowledge of God, and all true knowledge of his creation. “With that the place where our work must begin is clearly indicated. In the Church, where Christ has revealed himself as the Word of God”<sup>19</sup> Thus, at the outset of his Christology lectures, Bonhoeffer stands with Barth’s critique of liberalism and emphasizes a Christology from above

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<sup>14</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lectures on Christology,” Works 12:303 (emphasis original).

<sup>15</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lectures on Christology,” Works 12:305.

<sup>16</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lectures on Christology,” Works 12:305.

<sup>17</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 178.

<sup>18</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lectures on Christology,” Works 12:303.

<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Lectures on Christology,” Works 12:304.

along with the transcendence of God. Andreas Pangritz notes that Bonhoeffer's high Christology might give the impression of being ordinary to some. But in his context, Bonhoeffer's Christology was neither ordinary nor uncontroversial.

A superficial reading of the *Christology* lectures might give the impression that Bonhoeffer is simply defending the Christian tradition. In contrast to his liberal teacher Adolf von Harnack he even seems to find reason to applaud the doctrine of the early church on the "two natures" of Christ. At a time when the "German Christians" (the Deutsche Christen or the Nazi party of the church) attempted to construct an "Aryan" Christ, such a merely apologetic conception of Christology would have had political implications.<sup>20</sup>

Bonhoeffer's Christology stands in stark contrast to the theological method and the prevailing political movement of his day as it preserves the place of the authoritative Word of God to speak today. Significantly, Christology is foundational to Bonhoeffer's theological knowledge, including even the knowledge of Creation.

## 1.2. Orders of Creation

German theologians, including Paul Althaus and Emmanuel Hirsch, argued that Germans ought to follow Nazi policies, because both the government and the German race were created orders established by God. Hirsch argued that the institutional church must dutifully embrace the state's actions on this basis. "Church leadership ... has a relationship with and duty toward the state."<sup>21</sup> Their argument accepted historical reality as indicative of God's will and consequently as morally authoritative. The theological concept of the Orders of Creation complemented their understanding of Luther's Two Kingdoms paradigm. Bonhoeffer rejected this theological program by insisting that, as de Gruchy explains, "In Christ, God has overcome the division of the world into secular and sacred spheres, and brought all of reality under his authority."<sup>22</sup>

Years later, Bonhoeffer would develop this theory further into his system of Divine Mandates, which he grounded in the command of Christ, in contrast to the concept of Divine Orders, which are grounded in historical fact. In his paper on the "Church and State," Bonhoeffer would later write, "Only the grounding of government in Jesus Christ leads beyond groundings in natural law, which is where, finally, the groundings both in human nature and human sin end up."<sup>23</sup> In his posthumously published *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer defines the Divine Mandate as "the authorization and legitimization to declare a particular divine commandment, the conferring of divine authority on an earthly institution. A mandate is to be understood simultaneously as the laying claim to, commandeering of, and formation of a certain earthly domain by the divine command."<sup>24</sup> Bonhoeffer emphasizes Christ's authoritative revelation over the ability of the human logos to discern truth about God and God's will merely from the created order and human reason. Importantly, he denies any concept of the Orders of Creation that would attempt to detach Christ's will from his revelatory Word and would instead locate the divine

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<sup>20</sup> Pangritz, "Who Is Jesus Christ, for Us, Today?," 136.

<sup>21</sup> Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 149–50.

<sup>22</sup> De Gruchy, "The Development of Bonhoeffer's Theology," 33.

<sup>23</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "State and Church," in *Conspiracy and Imprisonment, 1940–1945*, Works 16:512.

<sup>24</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Works 6:389.



command in the natural order by human reason. Though Bonhoeffer continued to develop his concept of the Divine Mandates, his basic argument was already integral to his Christology lectures in 1933. As Joel Lawrence explains,

In these [Christology] lectures, Bonhoeffer is laying out the ground work of his resistance to Nazism by concentrating on the place of God's revelation, Jesus Christ. In contrast to this, the Nazis are proclaiming the "orders of creation," an ideology which proclaims that God reveals his will not simply in Scripture or through Jesus Christ, but through the means of *Volk*, race and the nation.<sup>25</sup>

When Bonhoeffer submits the human logos to the Divine Logos, he radically departs from the theological method which supported the theological argument for National Socialist ideology.

This must not be misunderstood as merely a polemical use of theology in support of Bonhoeffer's political agenda. Rather it is the natural conclusion of his Christology from above. This Christology includes his neo-orthodox emphasis on the transcendence of God against all attempts to know God by means of human reason and the created order. This went part and parcel with his understanding of revelation which he shared with Barth. Rumscheidt summarizes,

In his first edition of his *The Epistle to the Romans*, and again in the wholly revised second edition of 1922, Karl Barth stated that the Bible was not about the cultivation of a religious existence enriched by tradition, but solely about listening to God's voice.... This meant a decisive no! to all the forms of secular or sacral deification of the created that had spread like a corrosive poison in empirical Christianity and its theological eudaemonism of culture and experience.<sup>26</sup>

Deotis Roberts reaches the same conclusion about Bonhoeffer's argument, when he compares Bonhoeffer's theology to that of Martin Luther King Jr.

"Bonhoeffer was also concerned about false authorities. For example, theologians such as Althaus and Brunner saw the authority for the proclamation of the commandments in the "office" of the church or in the "orders of creation." For a period, Bonhoeffer responded to this crucial issue through "a qualified silence." He was later to assert, "The Barthian view of ethics as 'demonstration' rules out all concrete ethics and ethical principles. Proclaiming the concrete Christ always means proclaiming him in a concrete situation."<sup>27</sup>

Through this concept of the concrete, present command of Christ for us today, Bonhoeffer affirms the divine mandates of Church and State, but only insofar as they are subservient to the authoritative Word which is their source.

Bonhoeffer's Christology from above prompted him to criticize and reject the authority of the state, when and where it denied the concrete command of the Lord Jesus Christ from whom its authority is derived. In his 1933 essay, "On the Jewish Question," Bonhoeffer argued that the German Church

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<sup>25</sup> Joel Lawrence, *Bonhoeffer: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 18–19.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Rumscheidt, "The Formation of Bonhoeffer's Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 50–70.

<sup>27</sup> J. Deotis Roberts, *Bonhoeffer and King: Speaking Truth to Power* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 35.

must reject the state's attempts to divide it on a racial basis. Bonhoeffer does not reject state authority altogether—in fact, he upholds a position within the Lutheran Two-Kingdoms paradigm which allows the state its rightful jurisdiction. “Even on the Jewish question today, the church cannot contradict the state *directly* and demand that it takes any particular different course of action.”<sup>28</sup> Yet, the Church must not stand by quietly when the state takes actions that are illegitimate. He goes on to clarify, “But that does not mean that the church stands aside, indifferent to what political action is taken. Instead, it can and must, precisely because it does not moralize about individual cases, keep asking the government whether its actions can be justified as legitimate state actions, that is, actions that create law and order, not lack of rights and disorder.”<sup>29</sup> Bonhoeffer's Christology from above prompts him to reject attempts by the human logos to assert itself over and against divine self-revelation, including attempts by German theologians to justify unethical policies on the basis of a natural theology which stands apart from the concrete command and revelation of the divine Word. Thus, Bonhoeffer answers his question, ‘Who is this Christ?’ by asserting that Christ is the divine Logos, the definitive and authoritative self-revelation of the transcendent God. This answer positions Bonhoeffer squarely against the popular German theology and politics of his day.

## ***2. Bonhoeffer's Christology from Below***

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christology from below complements his view of Christ's transcendence by also highlighting Christ's immanence, as the one who is free for us. This belief in God's genuine presence in Christ, and therefore in Christ's Church, led Bonhoeffer to emphasize the unity of the Church and the ontological value of humanity, even at the cost of suffering violence and humiliation.

### **2.1. Christ's Humanity for Us**

In his Christology, Bonhoeffer complements his assertion of Christ's transcendence with an equal emphasis on Christ's genuine reconciliation to creation through his condescension. In his embrace of Christ's immanence, Bonhoeffer distinguishes himself from his mentor Karl Barth's theological position during that period. In the early years of Bonhoeffer's interaction with Barth, he took issue with this key aspect of Barth's early theology. According to Bethge, “as he eagerly and gratefully absorbed Barth's message during 1927 and 1929, Bonhoeffer directed a number of theological-epistemological questions towards Barth, under the principle of ‘*finitum capax infiniti*.’”<sup>30</sup> In his second dissertation, *Act and Being*, “He wanted to persuade [Barth] of his own belief in the *finitum capax infiniti* that, despite everything, God *was* accessible.”<sup>31</sup> In *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer writes in response to Barth's concept of God's freedom.

In revelation it is not so much a question of the freedom of God-eternally remaining within the divine self, aseity—on the other side of revelation, as it is of God's coming out of God's own self in revelation. It is a matter of God's *given* Word, the covenant in which God is bound by God's own action. It is a question of the freedom of God, which

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<sup>28</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Church and the Jewish Question,” in *Berlin: 1932–1933*, Works 12:363.

<sup>29</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Church and the Jewish Question,” Works 12:363–64.

<sup>30</sup> Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 133.

<sup>31</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 133.

finds its strongest evidence precisely in that God freely chose to be bound to historical human beings and to be placed at the disposal of human beings. God is not free from human beings but for them.<sup>32</sup>

This description of God's freedom as being *for* humanity comes from Bonhoeffer's early writing, but it continued to play a major role in his Christology lectures and beyond. Christ was the transcendent, authoritative revelation of God. But he was also God's revelation made manifest within the Church. As he put it in *Act and Being*, "Christ is the word of God's freedom. God *is* present, that is, not in eternal nonobjectivity but—to put it quite provisionally for now—'haveable,' graspable in the Word within the church."<sup>33</sup> Despite God's transcendence, he can truly be said to be present within the church, and thereby also present in the real, historical world today.

In *Act and Being*, as well as his Christology lectures, Bonhoeffer tried to mediate between the traditional Lutheran and Reformed controversy over the "extra Calvinisticum." He says in his Christology lectures concerning the person and work of Christ, "As the Crucified and Risen One, Jesus is at the same time the Christ who is present now.... Only because Christ is the Christ who is present are we still able to inquire of him. Only because proclamation and the sacraments are carried out in the church can we inquire about Christ."<sup>34</sup> In other words, in Christ God has become concretely accessible. Because Christ has reconciled God and humanity in himself through the miracle of the incarnation, redemption and genuine revelation are possible. "If true unity is lacking, redemption is called into question. *Finitum capax infiniti non per se sed per infinitum*."<sup>35</sup> By this, Bonhoeffer reconciled his Christology from above with his Christology from below and embraced Christ's presence and knowability within the concrete situation today. In *The Humanity of God*, written later in Barth's career and after Bonhoeffer's death, Barth likewise acknowledges that it is in God's humanity that we know him as divine. "It is precisely God's *deity* which, rightly understood, includes his *humanity*."<sup>36</sup> This is Bonhoeffer's contention in *Act and Being* and his *Lectures on Christology*, that God's transcendence is worked out in his freedom not *from* his creation but his freedom *for* his created people.<sup>37</sup> As de Gruchy explains, "Breaking away from Barth, Bonhoeffer once again drew deeply on Luther in his understanding of the 'humiliation of Christ,' in insisting on the freedom of God *for* humankind [*pro nobis*], and in his affirmation of *finitum capax infiniti*."<sup>38</sup> The finite is capable of the infinite, but not because of its own qualities. This reconciliation with God is possible only by the condescension of the infinite God who truly enters into Creation by his great power and goodness.

## 2.2. Christ as Pro Nobis

Beyond saying that God has become truly accessible in Christ, Bonhoeffer contends that Christ is really present today "*pro nobis*." This is his ultimate answer to the question, "Who is Jesus Christ for

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<sup>32</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, Works 2:90–91 (original emphasis).

<sup>33</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, Works 2:91 (original emphasis).

<sup>34</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Lectures on Christology," Works 12:310.

<sup>35</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Lectures on Christology," Works 12:346.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. John Newton Thomas and Thomas Wieser, reprint ed. (Atlanta: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 46 (original emphasis).

<sup>37</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Lectures on Christology," Works 12:316–17.

<sup>38</sup> de Gruchy, "The Development of Bonhoeffer's Theology," 19.

us today?': Christ is God and man reconciled "for us." According to Bethge, "Bonhoeffer's fundamental question received a very simple answer: Jesus Christ is 'the person for others.' ... It provided the basis for the ethics of conspiracy and its implementation."<sup>39</sup> Bonhoeffer's Christology therefore not only distinguished him from the German Christian and National Socialist movements, but also from many of his colleagues in the Confessing Church. In his book, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*, Reggie Williams considers the influence of the black church in Harlem, New York on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christology. Williams emphasizes the importance of Christ *pro nobis* in Bonhoeffer's theology.

Christ as the new humanity as being-free-for-humanity, is developed further in Bonhoeffer's Christology lectures in the summer of 1933. He described Christ as the one who is *pro nobis*, "for us," not in a sentimental way but ontologically as the person of Christ; Jesus cannot be understood in his being by himself, but only in relationship, in community. *Pro nobis* describes the being and the work of Christ in the development of God's kingdom. In his actions and his being, he is humanity for us before God.<sup>40</sup>

In Christ, humanity is reconciled to God not merely externally, but ontologically. Christ has truly united himself to us irrevocably, and that changes everything about the way we understand our relationship to God.

Bonhoeffer unfolds the significance of this concept of Christ "for us" in his Christology lectures. In Christ, God and man are truly reconciled. In Christ, the church finds its new humanity. In Christ, the church is called to exist for others, especially for those who suffer. Having rejected the question of "how?" when directed to the God-man, he concludes,

The only question that makes sense is: who is present, who is with us here and now? The answer is: the human-God Jesus. I cannot know who the human Christ is if I do not simultaneously think of the God-Christ and vice versa. God in his timeless eternity is *not* God. Jesus Christ in his humanity, limited in time, is *not* Jesus Christ. Instead, in the human being Jesus Christ, God is God. Only in Jesus Christ is God present.<sup>41</sup>

God is truly present in Jesus Christ. And he is present "for us."

The question must be, by virtue of what personal ontological structure is Christ present to the church? If one answers, by virtue of his God-humanity, that is correct but still needs explication. It is the "*pro-me*" structure. The being of Christ's person is essentially relatedness to me. His being-Christ is his being-for-me. This *pro-me* is not to be understood as an effect that issues from Christ or as a form that he assumes incidentally, but is to be understood as the being of his very person. The very core of his person is *pro-me*. This is not a historical, factual or ontic statement, but rather an ontological one: that is, I can never think of Jesus Christ in his being-in-himself, but only in his relatedness to me.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 40.

<sup>40</sup> Reggie L. Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 125.2014

<sup>41</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Lectures on Christology," Works 12:312–13 (original emphasis).

<sup>42</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Lectures on Christology," Works 12:314.

Thus, Bonhoeffer's Christology embraces the reality of a new humanity that ontologically exists in Christ. In this new humanity, God truly is knowable and is truly for us. In Him, God and mankind are reconciled forevermore, and so Bonhoeffer concludes that now we can only think of God and man in conjunction with one another.

In his first dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer defined the church as "Christ existing as community,"<sup>43</sup> and it is to this idea of Christ's perfect union with his church that he now returns during his discussion of Christ *pro-me*. "I can think of Christ only in existential relationship to him and, at the same time, only within the church-community. Christ is not in-himself and also in the church-community, but the Christ who is the only Christ is the one present in the church-community *pro-me*."<sup>44</sup> Bonhoeffer goes on to draw three conclusions about Christ's *pro-me* structure of existence for the new humanity. For the purposes of this paper, his second conclusion is of special interest. Specifically, he concludes,

He is there for his brothers and sisters in that he stands in their stead. Christ stands for his new humanity before God, that is, he takes their place and stands in their stead before God. If this is so, then he *is* the new humanity. There where the new humanity should stand, he himself stands, by virtue of his *pro-me* structure. That means he *is* the church-community. He is no longer acting *for* it, on its behalf, but rather *as* it, in his going to the cross, dying, and taking the sins of the church-community upon himself. Thus in him the new humanity is crucified and dies.<sup>45</sup>

Because of Bonhoeffer's Christology, which follows Chalcedon in insisting on the perfect union of God and humanity in Christ, Bonhoeffer emphasizes that the church is Christ's body. To tear apart the church is akin to rending Christ himself. Consequentially, when the Aryan Clause proposed dividing the church by the law of race, Bonhoeffer's Christology prompted him to argue in his 1933 Memorandum on the Jewish Question that the church was in a *status confessionis* because the very unity of Christ was being divided. "The Aryan paragraph in the form contained in the first program of the 'German Christians,' is a '*status confessionis*' for the Church. Nothing is more dangerous than for us to allow ourselves to be hoodwinked by statements as to its relative harmlessness."<sup>46</sup> Even among the Confessing Church leaders, Bonhoeffer's was a radical position, though it was a natural one for Bonhoeffer to take because of his understanding of Christ's humanity. His Christology gave him the ethical clarity to realize that "the exclusion of the Jewish Christians from our communion of worship would mean: The excluding Church is erecting a racial law as a prerequisite of Christian communion. But in doing so, it loses Christ himself, who is the goal of even this human, purely temporal law."<sup>47</sup> Because Bonhoeffer takes Christ's union with humanity seriously, he is able to recognize the division of the German church as an insidious attempt to divide Christ himself.

Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christ's humanity also led him to embrace the church's role of suffering with Christ, as it exists 'for others' as he exists 'for us.' In his Christology lectures, he argues

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<sup>43</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, Works 1:198.

<sup>44</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Lectures on Christology," Works 12:314.

<sup>45</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Lectures on Christology," Works, 12:315 (original emphasis).

<sup>46</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Jewish-Christian Question as Status Confessionis," in *Berlin: 1932–1933*, Works 12:372.

<sup>47</sup> Bonhoeffer, "The Jewish-Christian Question as Status Confessionis," Works 12:372.

that the church is Christ's present form in the world. "Christ is the church-community by virtue of his being *pro-me*. He takes action as the new humanity. The church-community, between his ascension and his second coming, is the form he takes."<sup>48</sup> A logical outworking of our union with Christ is that we are united to one another. Therefore, when one suffers, those who stand with Christ share in their suffering.

With exclusion of the Jewish Christians from the communion of worship, he who realizes the nature of the Church must feel himself to be excluded also. How can he who holds as church office administer that office if he knows that there are in the communion brethren of fewer rights to whom such office is not open because of their race?<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, Bonhoeffer would develop this theme further in his chapter on the image of Christ in his well-known work, *Discipleship*. There he writes, "The incarnate one transforms his disciples into brothers and sisters of all human beings. The 'philanthropy' (Titus 3:4) of God that became evident in the incarnation of Christ is the reason for Christians to love every human being on earth as a brother or sister."<sup>50</sup> Because of Bonhoeffer's Christology from below, he recognized the new humanity's shared identity with the incarnate and crucified One.

He became like human beings, so that we would be like him. In Christ's incarnation all of humanity regains the dignity of bearing the image of God. Whoever from now on attacks the least of the people attacks Christ, who took on human form and who in himself has restored the image of God for all who bear a human countenance. In community with the incarnate one, we are once again given our true humanity.<sup>51</sup>

This identity of the new humanity is that Christ *pro nobis* has reconciled us to God, and he has done so through the stumbling block of his suffering and humility. "*Christus pro nobis* is the Christ who reconciles me with God, and that is only possible through this stumbling block and through faith."<sup>52</sup> His church shares in this identity as the suffering one, despised by the world, and so must stand with our brothers and sisters who are the least of these. "With the humiliated Christ, his church must also be humiliated."<sup>53</sup> This is not, Bonhoeffer writes, for the church to "look upon itself with vain self-satisfaction, as though being humiliated were the visible proof that Christ is with it. There is no law here, and the humiliation of Christ is not a principle for the church to follow but rather a fact."<sup>54</sup> That fact is that we are united to the suffering servant, who is in himself the reconciliation of God and man, and our consequential union to one another.

### 3. Conclusion

How was Bonhoeffer able to recognize the evil of the Nazi regime and its persecution of the Jews when the other German Christians and even many among the Confessing Church were blind to it? If

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<sup>48</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Lectures on Christology," Works 12:323.

<sup>49</sup> Bonhoeffer, "The Jewish-Christian Question as Status Confessionis," Works 12:373.

<sup>50</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Works 4:285.

<sup>51</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Works 4:285.

<sup>52</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Lectures on Christology," Works 12:358.

<sup>53</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Lectures on Christology," Works 12:360.

<sup>54</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Lectures on Christology," Works 12:360.

we take Bonhoeffer at his word, it was his Christology. Many evangelicals today recognize Bonhoeffer's historical significance for the way he resisted the Nazi regime, but his reasons for doing so are not so well apprehended. It was Bonhoeffer the *theologian* who became Bonhoeffer the resister.

This article has argued that it was specifically Bonhoeffer's Christology which gave him such unique insight into the ethical questions of his day, when nearly everyone in his context was so afflicted with ethical blindness. Bonhoeffer's high view of Christ enabled him to logically connect the delegated authority of institutions to its source: the authoritative *Logos* of God, and so to hold it accountable to the mandate of the King. While most in the Confessing Church did not appreciate the importance of opposing the persecution of the Jews, Bonhoeffer's grasp of Christ's immanence gave him clarity to understand the significance of both the church's unity and the importance of standing with the afflicted in the name of Christ. Many observers have been compelled by Bonhoeffer's example, but it is crucial to note that he was motivated by that of Christ.

The tragic reality of Germany in the 1930s is that very few German Christians viewed the Nazi movement negatively, much less understood the movement to be dangerous and contradictory to Christianity. Most affirmed the movement explicitly or tacitly. Some have rightly argued that many German Christians allowed the Jewish persecution because of their own feelings of nationalism and racial superiority. "Few Evangelical Church spokespersons, lay or clerical, departed from the conviction that a Jewish 'problem' or 'question' existed and that it required restrictions upon the 'excessive' influence of Jews."<sup>55</sup> Other Christians who did not openly support these policies remained tragically silent. "The word most often used to describe the Christian response to the Holocaust and to Nazism in general is 'silence.' In the vast theological, historical, and popular literature on churches and National Socialism, silence has become the most serious charge leveled against Christianity. Why did Christians not speak out?"<sup>56</sup> It would be inaccurate to say that Bonhoeffer was the only Christian to do so, and it would be naïve to say that he did so perfectly. However, Bonhoeffer saw the situation with remarkable clarity, even from the early days of the Third Reich. His prophetic vision, which was so unique in his time, was simply the natural conclusion of his robust Christology, which neglected neither God's transcendent Word nor the reality of God's reconciliation to mankind in Christ.

Bonhoeffer's Christology lectures have often been translated from the notes of his students under the title, "Christ the Center." This is so, because "Christ the Center" is the way Bonhoeffer himself described the place of Christ among his church. He truly is present among us and for us, yet only by his own willing self-revelation. "*This* is the way in which Christ is present. He is everywhere, and yet we cannot get hold of him. He is not in the bread like straw in a sack; instead, this *in* must be thought of in a theological, spiritual way. He is there, but he is only there where he reveals himself through his Word."<sup>57</sup> Bonhoeffer writes of Christ as the Center, saying that "This is the Christ *pro-me* translated into the 'where structure.' Christ's status as mediator must be proven in that he can [be] seen as the center of human existence of history, and of nature."<sup>58</sup> Though Christ is not accessible to mankind by means of our rational, historical, scientific efforts, he is present. Though we cannot reveal God by history, in

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<sup>55</sup> Baranowski, "The Confessing Church and Antisemitism," 99.

<sup>56</sup> Doris L. Bergen, "Storm Troopers of Christ: The German Christian Movement and the Ecclesiastical Final Solution," in *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust*, ed. Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 40–67.

<sup>57</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Lectures on Christology," Works 12:321 (original emphasis).

<sup>58</sup> Bonhoeffer, "Lectures on Christology," Works 12:324.

Christ he has become present in history. Now, as a result of this Christological miracle, the church continues to exist as Christ in the present age, and it does so in a created order that can never justify itself, but which has been reconciled to God in Christ. Therefore, the created order and our ethical action in it does matter. Because the transcendent God has freely bound himself to his creation in Christ, Christ is truly God *pro nobis*.



# Genealogy and Doctrine: Reformed and Confucian Sociologies of Knowledge

— Nathan D. Shannon —

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**Abstract:** This article presents comparative textual analyses toward a basic grammar for understanding the interface between Reformed and Confucian sociologies of knowledge. I first propose a three-part Reformed theology of theological tradition in terms of historically successive communities. I then present relevant material from the *Analects* of Confucius, focusing on Confucius's own sociology of learning and instruction. Striking similarities between these two models come to light, as well as significant differences in the areas of unity and truth, ontology and office, and sin and grace.

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The value of the Western theological tradition for the global church is a complicated matter touching on historical, cultural, and theological issues. The very notion of tradition, or of intellectual heritage, is itself culturally and theologically complex. One might ask, for example: What happens to historic Christian self-understanding when it is transplanted wholesale to Confucian lands? Motivated by this question, the present study presents comparative textual analyses toward a basic grammar for understanding the interface between Reformed and Confucian sociologies of knowledge.

I first propose a three-part theology of theological tradition in terms of historically successive communities: Scripture, as Spirit-inspired apostolic tradition; historical theology, understood as post-apostolic theological reflection guided (but not inspired) by the Spirit; and, where history and culture signal sociological shift, a third designation is required: the church as heir to culturally foreign theological heritage. I then present relevant material from the *Analects* of Confucius, focusing on Confucius's own sociology of learning and instruction in terms of the recovery, exposition, and propagation of an objective body of knowledge historically given but nonetheless of distinct and even transcendent value for moral cultivation.

This analysis invites comparison with Protestant confessionalism specifically in terms of a doctrinal genealogy, in the case of the latter, and a paradigmatic father-son or teacher-student arrangement in the case of the former—comparable sociologies of knowledge, in other words. Striking similarities between these two models come to light, as well as significant differences in the areas of unity and truth; ontology and office; and sin and grace.

Both the Protestant confessionalism and the Confucian sociology of knowledge discussed below are deductive hypotheticals. That is, the interaction I facilitate here is more theoretical than actual. And yet, as readers with relevant experience will recognize, it is striking how clearly the notes struck in written sources, even ancient ones, resonate throughout lived experience even to the present day. And of course this interaction between Confucian and Reformed traditions is not meant to be symmetrical but rather missiological. I echo Herman Bavinck's claim that "Calvinism is not the only truth," in the sense that what one ought to hope for is neither Confucianism replaced nor Confucianism retrieved but Confucianism revamped, reshaped, let us say redeemed, by the grace of God in the Son.<sup>1</sup> The end goal, the gold standard, is a spirit of *semper reformanda* within and among the churches which still bear the influence of that towering but humble sage of East Asia.

### ***1. Ecclesiology and Doctrine: A Reformed Sketch***

Our interest here is in the relationship between a community and its confession, or between a group of people and the beliefs which signal or even constitute its unity. The Reformed tradition has recorded fairly nuanced reflection on precisely that relationship. We begin with the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF).

#### **1.1. Principles of Revelation and Inscripturation**

According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Word of God took written form "for the better preserving and propagating of the truth" (1.1). In this sense Scripture serves a rather mundane purpose: it helps us not forget. But Scripture, unlike a grocery list or a to-do list, is a bulwark of truth against the machinations of personal evil: "for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world" (1.1).

That the Word of God was committed to writing implies that the Word preceded its written form, as is indicated by mention of "those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased" (WCF 1.1). Also implied is the fact that the written form is not an end in itself but rather serves the preservation and flourishing of the Word in other forms—preaching, most conspicuously. Scripture is the only rule, a necessary and uniquely authoritative norm, for the faith and life of the church, and is sufficient (WCF 1.6, 9, 10). And yet while Scripture knows itself as the source and norm of gospel ministry and Christian life, the Westminster Confession indicates that Scripture alone is not the sum of these. The gospel of the Christ of the Scriptures is meant to be searched, taught, explained, preached, and defended—confessionalism as such—and to saturate the body of Christ with words and deeds conveying the wisdom and saving power of Christ, the Christ of the Scriptures and none other. Scripture is not merely good for such purposes; it is given precisely for such use.

Reformed biblical theologians have understood word revelation as explanatory accompaniment to objective, divine redemptive deed. And in that sense, Scripture would have been redemptively sufficient

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<sup>1</sup> George Harinck, "Calvinism Isn't the Only Truth: Herman Bavinck's Impressions of the USA," in *Proceedings of the 11th Biennial Conference of the Association for the Advancement of Dutch American Studies*, ed. Larry J. Wagenaar and Robert P. Swierenga (Holland, MI: Joint Archives of Holland, 1998), 156. Not "the only truth," says Bavinck, but "the only consistent theological view of the world and of humanity."

for each successive, historico-covenantal moment.<sup>2</sup> The completion and closing of the New Testament canon as Spirit-authorized commentary on the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures and the historical accomplishment of the eternal redemptive purposes of God is of course the salient instance of this pattern. Canon is closed because revelatory word always accompanies objective, redemptive deed, and redemption is, at the ascension and enthronement of the risen Son, accomplished.

### 1.2. The Apostle Paul and the First Generation of the Confessing Community

“Apostle” and “author of inspired NT Scripture” are not identical classes. The apostles were hand-picked, Spirit-authorized witnesses to biblical fulfillment and redemptive accomplishment in Christ. But not all of these wrote inspired Scripture; and not all inspired Scripture was written by apostles. This is at least in part because the apostolic revelatory dispensation was primarily oral.<sup>3</sup> This oral testimony was accompanied by supernatural displays of divine authorization (miracles) (Matt 10:8); nonetheless the apostles were witness to, even preachers of, the wisdom and faithfulness of God displayed in the foolishness of the cross and the resurrection of Christ.

And then apostolic witness took written form, for better preserving and propagating. That is, because the gospel is authorized testimony about actual historical accomplishment, the efficacy of subsequent doctrine (WCF 1.5) depends upon the factual accuracy of testimony (1 Cor 15:3–4). Accordingly, having been an eye-witness is a pre-requisite for apostolic office (Acts 1:21–22). Scripture, then, as Spirit-inspired inscripturation (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21) of Spirit-authorized eye-witness testimony, constitutes, for the global post-apostolic church, the unimpeachable tradition of a first-generation confessing community.<sup>4</sup> In the view of many Reformed writers, “apostolic” is a term designating a socio-historical phenomenon attributable to the one-time redemptive-historical activity of the Holy Spirit through Jesus’s own select witnesses. On such accounts only of this first generation may it be said that “the apostles did *not* transmit the tradition only after it had been given a fixed form by the faith of the church but because of the authority that they had received from Christ to be the bearers and custodians of this tradition.”<sup>5</sup> This apostolic office, therefore, is as much biographical as it is ecclesiological because the apostles deliver revelation they received personally and directly from Christ. The apostles are fallible; they correct each other publicly (Gal 2:11–14). Still, Paul may say both “not I but the Lord” and “I not the Lord” without implying gradation in canonical authority (1 Cor 7:10, 12). “This apostolic gospel,” writes Herman Ridderbos, “one must not ‘receive’ as the word of man but as it really is, as the Word of God (1 Thess. 2:13).”<sup>6</sup>

If with Ridderbos and Gaffin one thinks of the apostolate as historically defined, the church of the post-apostolic age as a whole may be understood as standing one step, or one generation, removed from its apostolic foundation. In that case, the confession of the church catholic remains under the authority of inscripturated, sealed, and finalized apostolic testimony, a testimony which is to be “translated into

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1975), 3–26; and Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1979), 89–102.

<sup>3</sup> See Herman Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, trans. H. de Jongste, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1988), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ridderbos, *Redemptive History*, 15–24.

<sup>5</sup> Ridderbos, *Redemptive History*, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Ridderbos, *Redemptive History*, 18.

the vulgar [local] language of every nation” unto which it comes (WCF 1.8). Whereas apostolic authority was a function of personal qualification and commissioning even by Christ himself, the objectivity of the completed, written text signifies a shift: ministerial office from Timothy onward is not itself canonical but post-canonical and tasked with the preservation and propagation of the faith once and only once delivered. Thus emerges Protestant ecclesiology: one effect of finalized inscripturation is that the entire church might have equal access to an objective, authoritative, apostolic witness. If “‘apostolic succession’ in a personal sense is a contradiction in terms,” no creaturely interpreter but only the Spirit working in and with the canonical Scriptures can bind the conscience (WCF 1.6, 7, 9, 10; 20.1–4; 25.6).<sup>7</sup>

### **1.3. My Son in the Faith: Timothy and the Second Generation**

This doctrinal second generation takes shape already in Scripture. Paul, an apostle, admonishes Timothy, not once called an apostle, to keep to the pattern of the sound words he had received, and not to teach or allow to be taught any other doctrine. Paul does not thus bind post-apostolic ministry to verbatim recitation. His instructions to his son in the faith include studious preservation of apostolic dispensation and faithful exposition of it in and out of season, labor to be entrusted also to others able to teach. Timothy’s call is custodial, and the faithful preaching it enjoins, wields authority derivative but true.

Contemporary Christians share with Paul an already-not-yet appropriation of the gospel, but have more in common with Timothy, a post-apostolic teacher entrusted with the preservation and explication of authoritative tradition received. Timothy himself is a kind of sequential first among equals: first because he learned directly and personally from Paul; equal because he belongs to the second confessing generation whose beginning is one determinate step removed from the singular apostolic foundation.

### **1.4. The Global Church: A Third Generation**

What I shall here call a third generation emerges as a distinguishable subset of the second by virtue of significant shifts in the demographics of the global church. This a matter of degree, primarily, not of kind, but some instances are more conspicuous than others. The first gentile church faced, in many ways, a similar set of challenges. Today, the church in non-Western contexts must wrestle with the reality of a faith delivered in culturally strange packaging.

One might ask: is this Western-global paradigm not outdated? In some ways perhaps it is, but only superficially. If a non-Western church is a significant missiological force, as for example the Korean church surely is, still it remains the case that the theological heritage in play is Western. A Korean missionary will identify himself, in the terms of Western theological formulation, as Presbyterian, Baptist, or non-denominational, for example. Surely, at the same time, a Korean missionary takes with him Western theological heritage in Koreanized form. And this is precisely the question: the character and influence of globally transplanted post-canonical tradition. In such cases the Korean missionary exemplifies and perpetuates the theological and ecclesiological self-understanding of this third generation. He is theologically bi-cultural.

The Westminster Confession defines the visible church as “all those throughout the world that profess the true religion” (25.2). And as that “true religion” moves “throughout the world,” a delicate balance must be sought. While the body of Christ in any local instantiation is entitled to the maternal care of the church catholic, she is also accountable to the church’s doctrinal training, authority, and

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<sup>7</sup> Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost*, 90.

discipline. But as the church undergoes radical and sometimes rapid demographic shifts, and the non-Western and now majority church examines an inheritance of nearly two millennia of extra-biblical theological reflection from Western writers, a relationship otherwise good and pleasant becomes complicated, sometimes even strained, particularly now, when identity is the battleground of our day.

### 1.5. Dangers of Socio-Traditional Breakdown

Two complementary mishandlings of inherited tradition haunt post-apostolic stewards of the gospel. The first is heavy-handedness (too much post-apostolic tradition), a Protestant magisterialism in which that which should be the derivative authority of theological reflection might assume exaggerated importance and immunize the teaching office against even exegetical scrutiny and the inter-personal mandate of gospel ministry, teaching the truth in love. Michael Allen's encouragement to add a "socially mediated activity of renewed reason" to classical Reformed theological *principia*, for example, seems to mistake the practice of theology with its nature, and thus to misconstrue the ministerial role of post-canonical sources.<sup>8</sup>

Individualism (too little tradition) is a complementary misstep. The individualist is the one who says that because he has the text of Paul he has no need of Timothy, or of historic creeds or the shoulders of giants. Old books and dead white men are simply not relevant.

Stephen Holmes argues that "to attempt to do theology without noticing the tradition ... is to deny, or at least to attempt to escape from, our historical locatedness," which he suggests is simply to resent that which God says is good, creatureliness itself.<sup>9</sup> He points out,

The standard editions of the Greek New Testament bear witness on nearly every page to the textual criticism that has come up with this text, and not another, and so we cannot even find a text of Scripture that has not been "handed on" to us by those who came before.<sup>10</sup>

Herman Bavinck says that because of distaste for dogma or theological system "people make a colossal leap back over eighteen centuries of the Christian Church and land, so they think, on the unadulterated and secure ground of Scripture."<sup>11</sup> But such ventures find "neither with Jesus nor with all the prophets and apostles" that coveted notion of "no system at all."<sup>12</sup> In other words: "Is not Scripture itself one entity, an organism, where one single basic idea animates all its parts? And do not the thoughts of Jesus and of the prophets and apostles ... constitute an inner unity and a comprehensive entity that agrees internally and in all its parts?"<sup>13</sup> And yet "properly speaking, a dogmatic system can never be obtained from Scripture," apart from, that is, the systematizing labors of the church as such.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Allen, "Reformed Retrieval," in *Theologies of Retrieval: An Exploration and Appraisal*, ed. Darren Sarisky (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 74.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Holmes, *Listening to the Past*, 6–7.

<sup>11</sup> Herman Bavinck, "The Pros and Cons of a Dogmatic System," trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, *The Bavinck Review* 5 (2014): 98.

<sup>12</sup> Bavinck, "The Pros and Cons," 98.

<sup>13</sup> Bavinck, "The Pros and Cons," 98, as in WCF 7.5–6.

<sup>14</sup> Bavinck, "The Pros and Cons," 98.

Again, the Scylla and Charybdis of theological authority, magisterialism and individualism, loom large. I remain unconvinced that neo-colonialism in evangelistic garb—the former error—is entirely outmoded, although its traditional forms evoke near universal revulsion today, at least where a host culture is not also implicated. Unfortunately, a young church complicit in the authoritarian misdoings of her progenitors is not hard to imagine, nor perhaps uncommon. On the other hand, exaggerated post-colonial sensitivities may encourage an unfilial distrust in corporate form. One fears that a church overly concerned with its own culture may become, by defensive overreaction, basically humanistic, preferring a gospel of ‘genuineness’ or ‘authenticity’—a gospel of its own humanity—over that of the Christ of the Scriptures. Unchecked fascination with grassroots theology may lead to culpable neglect of what Kevin Vanhoozer calls “an important opportunity for global theology to display catholic sensibility, which is to say a concern for doing theology in communion with the saints.”<sup>15</sup> “Non-Western Christianity does not need to become Western. Yet non-Western Christianity should strive to stay authentically Christian, and one way to do that is to remain in communion with catholic theological tradition.”<sup>16</sup>

All that is to say that contemporary Christian communities in the majority world are heirs to the extended, post-apostolic, fallible but formidable ministry of a second generation, and thereby represent a third generation in which cultural and sociological challenges bear acutely on the bequeathal of intellectual or confessional heritage. And in the cases of hundreds of millions of Christians in the East, Western theological tradition is received into historically Confucian cultures.

## *2. Confucian Sociology of Inherited Wisdom*

We turn now to examine the truly ancient original sources of Confucianism in order to understand how an altogether different tradition has handled similar questions. As stated above, our interest is ultimately missiological; but first let us incline our ear, and hear the words of the wise (Prov. 22:17).

### **2.1. Confucius and the Moral Imperative of Cultural Recovery**

*Kong Fuzi*, or Master Kong, known in the West as Confucius, was born in 551 BC in northeast China. He was a kind of Socrates of the East, and despite the modesty of his interests and methods his influence is difficult to overstate. Paul Goldin says that during “imperial times, Confucius’s standing was so great that the few writers who questioned his teachings became notorious for that reason alone.”<sup>17</sup> Ann-Ping Chin writes: “Until the mid-twentieth century, China was so inseparable from the idea of Confucius that her scheme of government and society, her concept of the self and human relationships, and her construct of culture and history all seemed to have originated from his mind alone.”<sup>18</sup>

Following the Way of Confucius meant undertaking sincere and selfless pursuit of an objective body of wisdom with the natural and necessary but nonetheless coveted effect of moral self-improvement. One sought wisdom for its own sake, and enjoyed moral progress as evidence of its natural virtue. In this sense, Confucius commends self-conscious acquisition of an objective body of knowledge, wisdom, and

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<sup>15</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, “Christology in the West: Conversations in Europe and North America,” in *Jesus without Borders: Christology in the Majority World*, ed. Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K. K. Yeo (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 32.

<sup>16</sup> Vanhoozer, “Christology in the West,” 33.

<sup>17</sup> Paul R. Goldin, *Confucianism* (Berkeley: University of California, 2011), 1.

<sup>18</sup> Ann-Ping Chin, *The Authentic Confucius: A Life of Thought and Politics* (New York: Scribner, 2007), 2.

moral insight. The pursuit of this acquisition, and the tireless rehearsal of its practical implementation, is the “Way” or the “Way of Confucius.”

Confucius was a ritual master, meaning that he was an expert preserver and practitioner of the endlessly complex rites, ceremonies, and customs of ancient Chinese life. A traditional body of wisdom from time immemorial had been cherished and well-practiced in an idealized prior age.<sup>19</sup> The idealization of this material, coupled with the obscurity surrounding its origins, endues it with a certain allure and authority, comparable perhaps to revelation or to the biblical account of Eden. Confucius viewed that ancestral wisdom as an object of contemporary neglect, abuse, and exploitation, and also as the only real hope for recovery and restoration, and at the same time eminently worthy of study and emulation for its own sake.<sup>20</sup> Confucius should thus be considered a kind of reformer, in the sense that his aim was an *ad fontes* recovery of a dilapidated vision for culture and flourishing (e.g., *Analects* 7.1, 7.20, 13.20, 17.16). Confucius’s high esteem for traditional learning even led him to careful attention to textual and contextual issues (7.18), and yet Confucius was not an inflexible traditionalist; he allowed for minor modifications that did not strike at the substance of the tradition (9.3).

One might say that the Way involves two quantifiable aspects: one of the acquisition of information—propositional content as to ritual procedure,<sup>21</sup> the texts of the ancient odes, and so on—and another of practical mastery of ritual and other arts by means of focused repetition. One must both understand and acquire discernment and orthodox ritual practice. Zigong quotes an ode to describe all this, hinting at the breakdown of the old self and the cultivation of the new, winning the Master’s approval: “As if cut, as if polished; as if carved, as if ground” (1.15). This two-part pursuit is a kind of catechetical duty toward the matured wisdom of a prior, purer age.

It is worth noting that Confucius could not conceive of entrance to the Way by loveless self-exertion. He says for instance that love for or devotion to the Way is qualitatively greater than catechetical achievement devoid of reverence.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, he notes at several points that one cannot lift one’s self by one’s boot straps as it were into the Way. But Confucius appears unsure how to instill the requisite disposition in his students and is indeed somewhat mystified by this conundrum. The Master appears to believe that by inculcation a heart-borne thirst for the Way may be caught, but it cannot be taught.

In this sense, the Way is of course a “way” rather than an achievement. Meager, unremarkable pursuit, if sincere, is to be esteemed above higher degrees of refinement and accomplishment that are at heart only mimicry. So he says: “Is Goodness really so far away? If I simply desire Goodness, I will find

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<sup>19</sup> Namely, the Zhou dynasty (1045–771 BC), which represented for Confucius a golden age.

<sup>20</sup> I use Edward Slingerland’s translation of the *Analects*, in which each of the Master’s sayings is accompanied by Slingerland’s own analysis and selections from traditional commentary. Slingerland says that the primary text of the *Analects* is basically impenetrable without the aid of this interpretive tradition; acquaintance with the primary text requires incorporation into an interpretive lineage. See “Preface,” in *Confucius: Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), vii–viii.

<sup>21</sup> A compelling but not undisputed account of ritual in Confucian thought is Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 1972), ch. 1.

<sup>22</sup> He says, for example, that “the Good person is sparing of speech” (12.3), “reticence is close to Goodness” (13.27), and “people in ancient times were not eager to speak, because they would be ashamed if their actions did not measure up to their words” (4.22), while “a clever tongue and fine appearance are rarely signs of Goodness” (17.17).

that it is already here” (7.30).<sup>23</sup> On the other hand: “Zigong said ‘I despise those who parrot others’ ideas and mistake this for wisdom; those who mistake insubordination for courage; and those who mistake the malicious exposing of other’s private affairs for uprightness” (17.24).

Confucius himself, accordingly, would on the one hand extol his own zeal for learning but at the same time present himself as a humble disciple. He extols his own love for learning, cultural refinement (chiefly, notice, self-restraint), and tireless effort; but he would not dare claim to have “arrived” or to be without equal as regards dutifulness or trustworthiness (5.28, 7.33, 7.34). And so he enjoins others to “Learn as if you will never catch up, and as if you feared losing what you have already attained” (8.17).

The Way of Confucius is extended, proven, personal devotion to inherited tradition. The source of that tradition is the wisdom of the Zhou dynasty, personified in the Duke of Zhou in particular, but its efficaciousness extends generously through succeeding developments that are faithful to its preservation and its values. This historic material, that which constitutes the object of the devotion of the Way, is unmatched in beauty and insight; and so, while it promises personal cultivation and an inimitable, intangible equanimity, it is not to be pursued as means to a greater end. There is a kind of magical moment in the teaching of the Master in which he commends pursuit of the Way but not pursuit of anything in particular. The Way in this sense is unquantifiable, and its benefits while certain are indirect. Notice also that pursuit of the Way and acknowledgement of its inherent virtue puts one at odds with contemporary culture. The follower of the Way might not be hostile to the world but he will at least be uninterested in its cruder wares.

One biographer makes this striking observation, indicative of the Master’s truly unpretentious manner: “Men like Confucius were not destined to have fame. Their concerns lacked immediate appeal.”<sup>24</sup> This is well reflected in the portrayal of Confucius himself within the text of the *Analects*. His attitude toward the Way combines conviction with humility, and devotion with modesty. He is a punctilious student of the primary sources but carries himself lightly: “Confucius was a humble man.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, as at once a beneficiary and a purveyor of so great an inheritance, Confucius saw himself not as a lonely scholar or monastic devotee but beholden, by the social impulses of the Way itself, to various overlapping asymmetrical relationships.

## 2.2. Filial Piety: Duty and Truth

For Confucius, the Way meant incorporation into a school of wisdom and of moral refinement that exceeded the capacity of any single person or lifetime. The Master was glad to represent himself as a humble student: “as for actually becoming a gentleman in practice, this is something I have not yet been able to achieve” (7.33). And so, built naturally into the Way is a particular virtue of loyalty and faithfulness to one’s benefactors, that of filial piety. As Julie Ching observes: “The Confucian regards human society in terms of personal relationships and ethical responsibilities result from such relationships.”<sup>26</sup> And so, she says, “for this reason, the Confucian society regards itself as a large family.”<sup>27</sup> Ching explains

<sup>23</sup> Slingerland explains: “The student cannot learn from the teacher unless he is passionately *committed* to learning, and this requires possessing a genuine love for the Confucian Way. The problem is that it is hard to see how the teacher can engender this sort of love in a student who lacks it.” *Analects*, 74, commentary on 7.30.

<sup>24</sup> Chin, *The Authentic Confucius*, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity*, 85.

<sup>26</sup> Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity*, 96.

<sup>27</sup> Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity*, 96.



that there are five relationships (ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder and younger brother, friend and friend) that all exemplify shared principles of reciprocity, characterized by “a basic sense of hierarchy.”<sup>28</sup> In terms of filiality: “Sons ... are encouraged to protect their parents’ good name, in spite of the knowledge of their wrong-doings.”<sup>29</sup> That filial framework characterizes nearly every human relationship. According to Ching, “The only truly horizontal relationship is that between friends, and even here, seniority of age demands a certain respect, as also with brothers.”<sup>30</sup>

Because of the centrality of the notion of family and of the individual as a refraction of the corporate, “filial piety is the first of all Confucian virtues, that which comes before loyalty to the sovereign, conjugal affection, and everything else.”<sup>31</sup> Filial piety functions more as a principle than a rule. “Filial,” in other words, may be taken metaphorically for the role of the subordinate in any asymmetrical relationship—teacher/student no less than parent/child.

Two features of filial piety must be considered. Consider these sayings:

The Master said, “When someone’s father is still alive, observe his intentions; after his father has passed away, observe his conduct. If for three years he does not alter the ways of his father, he may be called a filial son.” (1.11; also 4.20)

Meng Yizi asked about filial piety. The Master replied, “Do not disobey.” ... Fan Chi said, “What did you mean by that?” The Master replied, “When your parents are alive, serve them in accordance with the rites; when they pass away, bury them in accordance with the rites; and sacrifice to them in accordance with the rites.” (2.5)

During the parent’s lifetime, a son’s or daughter’s conduct suffers the problem of induction. It cannot establish a principle, essence, or nature, but only records patterns indicative of honor, obedience, and filial piety. The true substance of a child’s character is hidden from view and lies only in what is here called the intentions (1.11). But once the father has passed away, and filial disloyalty no longer faces the threat of direct response, hidden dispositions are free to come to light.

Confucius taught that filial piety required a mourning period of three years for a deceased parent, and that duty was not to be taken lightly.<sup>32</sup> Zai Wo attempts at one point to convince Confucius that one year ought to suffice; he hints that the requisite self-restraint for a three-year period is excessive. Confucius suspects that indolence motivates the question and reminds his student of the true impulse of genuine mourning, which appears to be the death of the parent causing a diminution of life, or of the joy of life, in the son:

When the gentleman is in mourning, he gets no pleasure from eating sweet foods, finds no joy in listening to music, and feels no comfort in his place of dwelling. This is why he gives up these things. (17.21)

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<sup>28</sup> Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity*, 97.

<sup>29</sup> Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity*, 97.

<sup>30</sup> Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity*, 97. Even in contemporary contexts, an age difference of only a few months—all other things being equal (and they rarely are)—is enough to establish a hierarchical relationship. It is worth noting that there is, effectively, no notion of friendship in the *Analects*.

<sup>31</sup> Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity*, 97.

<sup>32</sup> Slingerland says that three years is “usually understood as into the third year, or twenty-five months.” *Analects*, 5, commentary on 1.11.

More importantly, we see in the same passage a matter-of-fact reciprocity, even proportionality, behind Confucius's filial prescriptions: "A child is completely dependent upon the care of his parents for the first three years of his life—this is why the three-year mourning period is the common practice throughout the world" (17.21). Reducing the mourning period to a single year would be presumption and ingratitude, by precisely a factor of three.

But even then, this reciprocal exchange is to be thought of only as an indication of what truly matters. It is more fundamentally a probationary period for the child, a testing of the genuineness of his filial devotion:

The Master said, "One who makes no changes to the ways of his father for three years after his father has passed away may be called a filial son." (1.11; 4.20)

*Analects* 2.5 enriches the picture somewhat. Honoring parents according to ritual is the basic structure of filial piety. In that sense the Master's comment here is true to form and unsurprising. But as commentators have noted, and in light of Confucius's context and stated mission, this saying is likely a veiled rebuke of contemporary ritual excess and abuse signaling a deliberate break in the social structure, a break which is, in a word, one of reform.<sup>33</sup> In case one's parents have neglected ritual or are guilty of corrupting it, honoring them according to ritual after their passing serves to rebuke corrupt parental instruction without incurring the guilt of filial dishonor. The wayward parent is honored lawfully, as it were, and so his guilt is his own. This is a model for justifiable disunity, a cunning form of civil disobedience.<sup>34</sup>

Certainly for Confucius, disunity for the sake of restoration and ritual purity represents not an unholy rupture within body but purification of it. *Analects* 2.5 does not illustrate the son separating himself from society nor even from his family but rather filial adherence to ritual propriety that in effect disinvites the wayward parent from corporate communion, for the sake of truth and unity. This much is implied in the fact that filial piety is not essentially *ad hominem*, as the subtle subversion of 2.5 indicates. So even the profound personal affection that it requires (2.7, 2.8) yields at the end of the day to ritual correctness. This description of Confucius himself captures all this:

The Master was entirely free of four faults: arbitrariness, inflexibility, rigidity, and selfishness. (9.4)

Confucius was esteemed for balancing propriety and loyal guardianship of wisdom exceeding his own person and capacity, with genuine spontaneity and grace. He could be severely critical and unyielding as a teacher, but these were reasoned, calculated strategies; he is never pictured as harsh or impulsive.

### 2.3. Parallel Potential for Breakdown

There is little threat of unwieldy individualism at the expense of tradition in Confucius's teaching, though the individualistic tenor of one's accountability to the Way is apparent, and Confucius is said to

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<sup>33</sup> See Slingerland's commentary on *Analects* 2.5.

<sup>34</sup> *Analects* 13.18, in which Confucius says that filial piety would require a son to hide his father's illegal conduct from the authorities, would need to be considered as well. The distinguishing factor may be that in this case the father is still living or that the issue here is one of balancing the two relationships of ruler/subject and father/son rather than that of one's own ritual propriety and pursuit of the Way. Note also *Analects* 15.36: "The Master said, 'When it comes to being Good, defer to no one, not even your teacher.'"

have had a doctrine of martyrdom.<sup>35</sup> He himself, against the grain of his context, was wholly committed to the Way. And since the corruptions he faced seem to have unfolded on a broad scale and often took the form of ritual exaggeration and insincerity rather than brazen disregard, individualism is not a major theme in the *Analects*. Still, unmistakably, “those who try to innovate without first acquiring knowledge” (7.28) do bear the Master’s critical attention, and the gravity of the offense of filial demurrer warns against hasty division. For Confucius, one first of all and ultimately belongs to the social organism. Here ontology and social function blend.

The greater liability in Confucius’s teaching is found in the rules of reciprocity coupled with the disproportionality of the parent/child relationship, noting as well that this arrangement is to be read onto student/teacher and ruler/subject relationships. A natural, personal reciprocity permeates both Christian ecclesiology (respect for ordained officers, bearing with one another’s burdens, and so on) as well as Confucius’s view of human nature and community. But there is a kind of barb in Confucius’s view in the fact that the giving of life, from parents to children, renders the reciprocity of the parent/child relationship permanently disproportionate. A child is perpetually, indefinitely indebted to his parents. This non-quantifiable debt constrains him to obedience and deference even if parents fail in their duties of care and protection, even if parents renounce these responsibilities, even after parents have passed away—so long as one is a child of one’s parents, there is an outstanding balance.

Feminist scholars have noted other challenges issuing from the Confucian construal of relationships. “Because of its significant emphasis on filiality, ancestor worship is the oldest and most basic Confucian tradition,” but “one should note that ‘ancestor’ primarily means, ‘male ancestor of the husband.’”<sup>36</sup> The harmony envisioned by traditional notions of filiality is not indiscriminate:

Korean women retain their maiden name even after marriage, which might seem to imply equality until one comes to understand that they do so not because their independence is respected but because they cannot be accepted as a full member of their husband’s household. Since the married women do not have a direct blood connection with the husband’s family, women after marriage become outsiders both in their natal family and husband’s family: they are in-between. It is only when women give birth to a male child that they are able to claim their status as family member in their husband’s family.<sup>37</sup>

Filial piety appears to harbor a social essentialism hostile even to the very possibility of parting ways with one’s parent or teacher for the sake of truer unity. Renowned missionary to Korea William Blair noted, “The essence of Confucianism is reverence for established authority and order, above all that the son should honour the father. To the literal-minded Korean this meant that he should not dishonour the past by attempting to improve upon it.”<sup>38</sup>

The nature of the relationship and the attendant filial duty is such that visible displays of unqualified loyalty—rituals of self-abasement, in other words—embody the goodness toward which a person aspires. But that goodness is not only behavioral; it must be dispositional. And since the requisite inner disposition cannot be taught, the hope is that it is gradually engendered by ritual practices featuring deference and

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<sup>35</sup> Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity*, 87–89.

<sup>36</sup> Kang, “Confucian Familism,” 174.

<sup>37</sup> Kang, “Confucian Familism,” 182.

<sup>38</sup> William N. Blair and Bruce F. Hunt, *The Korean Pentecost and the Sufferings which Followed* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1977), 17–18.

honor, as though the disposition were already there. Acquisition of coveted self-renunciation comes by tireless repetition. Pursuit of the Way therefore requires intentional, self-conscious subjugation of every trace of internal dissonance with ritual expressions of filial piety. One's inner monologue must be silenced, and an idealized human relationship, impervious to the disappointments of actual human abuses, binds the conscience. Following the Way, in this sense, means to pursue increase in conformity to the image of perfect, uncritical obedience—self-abasement, in fact—wielding at best a severely restrained critical faculty. This arrangement is conducive to two things: from the bottom, *ad hominem* fidelity: whatever the teacher says is taken as unimpeachable dogma because he has said it, the demise of the self; from the top, authoritarianism, orthodoxy personified, impunity.

Still, this is only a partial reading; perhaps we judge too soon. As noted above, this Confucian model is an idealization. It therefore carries the same deontological weight for the teacher as it does for the student. Despotism, in other words, may not be native to the system.<sup>39</sup> The good teacher in the *Analects* is one who, like the Master himself, humbly assumes an office more noble than his own person. As master he is humble servant.

Nonetheless, the student must understand himself to be honored by the self-exaltation of the teacher and the student's own complementary self-abasement. The student's honor is in re-enforcing the hierarchy that constrains him. If the teacher does in fact presume on the humility of the student, still the student must honor himself by calling good that which is evil. His only hope for vindication is again the moral incoherence of unqualified deference. If despotism is not native to the system, still the system has no defense against it.

The tremendous potential of Confucius's sociology for humble discipleship may be too easily redirected toward subjugation; and the teacher's office is so well preserved by disproportionate reciprocity that it may lead easily to self-importance and self-interest. Relational asymmetry undermines the distinction between the wisdom offered by one's teacher (or pastor perhaps), and the teacher (or pastor) himself. Office and asymmetrical relation eclipse the person both of the father and the son, the inferior and the superior.

### 3. Comparison

Now with the raw materials in place, we are in a position to attempt select points of comparison between these two traditions on issues relevant to the broader question of community and confession.

#### 3.1. The Ideal Teacher

Between the Protestant confessionalism sketched above and a Confucian sociology of knowledge one discovers remarkable similarities, and Confucius himself appears to be a rare storehouse of common grace insight. With tenderness and simplicity of expression, he offers wisdom at several points consonant with a Reformed theology.

Confucius expects teachers to be qualified—they must know their subject matter. But knowledge is never of itself sufficient; good character is essential, so that teachers may serve not merely as sources of information but even more as beacons of faithful pursuit of the Way. The apostle Paul expects

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<sup>39</sup> Whether Confucianism is sexist, for example, is a complex question which one dare not oversimplify. Goldin's view is balanced: "To conclude, then ... is Confucianism sexist? If it is, it does not have to be." *Confucianism*, 120.

accuracy of doctrine and faithful teaching (1 Tim 1, 6; 2 Tim 4; Titus 2), but his emphasis on character—trustworthiness, integrity, and so on—is unmistakable. Jesus himself, of course, led a close circle not of students but of disciples. He not only lectured—if he did that at all—but lived with his disciples.

One easily detects a similar sensitivity to the relational character of knowledge and growth in knowledge in Reformed theology. In what may be regarded as the first Reformed prolegomena, Franciscus Junius's *Treatise on True Theology* codified the principle that “the Reformed conception of Christian theology is fundamentally a relational enterprise, determined by and determinative of the divine-human relationship.”<sup>40</sup> Geerhardus Vos, discussing the relationship between history and revelation, argued that God “*has caused His revelation to take place in the milieu of the historical life of a people*,” so that the “*circle of revelation is not a school, but a ‘covenant,’*”<sup>41</sup> the goal of which is that we would “*walk in newness of life*,” “*walk in the Spirit*,” and to “*abide*” in Christ, His Word, and His love (Rom 6:4; Gal 5:16; John 15:7, 9).

### 3.2. Familial Virtue and Wisdom

Confucius's emphasis on a familial conception of the confessing community also bears notable similarities to biblical ecclesiology in Reformed understanding. The Baptist was sent “turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers” (Mal 4:6/Luke 1:17). Calvin writes, “What Malachi says about John the Baptist, applies to all the ministers of Christ. They are sent for this purpose *to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to the fathers.*”<sup>42</sup> Jesus speaks of adoption in terms of familial reconstitution; those who do the will of the Father are truly his mother, sister, and brother (Matt 12:50). Paul's familial ecclesiology is in terms of “the household [οἶκεῖος] of faith” or “of God,” a sociological re-knitting that cuts across ethnic lines (Gal 6:10; Eph 2:19, 3:1–13; Col 1:27; 1 Tim 3:15). Confucian filial piety likewise extends the domestic metaphor across the social sphere and thus encourages the generational accountability highlighted in such passages as Deuteronomy 6 but often neglected in (Western) cultural contexts dominated by a fixation on youth, self-determination, and individuality.

Reformed theologians have recognized that salvation is a corporate and even familial affair. As Augustine did before him, Calvin suggests we think of the church as the mother of the faithful.<sup>43</sup> He writes,

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<sup>40</sup> Willem J. Van Asselt, “The Fundamental Meaning of Theology: Archetypal and Ectypal Theology in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Thought,” *WTJ* 64 (2002): 323.

<sup>41</sup> Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Matthew, Mark, Luke—Volume 1*, trans. William Pringle, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: CCEL, 1999), 344, italics original.

<sup>43</sup> See Augustine, *Confessions* 7.1; and *On the Morals of the Catholic Church* 62. More often quoted in this regard is Cyprian of Carthage: “He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother.” *Treatise 1: On the Unity of the Church* 6 (ANF 5:423). This is preceded of course by 1 Thessalonians, in which Paul characterizes apostolic ministry as the gentle and affectionate care of a nursing mother for her own children (1 Thess 2:7–8).

there is no other means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourish us at her breasts, and, in short, keep us under her charge and government, until, divested of mortal flesh, we become like the angels (Mt. 22:30).<sup>44</sup>

He associates grace and the body so closely as to say that “beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for.”<sup>45</sup> For Confucius, the follower of the Way is a son or daughter of the tradition, entrusted wide-eyed to the care and instruction of living keepers of ancient wisdom. Arguably the salient commonality in view is a corporate or specifically familial understanding of knowledge, wisdom, and virtue.

And yet there are significant differences between a Confucian sociology of knowledge and the Protestant confessionalism sketched above.

### 3.3. Unity True and False

That the body is the body of Christ entails the right of disunity for the sake of unity. Paul’s emphasis on the unity of the “household of God” (Eph 2:19) is unmistakable (1 Cor 3; 12:12–27; Eph 4:14–16), but certainly the apostle sees a role for disunity (1 Cor 11:19). In fact, his emphasis on unity is at the same time an emphasis on disunity; for Paul, unity is a refraction of soteriology, covenant theology, and even the doctrine of God. The unity of the body is a consequence of the unity of gospel accomplishment and truth, and so the unity of the body is also a consequence of separation from religious error and from the world (e.g., Rom 12:2).

Since new birth by the Spirit is provided for by the redemptive accomplishment proclaimed in the gospel, the health of familial ties depends upon faithfulness to the gospel and upon the obedience enjoined upon the followers of Jesus (Matt 28:19–20; John 14:15–31). In that sense, critical engagement with the tradition and the teaching of the church—not self-effacing subjugation to it—is not only proper but a matter of duty to the family itself and to the personal principle of its unity: the singular mediator present and active by the Spirit. Christian new birth is forged in the atoning death of the Messiah and the Spirit’s application of the Son’s victory to those upon whom the love of the Father rests. Regeneration sets the sinner at enmity with his old self, with the flesh under condemnation, and with the world. And so, the unity of the church is wrought in gospel truth, and its primary form, its inaugural moment, is disunity with the world and with falsehood (John 3:19; 12:25; 15:19; 1 Cor 2; 1 John 2–4). Antithesis is gracious.

To be a Christian, therefore, means to have exercised one’s right to lawful disunity. But unity via disunity is not only a starting gesture; it is the church’s perpetual duty, its essential and abiding character, even relative to its own tradition. While issuing unmistakable emphasis on unity, Paul warns the Ephesians that subversive wolves with deceitful schemes would arise even from within their own ranks (Acts 20:29; Eph 4:14), and that at times “there must be factions among you,” among the church, “in order that those who are genuine ... may be recognized” (1 Cor 11:19). “It is, after all,” writes Stephen Holmes, “a proper way to relate to a tradition to stand against particular developments and suggest that

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<sup>44</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.1.4.

<sup>45</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 4.1.4.

they are improper and should be done away with.”<sup>46</sup> The point being: “Theology needs always to be in dialogue—conversation—with its tradition, but that dialogue may well be sharply critical.”<sup>47</sup>

Confucius seems to have preserved such a right of disunity. He exercised it when he saw the wisdom of ages past fall into disrepair. However, in Confucius’s case, that same wisdom for which he labored enjoins a brand of filiality which virtually annuls the right of disunity. This can be seen in two ways: the reciprocity of asymmetrical relationships means that one’s filial duties are perpetually unfulfilled, and second, relational asymmetry appears to constitute the whole of a person’s social life. “Let your actions be governed by dutifulness and trustworthiness, and do not accept as a friend one who is not your equal,” says the Master (1.8, 9.25). But who is one’s equal?<sup>48</sup> This means that there are few relationships within which individuals may exercise a right to disunity on the basis of conscience for the sake of truth. As noted above, the elimination of the dissenting voice of conscience is, in the sociology of the Way, a crowning virtue. It is the gold standard of Confucian sanctification. This subjective aspect of filial cultivation renders lawful disunity elusive.

On Confucius’s model of the sociology of knowledge, therefore, social unity does not naturally stand securely on doctrinal truth but rather on the truth of socio-structural re-enforcement. It may therefore partner clumsily with a confession-borne sociology, or at worst truth may come under the influence of the more quantifiable asymmetries of inter-personal relation. Truth in this latter case will be a matter of social expediency. That which affirms relational asymmetry is true; whatever undermines hierarchy is false. And this pragmatistic redefinition of “truth” indicates an ontological vulnerability in Confucius’s social vision.

### 3.4. Creator/Creature Ontology

Neo-Calvinists have spoken of the church in terms of organism and institution.<sup>49</sup> The organism is the church catholic, the living body of Christ into which sinners are brought or incorporated by the regenerating work of the Spirit of the risen savior. This is all against the background of the inability of the sinner, apart from the regenerating work of the Spirit working by and with Scripture, to confess Christ truly or to do any good at all. The organism of the church is the regenerate people, who apart from regeneration are dead in sin.

The body of Christ is set apart from the fallen race by an act of grace; it is a gift, so that no man can boast (Eph 2:8, 9). The distinction in view is among human beings, relative to the creature’s relation to God. The formation of the body is constituted by a gracious change in status before God (Eph 2:1–10). The point is that this ecclesiology assumes a Creator/creature ontology. The movement from unregenerate to regenerate, or from in Adam to in Christ, is a change in status before God. Without a Creator/creature ontology these categories lose their meaning.

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<sup>46</sup> Holmes, *Listening to the Past*, 13. Holmes notes that “Calvin relates to Augustine ... with charity and respect.” Calvin, says Holmes, usually names Augustine when quoting him approvingly, but often withholds Augustine’s identity when critiquing his views.

<sup>47</sup> Holmes, *Listening to the Past*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Confucius’s sayings regarding friendship tend to be pragmatic. He has more a concept of ally than of friend. See for example *Analects* 12.24, 15.10, 16.4, 16.5.

<sup>49</sup> E.g., Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 4:329–32.

The church institution, on the other hand, is the visible formalization of the organism. Ecclesiastical offices represent distinction in the institution only, not in the organism. There are no degrees of participation in the organism, as to participation in saving grace. The grace of gifting and church leadership is given variously (Rom 12:3–8; 1 Cor 3:1–15; 12; Eph 3:1–8), but these are institutional distinctions which effect no change in status before God. The emphasis here must fall on relationships within the body, wherein teacher and student, parent and child, shepherd and sheep, are equally undeserving but nonetheless belong—fully and equally—by grace to the organism of the body.

One ecclesiological implication of Creator/creature ontology, therefore, is that office entails no exemption from accountability, neither to God nor to fellow image-bearers before God. Elders are protected from slander, but also held to a higher standard of holiness (1 Tim 5:19–20). In terms of organism, all members have equal access to the throne of grace and to the objective authority of God in Scripture. Organism in this sense, because in it there is no distinction before God, has an equalizing effect on the institution. All holders of church office are accountable to God, to whom any member can appeal, and to the Spirit-principle of unity and incorporation, for the handling of their offices. The fact that charges against an elder must have the support of multiple witnesses (1 Tim 5:19) signals the corporate context of the abuse of authority and the corrective ecclesiastical mechanisms. This requirement protects elders from slander and members under their care from intimidation. All in all, Creator/creature ontology prevents abuse of office and, in a word, keeps the church civil.

That Confucius makes no distinction between organism and institution suggests a monistic ontology. In Confucius's sociology of knowledge, in other words, there is only the human and the human other. The distinctions of status and office among humans are therefore ultimate distinctions, since there is no equalizing accountability to a Creator God, no higher court of appeal. It is difficult therefore to circumscribe and restrain the personal authority of the father-teacher.

Where the father-teacher is doctrinally wayward, the way to the office of appeals is guarded by filiality; and since there is no ontologically higher court, and thus no spiritual essence of corporate unity, there is no other way and no other office. Of course, the objectivity of that body of knowledge held in such high regard by Confucius appears to check the authority of the father-teacher; but it is a weak match for the insurmountable disproportionality of relational asymmetry. Truth has been swallowed up in social function.

Only the gravest paternal transgression could justify a child-student's appeal to the tradition against his father-teacher. But even in such cases, asymmetry implies that the child-student's rising against his father-teacher is quite simply a violation of natural order. He cannot win. Should the child-student bring a charge against his father-teacher and fail, he may at the eleventh hour preserve his servant-honor but only through celebrating his own dishonor and publicizing his remorse; he himself must restore the father-teacher's honor at the price of his own dignity. Notice also that private remorse is a social non-entity and therefore irrelevant. Public self-abasement is all that matters. On the other hand, should he succeed in demonstrating his teacher's error, the damage will be irreversible. He will have succeeded only in proving himself unworthy because ungrateful, a threat to the ethos of filiality that is essential to social harmony and progress. He is a liability for all. Truth-over-teacher has no currency in Confucius's sociology of knowledge. Accordingly:

Even though there is the fifth commandment ... Christians are commanded to obey parents "in the Lord" ... and if the biological parents instigate Christians to any transgression of God's law, such Christians may justly consider their biological parents



not as parents, but as strangers who are attempting to seduce them from obedience to God. In Confucianism, however, this is not possible for the parents, especially the biological father, who cannot be disobeyed in any circumstance.<sup>50</sup>

Monistic ontology, in other words, may allow the authority of the holder of office to usurp the authority of the teaching itself—in the church, even the Word of God. And if so, Confucius's sociology of knowledge is likely to prove resistant to the ecclesiological implications of the qualitative authority of a perspicuous and objective Holy Scripture—in particular the ecclesiological equalization of a universal right of appeal and the freedom of every member's conscience before all but God. Unmistakably, Confucius lays heavy emphasis on study and critical thinking; but sociologically, ecclesologically, he leans toward unqualified magisterialism, even authoritarianism.

Such effects have been documented. Dong-Choul Kim writes of the Korean church that “Neo-Confucianism” tends to “over-emphasize the authority of the preacher,” leading to “a misunderstanding of authority as a social and not a theological concept.”<sup>51</sup> “Authority of the authoritarian type,” in the pulpit in particular, “has its origins rooted deeply in the influence of Neo-Confucianism,” he explains.<sup>52</sup> In sum:

As the symbolic head of the religious community the preacher has unlimited power. Those who uphold authoritarianism may exercise authority in a hierarchical, top-down fashion that keeps the congregation dependent and submissive. The authority of a preacher as considered in the hierarchy of Korean society is characterized as patriarchal. In such a situation the challenge is in avoiding becoming authoritarian.<sup>53</sup>

### 3.5. Calvin and Confucius on Sin

Finally, Confucius's doctrine of sin is deficient. The result is that he encounters no need for grace and therefore what he envisions for moral improvement is at important points inadequate.

Calvin described Adamic inheritance in terms of both guilt and corruption.<sup>54</sup> He found that Scripture taught a salvation which responded to this state with what he called a *duplex gratia Dei*, a double grace of God, including both forensic and renovative benefits: God both reckons the sinner righteous and works internal renewal.<sup>55</sup> The relevant Pauline language in particular comes across as paradoxical, not only in terms of one's current status—is one righteous or not?—but also in terms of the justified sinner's ability either to sin or to do good. We have peace with God, and there is now no condemnation; but not even the apostle Paul himself dares presume that he has already attained it (Rom 5:1; 8:1; Phil 3:12). The same person who has been raised with Christ, and whose life is hidden

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<sup>50</sup> Kang, “Confucian Familism,” 178.

<sup>51</sup> Dong-Choul Kim, “‘Authority’ in Korean Presbyterian Preaching: A Practical Theological Investigation,” (PhD diss.; Stellenbosch University, 2014), 24.

<sup>52</sup> Kim, “‘Authority’ in Korean Presbyterian Preaching,” 25.

<sup>53</sup> Kim, “‘Authority’ in Korean Presbyterian Preaching,” 26.

<sup>54</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.1.5–11. Similarly WCF 6.3.

<sup>55</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 3.11.1. Also WCF 11 and 13.

with Christ in God, Paul commands to seek the things that are above. Richard Gaffin has called this the “‘mysterious math’ of God’s covenant.”<sup>56</sup>

The Master’s saying that “only the very wise and the very stupid do not change” (*Analects* 17.3) captures well the complexity of his view of human nature and natural capacity (cf. 16.9, 16.11). His strong denials of innate ability never meet anything like acknowledgement of the need for the grace of subjective restoration and objective reconciliation to the Father administered by the Spirit of the risen Son—a righteousness from God, from without (Rom 3:21–22). Anyone can agree that “by nature people are similar,” and that “they diverge as the result of practice” (17.2). But whatever truth this may convey, it conveys no grace; and this is because it understates the predicament to which grace responds. The Spirit makes sinners, unwilling and unable, both willing and able to obey and glorify God. Confucius appears at times to have grasped the darker secrets of the human condition, but the hope of his program hangs precariously on ambiguity between practiced decorum and the inner state of the image-bearer before God. Confucius’s doctrine of sin stumbles in the darkness; for this reason, his soteriology falls to convey real help. For all the value we find in his social vision, he can offer no lasting hope.

### 3.6. The Westminster Standards

Chapter 20 of the Westminster Confession of Faith, entitled “Of Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience,” includes a number of relevant insights. Section 1 addresses first of all liberty from guilt, divine wrath, curse, and the dominion of sin and Satan. Section 1 also names that unto which believers are saved, which is “obedience unto him, not out of slavish fear, but a childlike love and willing mind.” The obedience of the child—let us say the son, the student, the citizen, the subordinate—is childlike in its affective mode and motivation. Obedience is not merely willing but loving. And there is a corrective note here as well, distinguishing the obedience of Christian deliverance and regeneration from a worldly subjugation. The former is “not out of slavish fear.” A hint is thus dropped to the effect that obedience out of fear is not loving obedience but self-centered in a particularly pitiable fashion. Even as the subordinate obeys he provokes disdain, since he is a behavioral malformation of himself. It is also worth noting that slavish obedience creates a false notion of liberation. The subjugated son longs not for loving obedience but for no obedience at all. By the self-stifling bitterness of his position he is prevented from imagining a liberation of his soul unto another form of obedience but he longs instead for deliverance unto autonomy. The obedience of slavish fear nourishes sinful pride—and this is precisely the pairing we see in the serpent’s ploy in Genesis 3:1–6. The serpent positions Eve to transgress the authority of God and reject her own filial position by leading her to believe that she was an unwitting slave to a self-interested manipulator.

Section 2 discusses the relationship between conscience and obedience, drawing out implications of the redemptive liberation addressed in section 1. Section 2 provides, in other words, a brief psychology of obedience and the regenerate condition.

“God alone is Lord of the conscience” means that no person sits in judgment over the conscience of another, or that for a person’s sense of himself, in the relational fabric of his self-understanding, he owes an account only to God. So, while the first clause of WCF 20.2 is positive, affirming that God is Lord of the conscience, it also disallows even hidden attitudes of self-importance, in which one person thinks of himself as judge of another. There is a clear boundary of jurisdiction drawn here. No person

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<sup>56</sup> Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2006), 73.

wields authority over the hidden thoughts, over the self-understanding, of another. I can counsel, teach, encourage, debate, dispute, lead or lead by example, but I cannot govern or judge the conscience of another. This is impossible, but also wrong.

The lordship of God over the conscience is represented by Scripture, so that men and women can hold each other accountable to God's word, and thus administer divine authority indirectly, but thus far and no further—"not to any doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word."

Confession 20.2 addresses two relevant aspects of transgression. First, "to believe such doctrines," those which are contrary to the Word of God, "or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience." The Confession, in other words, insists upon the integrity of the person in moral conduct and self-understanding. The Confession claims that the breakdown of the person that occurs when conscience is transgressed by will constitutes a transgression of freedom. In other words, freedom is personal wholeness, the integrity of the person, released unto loving obedience to God. To exercise the will against the grain of one's heart is to act in violation of the regenerative deliverance of Confession 20.1, and so it is to act against the redemptive accomplishment and reign of Christ. Christ has set me free; so when I act against my conscience, I defame the accomplishment of grace.

The Confession goes one step further. In addition to liberty of conscience, "reason also" is defied by "the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute blind obedience." Sadly, this is precisely the demand that emerges from a Confucian sociological ontology, in which the silencing of the conscience through deferential behavioral conditioning serves as a beacon of moral striving.

Informative for present purposes is also the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC), questions 123–33, on the fifth commandment. The Larger Catechism in fact devotes more questions to the fifth commandment than to another commandment of the decalogue—ten questions, compared to seven on the fourth commandment.

The scope of the fifth commandment, according to WLC 126, is "the performance of those duties which we mutually owe in our several relations, as inferiors, superiors, or equals." Two questions, 124 and 125, reflect upon the Scripture's styling these relations in familial terms. In other words, the Westminster divines took it for granted that Exodus 20:12 was interested in social relationships as such—all of them—and that the Lord saw fit to cast his instruction, with regard to human relationships, in familial terms. The divines understand Scripture to teach that the family is the seed of social, political, and professional life, and that by divine design we ought to extrapolate family relationships for understanding how human society ought to function. The familial character of student-teacher relationships, sovereign-subject relationships, and friendships—to name only a few—is divinely acknowledged, perhaps divinely sanctioned, even designed thus by God. This relational organicism, to put some terminology to it, is also apparent in various places in the New Testament. Paul addresses familial, social, and political conduct together in Ephesians 4–6 and again in Colossians 3. Peter as well, in 1 Peter 2–3, refers to various human institutions (πάση ἀνθρωπίνῃ κτίσει, 2:13), speaking collectively and then sequentially of familial, social, and political life. And indeed, historically speaking, humanity began as a family, and then developed socially and politically. How right the Master was!

This connection between family life and public or social life is explicit in WLC questions 124 and 125. "Father and mother," reads 124, means "all superiors in age and gifts," and "especially" those who "by God's ordinance, are over us in place of authority, whether in family, church, or commonwealth." "By father and mother *are meant*," or 'intentionally designated,' in other words, all superiors in human

relationships, including, evidently, elder siblings. It is a rich, even ambitious, reading of the fifth commandment to see it not as suggesting the inclusion of various non-familial relationships, nor even as implicating such relationships, but intending by the language of “father and mother” to designate all superiors in all superior-inferior relationships. And the fifth commandment, according to the Westminster divines, wants to say that all superiors are to be as parents to inferiors. Specifically, this means that all superiors are expected, “like natural parents, to express love and tenderness” to inferiors. Reciprocally, the familial language of the fifth commandment is given in order “to work inferiors to greater willingness and cheerfulness in performing their duties to their superiors, as to their parents.”

Questions 127 and 128 address the duties and sins, respectively, of inferiors relative to superiors, and questions 129 and 130 address the duties and sins of superiors relative to inferiors. Relationship dynamics—even honor and shame—are explicated in detail. And for the most part, the words of WLC 127–130 could be ascribed to Confucius himself. He could say the very same things, even believing that his words had the same meaning. But there are, to be sure, indications of deeper differences between the outlook of the divines and that of the ancient Eastern sage.

Inferiors ought, according to question 127, to pray and offer thanksgiving for their superiors, and they ought to bear “with their infirmities ... covering them in love.” There is, conspicuously, a deference to God in gratitude for his provision of superiors, even of superiors whose infirmities are apparent. Ideally considered, a good superior, or good parental care and guidance, is a provision from God which enriches the life and labors of the inferior. Again, we hear echoes of New Testament teachings on family and political life. But this mode of gratitude is not tethered exclusively to the ideal superior, to the superior perfectly virtuous and gracious, issuing only lawful, agreeable commands. Rather, the inferior is encouraged to bear with the infirmities of his superior, and that in a specific manner: by covering him in love.

Now, Confucius cannot say that “love covers a multitude of sins,” but only that love can momentarily suppress or briefly ameliorate the guilt, shame, and hurt that sin causes—or even that love simply is a momentary and naively wishful suppression of sin and its ill-effects. What Confucius cannot do is enjoin his disciples to bear with their superiors’ imperfections and cover them with love on the basis of the love of John 3:16 that not poetically but covenantally covered once and for all the sins of the saints. The counsel of the master can only pretend to bear the genuine healing power of the love of the Godman for his friends.

Most theologically conspicuous in the Larger Catechism’s exposition of the mutual duties and offenses of superior and inferior is question 129, on the duties of superiors towards their inferiors—a telling fact in and of itself, where, by contrast, Confucius’s attention is overwhelmingly given to duties of the subordinate. But most conspicuous here is the divine curatorial hand and the implication of religious accountability that runs through every space of the superior-inferior relationship.

Specifically, superiors should carry out their duties “according to that power they receive from God.” This pregnant designation is noteworthy on two counts. First, a superior is a superior by divine appointment. This is of course not exclusive of the normal human paths to leadership or institutional influence—training, experience, networking, and so on. And the fact that divine appointment is not an alternative to these normal circumstances means that Christians may strive and perhaps accomplish but never boast. Conversely, should things not go well—and how rarely they do for most people—likewise those circumstances less encouraging to our limited understanding are also best deferred to

divine wisdom and goodness. We neither boast, therefore, nor despair, because the power we wield is granted by God, or not.

Second, the power which superiors wield is that power which is granted by God; that is, the superior's superiority is circumscribed by divine endorsement. The superior might exercise all kinds of power, but not all of his power enjoys divine approval. God grants to the father the power to guide, build up, encourage, and discipline his children; but not to provoke or exasperate them. But the father is capable of both. A father does have the power, or the capacity, to make the lives of his children miserable, but he does not have the authority to do so because his power is granted by God. If God is the bestowing authority of the power of the superior, than that authority bears the character of God, and legitimate exercise of that authority is restricted to that which pleases or glorifies God.

This is made explicit in the final clauses of 129 in which superiors are enjoined "to procure glory to God" and thereby to procure "honor to themselves." In the social organism envisioned here, the God of comfort, love, order, and justice is glorified when the superior is duly honored and the inferior duly led. To put it the other way around: the superior is duly honored, and the inferior rightly led, when and only when God is glorified. God being God, when God is glorified, all things for the creature are set rightly in their places. The keeping of the fifth commandment includes "an express promise of long life and prosperity, as far as it shall serve for God's glory and their own good, to all such as keep this commandment."

### *4. Conclusion*

Striking similarities between Reformed ecclesiology, Reformed views of tradition and teaching, and Confucius's own take on knowledge, learning, and relevant personal-corporate dynamics are undeniable, as are resources for mutual edification.

For example, recognition of biblical precedent for Confucian familialism aids discernment. By acknowledging a creation-corruption sequence in the familial sphere, the observer may avoid both contrarian over-reaction, on the one hand, and reactionary tribalism on the other. Such a balance stands to set a healthy tone for efforts in culturally directed theologies.

Reflecting on the foregoing comparison also brings to light differences with regard to tradition as such. The fact that tradition may serve as either a scapegoat or a refuge for improprieties of one kind or another is clear enough; but the ways in which ambiguous deployments of the notion of tradition may take hold vary as cultural valuations of tradition vary. We view learning differently; we view teaching differently; and we have different attitudes toward that which is taught and the people who teach. Awareness of cultural instincts on this count would help us to utilize theological tradition with greater wisdom in a cross-cultural context.

A third benefit is what we might call a point of contact, or evident openness to the gospel. Cultures differ but share both a common origin and impulse, and the suppressive instinct of the sinful condition. When we point out these common principles on a cultural level, it becomes evident that the tension between openness to the gospel and the suppressive instinct is not resolved in full at the point of conversion. Growth in truth and holiness (Eph 4:15) will continue to face not only individual but corporate and cultural resistance. Cross-cultural ministry—and all ministry is cross-cultural, at the end of the day—that is aided by such comparative insights is better equipped for such challenges.

# *The Case for Christian Nationalism:* A Review Article

— Kevin DeYoung —

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**Abstract:** For all the fine retrieval work Stephen Wolfe does in parts of *The Case for Christian Nationalism*, the overall project must be rejected. I offer a substantive critique of this book under four headings: nations and ethnicity, the nature of the church, Protestant political thought, and the way forward. While it is right to pray for a great renewal, we must remember that the most needed renewal in our world and in our land is the restoration of true doctrine, the reformation of our lives, and the revival of that divine and supernatural light shining in our hearts to show us God’s glory in the face of Christ (2 Cor 4:6).

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I first encountered Stephen Wolfe, through his writing, when I was doing my doctoral work. We were both working on similar intellectual themes and looking at similar sources. I quoted Wolfe—who has a PhD from Louisiana State University and is now a “country scholar at Wolfeshire”—once or twice in my dissertation. Since then, I’ve read an article here or there from Wolfe and have tracked with some of his comments on Twitter. When I saw that he had a massive book coming out making *The Case for Christian Nationalism*,<sup>1</sup> I was eager to read a serious exploration of such a timely and controversial topic.

This is a long review, so let me state my conclusion up front: I understand and sympathize with the desire for something like Christian Nationalism, but if this book represents the best of that *ism*, then Christian Nationalism isn’t the answer the church or our nation needs. For all the fine retrieval work Wolfe does in parts of the book, the overall project must be rejected.

The message—that ethnicities shouldn’t mix, that heretics can be killed, that violent revolution is already justified, and that what our nation needs is a charismatic Caesar-like leader to raise our consciousness and galvanize the will of the people—may bear resemblance to certain blood-and-soil

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2022). This article was originally published by The Gospel Coalition, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/christian-nationalism-wolfe/>. See also Brad Littlejohn’s review of Wolfe’s book in this issue of *Themelios* (pp. 251–53).

nationalisms of the 19th and 20th centuries, but it's not a nationalism that honors and represents the name of Christ.

Let me start by acknowledging the understandable desire for something like Christian Nationalism. The best part of the book is Wolfe's chapter on "The Good of Cultural Christianity" and, in particular, the section on "Celebrating Decline." Wolfe is right to maintain that while cultural Christianity cannot save sinners (i.e., the message of the gospel is entrusted to the church, not to the civil order), a Christian culture can be both preparative and persuasive in direction of the gospel (p. 213). Just because hypocrisy and nominalism are dangers—dangers that ministers should and do warn against—that doesn't mean we should welcome the collapse of social assumptions and stigmas that pushed people in the direction of biblical truth and basic morality.

Too many Christians are quick to wish away cultural Christianity without considering the alternatives. "But wouldn't you prefer to live in a community," Wolfe asks, "where you can trust your neighbors, having mutual expectations of conduct, speech, and beliefs according to Christian standards? Wouldn't you prefer to have neighbors with Christian standards of decency, respect, and admonishment, *even if* it is merely cultural?" (p. 223).

These are good questions. I share Wolfe's bewilderment over the Christian leaders who seem to *prefer* a society hostile to Christianity. I've seen pastors in my own denomination look wistfully at Christians losing power and becoming a minority in the country, as if Constantine ruined everything and our influence would be so much greater if we only we could lose power and become more marginalized.

It's one thing to acknowledge cultural Christianity comes with tradeoffs or to recognize cultural Christianity allowed for certain sins to flourish; it's another thing to say "good riddance" to Bible Belt near-Christianity, as Russell Moore did in a 2015 article that Wolfe quotes at length (pp. 224–25). Wolfe notes how Moore rejoices that "we don't have Mayberry anymore, if we ever did" (p. 226). Traditional family values may have kept some children in intact families. "But," Moore concludes, "that's hardly revival" (p. 225). True, not revival, but something worth preserving, if we can?

I've given a mini-speech in private settings probably a dozen times in the past five years. I've said something like this to my friends and colleagues:

We have to realize that people are scared and discouraged. They see America rapidly becoming less and less Christian. They see traditional morality—especially in areas of sex and gender—not only being tossed overboard but resolutely and legally opposed. Of course, we should not give way to ungodly fear and panic. We should not make an idol out of politics. We should not fight like jerks because that's the way the world fights. But people want to see that their Christian leaders—pastors, thinkers, writers, institutional heads—are willing to fight for the truth. You may think your people spend too much time watching Tucker Carlson, or retweeting Ben Shapiro, or looking for Jordan Peterson videos on YouTube, or reading the latest stuff from Doug Wilson—and I have theological disagreements with all of them (after all, some of them aren't even Christians)—but people are drawn to them because they offer a confident assertion of truth. Our people can see the world being overrun by moral chaos, and they want help in mounting a courageous resistance; instead, they are getting a respectable retreat.

The online "winsomeness" debate of 2022 was a reprise of the "empathy" debate of 2021. In both instances, someone raises the point, "Hey, that word should not represent the sum total of our Christian

witness. In fact, by itself, that word may smuggle in some bad ideas and assumptions.” A number of voices chime in in agreement.

In response, other Christians say, “Woah, wait a minute. Jesus was full of compassion. We should be kind to one another and love our neighbors. Why are you anti-Jesus?” Which prompts the first group to say, “That’s not really what we were talking about.” Meanwhile, another group runs with the idea that “winsomeness” and “empathy” are bad and concludes that if you don’t assert yourself with maximum obnoxiousness and offensiveness, then you’re a Big Eva Squish. Lather, rinse, repeat. The conversation devolves into the usual taking of sides.

As frustrating as those discussions can be, they highlight an important difference in evangelical sensibilities. I’ve used the word “winsome” for years. It’s a good word. One of the unofficial slogans of Reformed Theological Seminary, where I gladly serve, is “winsomely Reformed.” If “winsome” means we engage in the battle of ideas with respect and civility, looking to build bridges where we can, then it’s certainly a worthwhile goal. The problem is when “winsomeness” and “empathy” get to be defined not by our words and deeds but by how our words and deeds make people feel. “I will be kind” is Christianity. “I will not do anything to jeopardize your good opinion of me” is capitulation.

The other problem is that winsomeness almost always runs in one direction. The “winsome” folks are careful to speak respectfully and humbly to an LGBT+ audience, while they’re eager to speak “prophetically” to the MAGA crowd. Many conservative Christians are tired of always being on the defensive and always having to communicate their convictions in ways that left-leaning secularists approve of. They want more than a tiny island of religious freedom where we promise not to bother anyone; they want a vigorous defense of what’s true.

The appeal of something like Christian Nationalism is that it presents a muscular alternative to surrender and defeat. Few conservative Christians have anything like a sophisticated political philosophy. But they know gay so-called marriage is wrong and drag queen story hour is bad. So if the two choices in political philosophy are (1) supporting gay “marriage” because that’s what pluralism demands and defending drag queen story hour as a blessing of liberty or (2) Christian Nationalism, millions of Christians in this country are going to choose the latter. I imagine the same basic equation explains the newfound interest in Catholic integralism as well.

I sympathize with the reasons many Christians want something like Christian Nationalism. They aren’t necessarily looking for culture warriors. They just don’t want to be told that the increasing hostility toward Christian ethics is all a figment of their imagination or really their own fault. These Christians are looking for leadership. They’re looking for confidence. They’re looking for a way to assert not only that Christian ideas have the right to exist but that Christian ideas are *right*. When a 475-page book with hundreds of footnotes from people like Althusius and Turretin reaches the top 100 on Amazon, you know something deeper is going on than a passion for political theory. Many Christians want an alternative to decline and retreat. So do I. But Christian Nationalism is not the answer.

### *1. A Difficult Task*

I’m going to get to my critique, but first let me make some preliminary remarks about what makes this book difficult to review.



For starters, it's a long book, covering a lot of ground—from philosophy to history to theology to political theory. Wolfe has a lot to say, and there's a lot that can be said in response. But a book review is not a book, so the reviewer has to practice restraint.<sup>2</sup>

Second, this is a personal book. Although there are plenty of footnotes and evidence of academic research, this volume is not meant to be a dispassionate scholarly reflection on the nature of civil society. As Wolfe says in the last paragraph on the last page, “This book is not an intellectual exercise, nor intended simply to ‘contribute to the field’ of Christian political theory. It is personal. It is a vision of the future, and my family is a part of that future” (p. 478).

With that aim, it's hard to know whether the book should be reviewed as a work of political theorizing, as a work of historical retrieval, or as a personal manifesto. Wolfe isn't just arguing for the establishment principle or for legislating both tables of the Mosaic law, he's justifying violent revolution (p. 324) and calling for “the Great Renewal” (p. 435). It would be a mistake to think Wolfe's interest is in settling antiquarian debates.

Third, reviewing *The Case for Christian Nationalism* is difficult because Wolfe stacks the rhetorical deck against critical engagement with his claims and his ideas. At the beginning of the book, Wolfe emphasizes his commitment to use “an older style” of writing that relies on actual arguments, logical coherence, and scholarly demonstration. He laments the fact that so many Christians “resort to rhetorical devices, tweetable shibboleths, and credibility development to assert disparate principles and applications” (pp. 19–20). He decries those who “personally attack those who would disagree” and “appeal to common prejudice or sentiment” (p. 20).

And yet, Wolfe doesn't abide by these same ideals in dealing with those who would disagree with his ideas. He speaks of his opponents as “regime evangelicals” (p. 341) and describes them as “rhetorically enslaved to the sentiments of a coastal elite” (p. 456). Likewise, he anticipates that “the most vociferous critics [of his pro-Russian views] will be [Globalist American Empire]–affirming Christians” (p. 445).

Just as the left has predetermined that any opposition to its ideology must be attributable to racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, so some voices on the right have predetermined that anyone unwilling to go all the way in the direction of Christian Nationalism must be sellouts eager to please a nefarious cabal of secular elites. This posture hardly encourages an open and honest exchange of ideas.

These difficulties notwithstanding, I want to offer a substantive critique of *The Case for Christian Nationalism*. I'll group my concerns under four headings: nations and ethnicity, the nature of the church, Protestant political thought, and the way forward.

## 2. Nations and Ethnicity

By Wolfe's own admission, his definitions are often idiosyncratic, and by my estimation, they're not entirely consistent. For example, the all-important concept of “nation” sometimes operates in Wolfe's thinking more organically like an ethnicity, sometimes more loosely like a culture, sometimes more locally like a love of people and place, and sometimes more traditionally like a nation-state with a recognizable set of laws, a governing magistrate, and the power of the sword. The front cover contains

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<sup>2</sup> If you want a fuller summary and more comprehensive evaluation of the book, I recommend Neil Shenvi's four-part review, “Of Gods and Men: A Long Review of Wolfe's Case for Christian Nationalism,” <https://shenvi-apologetics.com/of-gods-and-men-a-long-review-of-wolfes-case-for-christian-nationalism-part-i-book-summary/>.

a picture of America with a cross in the middle, so the book would seem to be about the nation-state we know as the United States of America. But at other times, it's clear Wolfe doesn't like that idea of "nation" and is animated by a different understanding of nation—one that defines "nationalism" as the natural good of becoming conscious of your own "people-group," being for your own people-group, and keeping your people-group distinct from other people-groups (p. 135).

There are many problems with Wolfe's defense of this "similarity principle." It's built upon a weak and speculative foundation about how people would have formed distinct nations even without the fall, it gives too much credence to our own fallen inclinations, and it gives too little consideration for how our desire for "similarity" has been tainted by sin. Grace may perfect nature, but it often does so in ways that feel unnatural to us.

Likewise, Wolfe's argument doesn't reckon with the way the Bible relativizes our sense of family (Mark 3:31–35), tears down dividing walls between people groups (Eph 2:11–22), and presents a multiracial and multilingual reality (and hoped-for future) as a heavenly good (Rev 5:9–10).

I also fail to see how Wolfe's rejection of the West's universalizing tendency squares with Wolfe's use of natural theology and natural law (which are, by definition, universally accessible, leading to truths than can be universally affirmed). Neil Shenvi's review is particularly good on the issue of ethnicity, so I won't repeat all the same arguments here.<sup>3</sup>

But before moving on from this point, it's worth mentioning how Wolfe leaves a number of serious questions unanswered. Wolfe often decries the mental habit, forced upon us by secular elites, that makes Christian nationalists feel the need to prove they're not racists or kinists or xenophobes. Wolfe refuses to play by those rules (pp. 456–57). I understand the frustration. But surely in a 500-page book, it wouldn't have been misplaced, or kowtowing to the spirit of the age, for Wolfe to make clear exactly what he is and isn't arguing for (especially when he quotes approvingly from Samuel Francis on [VDARE.com](http://VDARE.com)).

Wolfe says a mark of nationalism is that "each people-group has a right to be *for* itself" (p. 118, emphasis original), and that "no nation (properly conceived) is composed of two or more ethnicities" (p. 135), and that our "instinct to conduct everyday life among similar people is natural, and being natural, it is for your good" (p. 142), and that "to exclude an out-group is to recognize a universal good for man" (p. 145), and that "spiritual unity is inadequate for formal ecclesial unity" (p. 200), and that "the most suitable condition for a group of people to successfully pursue the complete good is one of cultural similarity" (p. 201).

What are we to do with these statements? Is Wolfe's main concern about immigration policy for a nation-state? That's part of what animates his warning against self-immolation and national suicide (p. 171). Is he making the argument that we need not be ashamed to love our family, our country, and our place more than other families, countries, and places? That's also part of his concern; fair enough.

But you don't have to be a left-wing watchdog to wonder how these "similarity" arguments work out in practice. In a footnote, Wolfe rejects modern racialist principles and denies that he's making a "white nationalist" argument (p. 119), but if we cannot accept the creedal nation concept, and if ethnicities are grouped by cultural similarity, it's an open question how much cooperation and togetherness blacks and

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<sup>3</sup> Neil Shenvi, "Of Gods and Men: A Long Review of Wolfe's Case for Christian Nationalism, Part III—Objections," <https://shenviapogetics.com/of-gods-and-men-a-long-review-of-wolfes-case-for-christian-nationalism-part-iii-objections/>.

whites (not to mention Asians and Hispanics and Native Americans) will ever share—or if they should even try to live and worship together.

Is this really the direction we're to be pushed by the gospel? Are we really to pursue a social ordering on earth so different from that which is present in heaven? Are we really so sure that our love for people like us and our ostracism of people unlike us are God-given inclinations and not fallen ones?

If there were no other problems with the book, Wolfe's vigorous defense of becoming "more exclusive and ethnic-focused" (p. 459) should stop in their tracks all who are ready to follow Wolfe's vision for national renewal. The fact that the left thinks racism is everywhere doesn't mean racism is nowhere. Wolfe may eschew contemporary racist categories, but he doesn't make clear how his ideas on kinship are different from racist ideas of the past that have been used to forbid interracial marriage and to enforce the legal injustice of "separate but equal."

By God's grace, America has made great strides in overcoming racism in the past sixty years. I fail to see how Wolfe's vision isn't a giant step in the wrong direction.

### *3. The Nature of the Church*

Key to Wolfe's political theory is the contention that "a Christian nation is a nation whose particular earthly way of life has been ordered to heavenly life in Christ" (p. 174). I will say more about Protestant political thought in the next section. My criticism at present isn't about moral philosophy as much as it's about systematic theology.

To his credit, Wolfe clearly distinguishes between the civil realm and the ecclesial realm. He holds to a (kind of) two-kingdom theology. Wolfe's project doesn't entail theocracy; neither is it theonomy: "The Christian nation is not the spiritual kingdom of Christ or the immanentized eschaton; it is not founded in principles of grace or the Gospel" (p. 186). Nevertheless, civil government ought to direct people to the Christian religion because "an earthly kingdom is a Christian kingdom when it orders the people to the kingdom of heaven" (p. 195).

Wolfe doesn't conflate the church and the world, but he argues that "the Christian nation is the complete image of eternal life on earth." Wolfe rejects the idea of the church as a "colony" or "outpost" of heaven (p. 222). The church may give us the "principal image" of heavenly life (public worship), but only a Christian nation can give us the "complete image" of heavenly life. "For in addition to being a worshipping people, the Christian nation has submitted to magistrates and constitutes a people whose cultural practices and self-conception provide a foretaste of heaven" (p. 223). In short, Wolfe maintains that a Christian nation should be ordered "*to make the earthly city an analog of the heavenly city*" (p. 209, emphasis original).

I disagree with this conclusion. It's one thing to suggest civil society may bear resemblance to heavenly realities or that in the life to come we'll more deeply enjoy whatever is excellent in this life. It's another to suggest the analog of the heavenly city is to be found in the earthly city. Contrary to Wolfe, I maintain the church is an "outpost" or "embassy" or "colony" of the heavenly city.

This comports with the sweep of redemptive history: the reality of heavenly paradise is first found in Eden; then a reflection of Edenic bliss is to be found in the nation of Israel (the land in which God dwells, described with Edenic language and marked by Edenic boundaries); at present God's dwelling is with his people in the church (where the judicial punishments in Israel are recalibrated as ecclesiastical disfellowshipping and the picture of Edenic plenty is manifested by giving generously to our brothers

and sisters); and finally at the consummation will the kingdom of this world become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ (Rev 11:15).

It's only at the end of the age that we can expect heaven to come down to earth. In the time being, the analog of the heavenly city resides in the church. Wolfe quotes Matthew Henry to the effect that "whatever is excellent and valuable in this world" will enter the New Jerusalem (p. 222). But Henry, in that same passage on Revelation 21:9–27, doesn't describe the New Jerusalem as the realization of the earthly city. The New Jerusalem, according to Henry, is a picture of "the church of God in her glorious, perfect, triumphant state."<sup>4</sup>

After all, the New Jerusalem is a vision of the Bride, the wife of the Lamb, the church (Rev 21:9). When Hebrews describes the church as "Mount Zion" and "the city of the living God," as "the heavenly Jerusalem" and "the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" (Heb 12:22–23), it's hard to conclude we should call the church an incomplete image of heavenly life.

Christ's chief concern in this age is with the church. While many institutions contribute to earthly life and human flourishing, Jesus didn't promise to build any institution other than the church (Matt 16:18). The impression one gets from *The Case for Christian Nationalism* is that the church plays merely a supportive spiritual role as part of a larger project that involves the civil realm ordering people to their complete good. Wolfe's vision is nation-centric rather than church-centric.

For example, if we're to experience the Great Renewal, we must hope and pray for a god-like magistrate "whom the people look upon as father or protectorate of the country, ... a man of dignity and greatness of soul who will lead a people to liberty, virtue, and godliness—to greatness" (p. 279). There isn't much about prayer in the book, which isn't significant in itself, except that the strongest (only?) exhortation to prayer is that we should pray for God to raise up a "Christian prince"—a leader "who would suppress the enemies of God and elevate his people; recover a worshiping people; restore masculine prominence in the land and a spirit of dominion; affirm and conserve his people and place, not permitting their dissolution or capture; and inspire a love of one's Christian country." Wolfe concludes the chapter by urging the reader to "pray that God would bring about, through a Christian prince, a great renewal" (p. 322).

Besides questioning the wisdom of wishing for "a measured theocratic Caesarism" and a "world-shaker for our time" (p. 279), I fail to see how this has been, let alone *should* be, the great hope of God's people. I agree with Wolfe that the church shouldn't be a hub of political activism, but do we really want to insist that the magistrate has the power to "resolve doctrinal conflicts," to moderate synods, and to "confirm or deny their theological judgments"? Has it generally worked out well for the church when the magistrate "retains his superiority" over the doctrine of the church (p. 313)?

In Wolfe's vision, pastors are left to be "more like chaplains" (p. 470) and the people of God are told to form civil associations "without pastoral leadership" (p. 471). Any vision of Christian Nationalism that increases the importance of the nation at the expense of the importance of the church is a price too high to pay.

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, reprint ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 2484.

#### 4. Protestant Political Thought

Wolfe's use of early Protestant political thought is commendable and shouldn't be dismissed lightly, but there's no *one* Protestant (or Reformed) political theory that must be determinative for all peoples in all places and all times. Let me back my way into that conclusion by making three points.

(1) *Wolfe's retrieval project from 16th- and 17th-century sources is largely correct.* Most theologians in the early and high period of Reformed orthodoxy believed in the power of the civil magistrate to call and conduct synods, in the necessity of enforcing both tables of the law, and in the establishment principle (i.e., an official state church supported financially and enjoying certain legal privileges). They maintained that the magistrate had the power to punish heretics, enforce uniformity of doctrine and worship, and use capital punishment (in extreme cases) to protect society from the leavening effects of sin and false teaching.

Coming out of the Catholic Church, Protestant theologians believed strongly in the liberty of conscience. As Wolfe points out, they taught that true inward religion was a matter of persuasion, but this didn't mean the magistrate couldn't use coercive power to suppress false religion (p. 353).

Opponents of these older views should be careful not to overstate their case. It's one thing to make a prudential argument against, say, the enforceability of blasphemy laws in our day. It's another to argue such laws are in principle wrong. Wolfe is to be commended for having the courage of his convictions and forcing Christians to think more carefully about a host of conclusions that most Western Christians assume just can't be true.

(2) *As illuminating as Wolfe's case may be, it in no way constitutes the Protestant position.* Perhaps it can be called "classic" if classic simply means old. But Protestant social thought hasn't been static since the death of Turretin, nor should it be argued that everything after 1700 can be written off as "Enlightenment" thinking. By the end of the 17th century, leading Protestant moral philosophers and natural-law thinkers were rethinking the effectiveness of enforced religious uniformity and questioning the biblical justification for granting to the magistrate such far-reaching power in religious matters.

For example, in the work *Of the Nature and Qualification of Religion in Reference to Civil Society*, Samuel von Pufendorf argued that the state was not founded for the sake of religion and that religion, as a part of natural human freedom, cannot be delegated to the sovereign.<sup>5</sup> According to Pufendorf, the magistrate's chief duty was not the heavenly ordering of his society but the safety and security of his people. That was the end for which civil government was instituted.

To be sure, Pufendorf didn't argue for disestablishment, and he didn't think the sovereign had to tolerate every kind of religious deviation, but he pushed the Protestant world toward toleration and made the case that the sovereign shouldn't enforce anything more than the basics of natural religion. One can disagree with Pufendorf, but he was an orthodox Lutheran, and his work is rooted in hundreds of biblical texts.

Pufendorf was far from the only thinker moving in this direction. In 1689, John Locke argued in his famous *Letter Concerning Toleration* that the magistrate may tolerate false religion. Locke asked, "What if a Church be idolatrous, is that also to be tolerated by the magistrate?" His answer proved influential:

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<sup>5</sup> Samuel von Pufendorf, *Of the Nature and Qualification of Religion in Reference to Civil Society* (London, 1698), <https://tinyurl.com/46726n2j>.

“What power can be given to the magistrate for the suppression of an idolatrous Church, which may not in time and place be made use of to the ruin of an orthodox one?”<sup>6</sup>

Both Pufendorf and Locke were writing in response to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685) which forced French Huguenots to convert to Catholicism, face life in prison, or flee the country. Toleration looked better and more conducive to the aims of Christianity than giving the sovereign final say over the teaching and worship of the church. The move away from the strict enforcement of religious nationalism was promoted most powerfully not by free thinkers and atheists but by committed *Protestants*.

There’s a reason Thomas Aikenhead, the 20-year-old student who died by hanging in 1697, was the last person to be executed for blasphemy in Great Britain. Increasingly, Protestants believed there was a better way for diverse religious populations to coexist. At the outset of the book, Wolfe lays down one of his principles: “I do not appeal to historical examples of nationalism, nor do I waste time repudiating ‘fascist nationalism’” (p. 26). Considering the real-life aims of the book, it would have been nice to know where Wolfe’s version of Christian Nationalism has been implemented and whether it has proven successful at promoting a commodious life as an analog of heaven. But we’re never shown Wolfe’s vision in living color. Perhaps we’re to accept that Christian Nationalism, like socialism, hasn’t worked because the *real* thing has never been tried.

For all the faults of America (and there are many), and for all the problems facing Christians today (also, many), you’d be hard-pressed to find a country where orthodox Protestants wield more political power, have more cultural influence, and have more freedom to practice their faith according to the dictates of their conscience.

I’m generally in agreement with Aaron Renn’s “negative world” thesis.<sup>7</sup> I think we’re in a moment of profound cultural change and that the forces aligned against orthodox Christian faith are many and powerful. It remains to be seen which Christian institutions and individuals will remain faithful. A big sort is already underway.

And yet, there are still more supports for biblical Christianity—institutionally and culturally—than in almost any other country in the world. That’s changing, and we shouldn’t rejoice in the declension. But I dare say Christianity in this country—without a national religious establishment, without a world-shaking Christian prince, without uniformity in worship and doctrine—has fared pretty well. When talking about earthly realities, it’s always helpful to ask the question “Compared to what?” If the American experiment has failed, I’d like to know which country in the past 250 years has gotten a passing grade.

(3) *Wolfe’s handling of the American founding, in support of his Christian Nationalism project, is not persuasive.* In his last chapter before the epilogue, Wolfe asks the question, “Does the American political tradition permit a Christian self-conception, Christian governments, and church establishment?” (p. 398). He concludes at the end of the chapter that the founders “all believed that a religious people was necessary for civic morals, public happiness, and effective government, and most (if not all) thought that Christianity provided something distinctive in this regard” (p. 430). The founders also believed, says Wolfe, that the government had a role in supporting true religion and that violations of natural

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<sup>6</sup> John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (London, 1689), 34.

<sup>7</sup> Aaron M. Renn, “The Three Worlds of Evangelicalism,” *First Things*, February 2022, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2022/02/the-three-worlds-of-evangelicalism>.

religion could be suppressed. This is all true. America's founding was much more Christian than today's strict "wall of separation" advocates would make us think.

But there's a disconnect between these conclusions and the rest of the book. Wolfe's book doesn't simply argue Christianity is necessary for public virtue or that Christianity should have a privileged place in American cultural and political life. Wolfe argues for "theocratic Caesarism," for a national church establishment, and for a Christian prince to punish false teachers and to regulate external acts of religion—including professions of faith, ceremonies of worship, and the church's doctrine (356–57). This isn't what the American founding was about, and in many respects it was precisely what the American colonists wanted to avoid.

As I've written before, if the founding era was about one thing, it was about liberty—not the "liberty" of expressive individualism but a commitment to liberty that believed government existed to protect men's rights, that government should be limited, and that government's power should be frustrated by checks and balances.<sup>8</sup> Wolfe says, "Our time calls for a man who can wield formal civil power to great effect and shape the public imagination by means of charisma, gravitas, and personality" (p. 31)—which is the sort of demagogic instinct our Constitutional system was meant to oppose.

In Wolfe's retelling, one is led to believe the political philosophy of the founding era was no different than what Protestants had believed 100 or 200 years ago. For example, Wolfe concludes that John Witherspoon's "view on the role of government in religion is no different than Cotton Mather's" (p. 417). This is simply not true.

For starters, Witherspoon taught a course on moral philosophy at Princeton (the lectures from which Wolfe quotes several times). Witherspoon had been shaped by Pufendorf and Hutcheson and the whole tradition of Protestant natural-law ethics. (It was a saying in Glasgow that the students there had to endure classroom instruction "in which ... their Heads they knock/Grotius, Pufendorf, and Locke.")

Mather, on the other hand, derided the discipline of moral philosophy as "infidelity reduced to a system." Witherspoon and Mather shared many doctrinal commitments in common, but they didn't conceive of church-state relations in the same way.

As a member of the New Jersey Provincial Congress, Witherspoon and the other delegates (including other prominent Presbyterians) defended religious freedom and opposed religious establishments. Article XVIII of the Constitution they framed says the following:

That no person shall ever within this colony be deprived of the inestimable privilege of worshipping Almighty God in a manner agreeable to the dictates of his own conscience; nor under any pretence whatsoever compelled to attend any place of worship, contrary to his own faith and judgment; not shall any person within this colony ever be obliged to pay titles, taxes, or any other rates, for the purpose of building or repairing any church or churches, place or places of worship, or for the maintenance of any ministry or ministry, contrary to what he believes to be right or has deliberately or voluntarily engaged to perform.

To be sure, what New Jersey did in 1776 would take another fifty years to take root in the rest of the American states. My argument isn't that state establishments didn't exist at the time of the founding,

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<sup>8</sup> Kevin DeYoung, "Liberty, Pandora, and the Serpent: What Undergirds the American Experiment?," *World Opinions*, 10 November 2022, <https://wng.org/opinions/liberty-pandora-and-the-serpent-1668085193>.

or even that it was wrong that they did exist. My argument is that many orthodox Christians opposed these establishments and opposed them on historical, prudential, and biblical grounds.

Knowing that James Madison—Witherspoon’s student at Princeton—refused to give the magistrate authority over the external acts of religion, Wolfe is at pains to prove that Madison’s view was “extreme” and that his “importance in the founding era on religious liberty is exaggerated” (p. 423). Perhaps, but if Madison’s views were not as important, it’s because the views of Presbyterians and Baptists were *more* important. Madison’s famous *Memorial and Remonstrance* was written in opposition to Patrick Henry’s plan to tax property owners to fund ministers from all Protestant denominations. Madison’s *Memorial* was filed with the general assembly in Virginia with 1,552 signatures.

The most popular petition against Henry’s proposal, however, was filed by Presbyterians, Baptists, and other dissenters. Their proposal, which made many of the same arguments as Madison’s, garnered 4,899 signatures. These dissenters knew that a pan-Protestant establishment had never worked (or even been attempted). Establishment always meant privileging one denomination at the expense of another, which is why disestablishment happened most quickly in religiously diverse states and most slowly where one denomination had been dominant.

To spend time dreaming of a pan-Protestant establishment in the United States today—with 330 million people, and with a Protestantism that now includes a large number of Pentecostals and charismatics, plus a black tradition and a liberal tradition, and hundreds of denominations that don’t see eye to eye on a thousand different things—is a dream that will never be realized. And for that we should be thankful.

Let me make a final comment about Presbyterians, since I am one and so is Wolfe. For better or worse (and I would say for better), the Presbyterian view on church-state relations changed in America. From the reorganization plan in 1787 to the first General Assembly in 1789, Witherspoon played a key role in establishing a national Presbyterian church, and when the ecclesiastical constitution was finally adopted, the Westminster Confession had been altered to create more distance between church and state. The edition of the Westminster Standards used by the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) contains those 1789 revisions that limited the power of the civil magistrate over religious matters.

Moreover, these changes didn’t originate in the 1780s. In conjunction with the Adopting Act of 1729, the Presbyterian church in the American colonies already allowed that chapters 20 and 23 of the Westminster Confession weren’t binding on ministers and that ministers need not receive “those articles in any such sense as to suppose the civil magistrate hath a controlling power over Synods with respect to the exercise of their ministerial authority.” With few exceptions, Presbyterians in this country have never held to the “classic” Reformed position on the power of the civil magistrate.

### *5. The Way Forward*

This review has already gone on too long, but there’s one final point to make: the book, for all its serious work of theological and philosophical retrieval, is hard to take seriously after you read the epilogue. Without the epilogue, the book would still provoke a strong reaction, but one could argue that at the heart of Wolfe’s vision is a return to the political ordering of Western Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. I don’t think that’s the right vision, but it’s worthwhile to consider why many of our theological forebears thought so differently about how to order their societies. There is much to learn



from these earlier theologians, even if we don't think it necessary to implement their political ideas in our own day.

But the epilogue gives the whole book a different feel. Wolfe's epilogue purports to answer the question "Now what?"—but the chapter consists of a string of loosely connected topics that can fairly be described as a 38-part rant. Several examples will suffice to justify this conclusion.

On the problem with progress:

Every step of progress is overcoming you. Ask yourself, "What sort of villain does each event of progress have in common?" The straight white male. That is the chief out-group of New America, the embodiment of regression and oppression. (p. 436)

On living under a "gynocracy":

We live under a gynocracy—a rule by women. This may not be apparent on the surface, since men still run many things. But the governing virtues of America are feminine vices, associated with certain feminine virtues, such as empathy, fairness, and equality. (p. 448)

On the many problems with "gynocracy":

Are you a minority and have a grievance? Signal displeasure to white women, even blame them for your pain, and women will shower you with money and retweets.... Consider also child transgenderism, which seems to be facilitated in large part by over-empathetic and sometimes deranged mothers. The most insane and damaging sociological trends of our modern society are female-driven. The gynocracy is self-destructive and breeds social disorder. (p. 451)

On women and credentialism:

As academic institutions cater to and graduate more and more women, credentialism is on the rise.... This is why women place their credentials—"Dr." or "PhD" or "Professor," or even "MA in theology"—in their social media name. (p. 453)

On the ruling class:

There is no robust common ground here. There is no credibility we can establish with them. Unavoidably, we are threats to their regime. Christian nationalism is an existential threat to the secularist regime. They are enemies of the church and, as such, enemies of the human race. (p. 456)

On the need to resist modern life:

I'm not going to tell you how far to go in this, but it is both good for you and your family *and* it prepares for a better future. I expect that most committed Christian nationalists will be farmers, homesteaders, and ranchers. (p. 461, original emphasis)

On choosing a career:

I say now [to my kids]: "Find a career that maximizes your autonomy from the forces of the secularist ruling class." If you are a white, heterosexual, cis-gendered male, then the world will not offer you any favors. Indeed, your career advancement depends on

sacrificing your self-respect by praising and pandering to your inferiors who rule over you. Even the CEOs, in the end, are dominated by woke scolds. (p. 464)

On the embarrassment of low testosterone:

Christian nationalism should have a strong and austere aesthetic. I was dismayed when I saw the attendees of a recent PCA General Assembly—men in wrinkled, short-sleeve, golf shirts, sitting plump in their seats. We have to do better. Pursue your potential. Lift weights, eat right, and lose the dad bod. We don't all have to become bodybuilders, but we ought to be men of power and endurance. We cannot achieve our goals with such a flabby aesthetic vision and under the control of modern nutrition. Sneering at this aesthetic vision, which I fully expect to happen, is pure cope. Grace does not destroy T-levels; grace does not perfect testosterone into estrogen. If our opponents want to be fat, have low testosterone, and chug vegetable oil, let them. It won't be us. (pp. 469–70)

That Wolfe thinks all this is concerning. That he wrote it down is extra troubling. That he and his editors thought it a good idea to end the book with a series of vituperative harangues is baffling. Is this the civilizational answer we've been looking for—living off the grid, complaining about women, complaining about the regime, complaining about how hard it is to be a white male, warning about the globalists, calling out the dangers of vegetable oil, and chastising Presbyterians with dad bods?

Besides trafficking in sweeping and unsubstantiated claims about the totalizing control of the Globalist American Empire and the gynocracy, Wolfe's apocalyptic vision—for all of its vitriol toward the secular elites—borrows liberally from the playbook of the left. He not only redefines the nature of oppression as psychological oppression (making it easier to justify extreme measures and harder to argue things aren't as bad as they seem), he also rallies the troops (figuratively, but perhaps also literally?) by reminding them they're victims. "The world is out to get you, and people out there hate you" is not a message that will ultimately help white men or any other group that considers themselves oppressed.

When Wolfe sarcastically thanks those who "woke many from their dogmatic slumber" and rejoices that "more are awakening each day" (p. 477), one might be forgiven for seeing his version of Christian Nationalism as a form of right-wing wokeism. What does it mean to be woke if not that we're awakened to the "reality" that oppression is everywhere, extreme measures are necessary, and the regime must be overthrown?

If critical race theory teaches that America has failed, that the existing order is irredeemable, that Western liberalism was a mistake from the beginning, that the current system is rigged against our tribe, and that we ought to make ethnic consciousness *more* important—it seems to me that Wolfe's project is the right-wing version of these same impulses.

## *6. Better Strategy: Confidence, Courage, Christlikeness*

So what is my answer to our national and civilizational collapse?

First of all, we should remember there are *much* bigger problems than national and civilizational collapse. Like sin, flesh, and the Devil. Like death and hell (Matt 10:28). As a pastor, I'm also concerned about the peace and purity of the church. Surely it's significant that these discussions around Christian Nationalism are taking place when it has never been less likely to happen.

On the one hand, that makes sense. We're grasping for some alternative to the rise of militant progressivism. And yet, considering that there are no plans afoot to establish a Protestant or Presbyterian colony on Mars, we should hold to our political blueprints—the ones that have no possibility of being achieved—loosely and charitably. I fear the practical payoff from this discussion will be very small, but the potential for division in the church will be great.

But if we must say something about a strategy for national renewal, it's multifaceted and rather ordinary. We need confidence, courage, and Christlikeness. We need faithful churches, gospel preaching, and prayer. We should contend for the faith. We should disciple our churches and catechize our kids. We should create new—and steward existing—civic, educational, and ecclesiastical institutions. We should love our neighbors and share our faith. We should press home the truths of natural and revealed religion in the public square and get involved in the political process. Where possible, most of us should get married and have children (the more the merrier).

Our "strategy" is not one thing. It's many things. It's cultivating the virtues of prudence, justice, wisdom, and temperance (and understanding how each virtue needs the other three). It's building bridges and building walls. It's speaking the truth and offering grace. It's striving to grow in every fruit of the Spirit. It's asking that God would give us every virtue of grace. It's modeling an alternative culture as the City of God, and it's trying to be salt and light among the City of Man.

I lament that America is much less Christian than it used to be. I want Christians in the fray, not simply negotiating the terms of our surrender. I want Christian people and Christian ideas to influence our nation for good. I pray for Christ and his kingdom to come. I want godly and wise magistrates. I want to see the sexual revolution turned back.

I love my nation and want to see it become more Christian—mostly by regeneration, but also by the good that comes from cultural Christianity. We should pray and labor for all of that. I just don't think that equals Christian Nationalism as it has now been offered to us.

I know the instinct that assumes that whatever position seems most "conservative" must be correct, especially if that position is hated by the left. But that's not a foolproof instinct. And besides, Wolfe makes clear that his project is not "conservative." We are better to see Wolfe's vision as one of several postliberal ideologies that are growing on the radical right.

Read the chapter on "The Nationalist" in Matthew Rose's 2021 book, *A World After Liberalism*,<sup>9</sup> and you'll see that many of the central ideas from Samuel Francis—the impotence of the conservative movement, the need to stir up the grievances of Middle America, the call for distinct ethnicities (read: white) to stop the self-harm and defend their own nation, the insistence that America is dead and revolution is necessary, and the encouragement to make use of Caesarism and the mass loyalties that a charismatic leader inspires—are present in Wolfe's own vision.

Biblical instincts are better than nationalist ones, and the ethos of the Christian Nationalism project fails the biblical smell test. Will the person who goes all in on this book—the person who says "yes" to every rant, the person who feels drawn to the vision of ethnic separation, the person who is just biding his time until the Christian prince arrives and the revolution is ready to start—be apt to grow in faith, hope, and love (1 Cor 13:13)? Will he be led to rejoice insofar as he shares in Christ's sufferings (1 Pet 4:13)? And if the end of things is at hand, will he be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of his prayers (1 Pet 4:7)? Or will this book help us return reviling for reviling (1 Pet 2:23)?

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew Rose, *A World after Liberalism: Philosophers of the Radical Right* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 111–35.

We aren't the first Christians to live in trying times; most Christians around the world, and millions of Christians throughout history, would likely trade their circumstances for ours. The cultural upheaval we're living through will be a means of providential grace if it leads us to think more carefully about civil society, to contend for the truth more persuasively, to commit ourselves more fully to Jesus and his church, and to grow in that holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb 12:14).

Certainly, let us pray for a great renewal, but let us also remember that the renewal we need most in our world and in our land is the restoration of true doctrine, the reformation of our lives, and the revival of that divine and supernatural light that shines in our hearts to show us the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor 4:6).

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## — OLD TESTAMENT —

G. Geoffrey Harper. *Teaching Leviticus: From Text to Message*. Proclamation Trust. Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2022. 416 pp. £12.99/\$17.99.

As with other volumes in this series, the book is aimed at helping preachers and teachers “understand the central aim of the book, in order to teach or preach it to others” (p. 9). Though not to be considered a detailed exegetical commentary, the volume admirably accomplishes its goal, and the academic proficiency that has gone into its writing is very much in view. The author, G. Geoffrey Harper, Director of Research and Lecturer in Old Testament at Sydney Missionary and Bible College, is eminently qualified for the work, having already written several academic articles on Leviticus, as well as a major scholarly monograph on the book: *I Will Walk among You: The Rhetorical Function of Allusion to Genesis 1–3 in the Book of Leviticus*, BBRSup 21 (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2018).

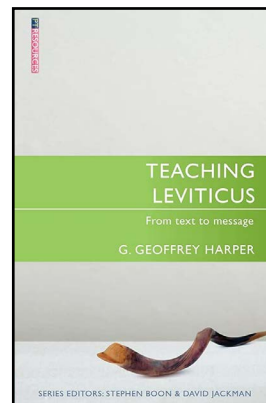
While the introduction covers the same material as most commentaries would, three extended sections depart from the standard and set the stage for what will be covered in the following chapters: “Why Should We Preach and Teach Leviticus?,” “Ideas for a Preaching or Teaching Series in Leviticus,” and “Preaching and Teaching Old Testament Law.” The “cockles” of this Old Testament heart were “strangely warmed,” as I read these sections, which affirmed that the Torah is a word from God in which we are to take delight, an “expression of grace,” and that “it is here, perhaps, that we need to let the testimony of Scripture speak on its own terms and let it challenge our (Western, Protestant) disinclination toward Old Testament law” (p. 47).

As the author makes his way through the text of Leviticus, he follows in each chapter the series’ rubrics for covering the material in five sections: (1) Introduction; (2) Listening to the text, which deals with context, structure, and exegesis; (3) From text to message, which deals with the theme and aim of the passage as well as ideas for approaching the text and drawing applications; (4) Suggestions for preaching, which usually presents one or two possible sermon outlines; and (5) Suggestions for teaching, which provides questions for understanding and applying the passage. In all this material the author demonstrates both his academic prowess and teaching ability, as well as his pastoral heart.

What can the reader expect to find when they open this volume? Here are a few of the more important items.

(1) A concern for the church. In the author’s second sentence in the book, he states, “In writing, I have been reminded of how essential Leviticus is for the church” (p. 7). This seems to go quite against the grain of much modern Christianity, which, in place of the word, “essential,” might substitute the word, “peripheral,” or “disposable,” perhaps even “repugnant.” But Harper is convinced that Leviticus, rightly understood and rightly appropriated, will be transformative for both “individuals and community in conformity with the likeness of Yahweh” (p. 26). To read and study Leviticus is an exercise in becoming holy, even as God is holy.

(2) An emphasis on God’s glory. As opposed to the romanticization of the exodus narrative in Exodus-Deuteronomy, which focuses on rescue from slavery in Egypt and settlement in the promised land, the author notes that the “highpoint” in the exodus is actually the construction of a tabernacle to house God’s glory” (p. 16), with God himself setting up his tent “right at the heart of the Israelite camp”





(p, 17). Leviticus then provides the Israelites with instruction as to how to make sure that God continues to be pleased to dwell among his people, and the church can benefit from a study of these instructions as well.

(3) An appreciation for literary artistry. Perhaps one would not normally think of Leviticus as an “artful” book. But, throughout the commentary, Harper calls attention to various literary devices that are utilized by the author/editors of Leviticus: wordplays, chiasms, allusions, balancing structures, which occur often on a micro-scale, but also on a larger macro-scale. These devices are not there solely for purposes of adornment, but can also be seen as having semantic value, helping the reader better understand the actual meaning of the text.

(4) A rich biblical theology. Harper serves as a masterful guide in pointing out the biblical-theological connections between Leviticus and other portions of Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments. Occasionally, the author draws from other articles he has written, as well as his aforementioned monograph, to highlight the allusions Leviticus makes to other OT books, and to demonstrate how Leviticus anticipates revelation yet to come in both the Old and New Testaments.

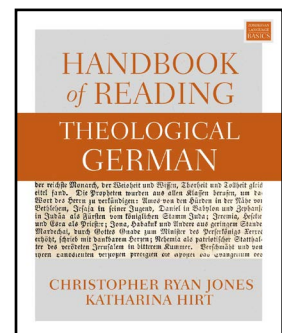
(5) A better understanding of who Jesus is. In a day in which Jesus is increasingly misunderstood as being opposed to Old Testament institutions, the author reminds his readers that, without Leviticus and the concepts found there regarding purity, sacrifice, atonement, and the role of the priesthood, we end up with an “anemic” portrait of Christ (p. 31). We need Leviticus to understand Jesus, and we must recognize that Leviticus is, indeed, “Christian Scripture.”

There are places in the commentary where I might have a quibble or two with the author's interpretation of particular passages, but they are indeed quibbles, and good cases have been, and can be, made by responsible exegetes for different interpretation, so I will not mention them here in this short review. This is an outstanding contribution to the understanding of Leviticus, and to the homiletical and didactic use of Leviticus in the Christian church today. I wish I could have had access to this rich material when I was writing my own commentary just a few short years ago. In my estimation, Harper's commentary is a must-have for anyone who is going to preach or teach from the book of Leviticus.

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Christopher R. Jones and Katharina Hirt. *Handbook of Reading Theological German*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021. xvi + 288 pp. £40.00/\$44.99.

“Do I need to learn German?” The look in the student’s eye betrays the answer they hope to hear. Developing an ability to interact with German literature is a daunting, yet often required, task for anglophone doctoral students. Even for those who already have conversational German, the jump to theological texts can be significant. Recognizing this, in 2015 the University of Mainz developed a summer program, “German and Theology,” with the express purpose of providing the necessary skills. In *Handbook of Reading Theological German*, Christopher Jones and Katharina Hirt aim to approximate in 288 pages what participants glean over three weeks in Mainz. They are crystal clear about



intent. Only material relevant to the larger goal of grappling with German theological works is included (p. xiv). Readers may arrive at a point where they can appreciate Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the original, but asking for directions to the train station is a different matter.

*Handbook of Reading Theological German* is divided into three parts. Part 1, consisting of four chapters, opens with an homage to German theological scholarship, rightly noting its indelible influence (pp. 3–12). The remaining chapters focus on grammar familiarization; the so-called “Mainz Method” for reading German provides the overarching structure (p. xv):

1. Find all the verb forms
2. Find all commas
3. Find all conjunctions
4. Mark the main clause
5. Identify case and number of all nouns
6. Locate all referent nouns
7. Look out for participles used as adjectives
8. Look up all new words
9. Perform a rough translation
10. Polish the sentence to ensure readability.

Each step is explained and expanded with a discussion of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. Throughout, recognition is prioritized over memorization (although some rote learning is advised—e.g., pp. 17, 39, 53, 73).

Parts 2 and 3 move beyond grammar familiarization by providing a select reader of German texts. Part 2 contains excerpts from key historical figures: Martin Luther, Immanuel Kant, Moses Mendelssohn, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. An introduction places each author in context and, importantly, gives guidance concerning how to negotiate the different writing styles. Additionally, exercises aid students’ engagement with the texts and explicitly utilize the reading method conveyed in chapters 2–4. Other aids help to boost confidence. More difficult paragraphs have been “pre-chewed” and copious footnotes supply additional hints as well as glosses for obscure terms. The eight texts in Part 3 are field specific. Selected authors represent Hebrew Bible/archaeology, New Testament, Jewish studies, and church history/theology. Fittingly, fewer prompts are provided as an encouragement to solidify skills acquired.

There is much to appreciate about this volume. The grammar overview is succinct and limits explanations and forms to the essentials. A series of appendices provides valuable additional information (e.g., a list of irregular verbs, pp. 197–200), solutions to all exercises, and (unpolished) translations of the texts from Parts 2 and 3. Throughout, Jones and Hirt stay resolutely on target. The aim of the book is to get students *reading* theological German. After only sixty-eight pages of instruction, Luther’s *Der Große Katechismus* is next.

Jones and Hirt rightly recognize the paucity of German theological grammars. Still, to regard Ziefle’s *Theological German: A Reader* as “the last notable text on this subject” (pp. xiii–xiv) is perhaps a little unfair to April Wilson’s volume, *German Quickly: A Grammar for Reading German*, revised ed. (New York: Peter Lang, 2007). While Wilson’s sample texts are more eclectic, they include names like Buber and Nietzsche. Additionally, Carolyn Roberts Thompson’s new book, *Reading German for Theological Studies: A Grammar and Reader* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), adopts a text-based approach from the beginning. All this to say, there is, thankfully, an increasing array of available resources. This

is important, not because more is inherently better, but because different matters. I mean that a given grammar, whether it be for German or Hebrew, works well for some students, but not others. “Fit” is essential. Some readers will doubtless love the Mainz Method and appreciate the structured approach it provides. Others, however, will not survive the twenty-four-page plunge into the German verbal system as their *first* foray into a new language. The potential shock to the system may have been mitigated by supplying a higher frequency of exercises (which are sparse). This is perhaps a vestige of the book’s origin as a course manual. Lack of easy access to a tutor, however, means more tweaking is required to meet the needs of readers learning on their own.

*Handbook of Reading Theological German* is a valuable and timely resource. It is already one of the grammars I encourage doctoral students to sample.

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Will Kynes, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Wisdom and the Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. xxii + 683 pp. £97.00/\$150.00.

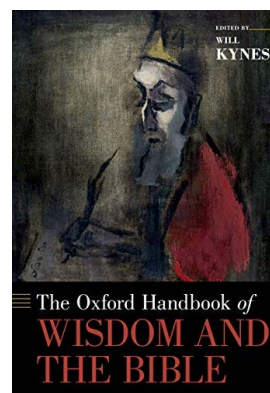
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*The Oxford Handbook of Wisdom and the Bible* reflects on the current state of Wisdom Literature and hopes to shape its future. However, as “the study of Wisdom Literature does not completely comprehend the study of wisdom as a concept in the Bible and related cultures” (p. viii), the first half of the handbook explores wisdom as a concept. To achieve this goal, Will Kynes has assembled an impressive team of scholars who specialize in biblical books typically associated with Wisdom Literature, as well as students of wisdom in comparable cultures.

Kynes helpfully introduces the handbook by discussing wisdom and Wisdom Literature (past, present, and future). He rightly points out the current high interest in biblical wisdom and assesses the state of the field, but he exaggerates the demise of Wisdom Literature as a category. (For further reading, see his *An Obituary for “Wisdom Literature”: The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2019].) It is unlikely that there will be a “paradigm shift” away from Wisdom Literature as a category, because there are obvious pragmatic benefits for highlighting significant affinities between the terminology and goals of the texts typically included in this category (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job).

The handbook is divided into six major parts. The first part, consisting of six chapters, focuses on the multifaceted concept of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible. Jaqueline Vayntrub begins in chapter 2 by focusing on wisdom’s association with practical advice for achieving skill and success. This is an appropriate place to start since wisdom is primarily about skill for living an optimum life.

The other chapters in the first part deal with how wisdom connects to knowledge and revelation (its epistemology), its role and association with virtue for character formation, its theology—especially in connection with creation and covenant—and its vision of order in the world. The chapters are well written, highly instructive, and reflect the knowledge of scholars who have dedicated significant time to their study. However, some weaknesses are evident, particularly their sometimes simplistic and



speculative reconstruction of the history of the texts, their exaggerated highlighting of differences, and occasional readings of personal, modern concerns into the ancient texts.

Raymond C. Van Leeuwen's article in chapter 5 is especially useful as a corrective for those who draw a sharp distinction between wisdom and covenant, thus creating a "false dichotomy" for theology. He demonstrates how the very possibility of wisdom and covenant depend on creation. The "primal Noahic covenant" with creation is necessary for Israel's covenants, which "*presuppose* YHWH's wise cosmic sovereignty, even when they do not mention creation" (p. 79, emphasis original). The end of the article provides a superb integration of creation, wisdom, and covenant: "Finally, wisdom's delight in creation and Creator returns us to the *fear of the Lord*, which is the *beginning of wisdom* and the *sine qua non* for covenant-keeping" (p. 80, emphasis original).

Despite some minor disagreements, I find Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger's article on order to be one of the highlights of this handbook. She demonstrates a solid understanding of all three basic wisdom books of the Old Testament (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job) and clearly explains how *order*, *crisis of order*, and *deepened understanding of God's maintained order* progress in Job and beyond. The crisis of order in Wisdom Literature is "overcome by a deepened understanding of God's action and presence in the world" (p. 99). In a few instances, some concepts seem to need a better explanation, for example, the ethics of love towards God and the neighbor and their connection to wisdom (p. 86).

The second part of the handbook comprises seven chapters that focus on the concept of wisdom in related cultures, including ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Dead Sea Scrolls and early Jewish interpretation, Greek civilization, the New Testament, later Patristic interpretation (with a focus on Athanasius), and Rabbinic literature. The articles suffer from superficiality and a lack of focus, particularly in terms of their engagement with the biblical text(s). While the articles are generally useful, especially for their bibliography and their insight into related cultures, they sometimes betray a limited understanding of wisdom in the Hebrew Bible.

For Old Testament relevance the following comment by Joachim Friedrich Quack (Wisdom in Egypt) is especially useful, "It is important to note that loosely organized sayings without clear overall structure are definitely later than works well-organized into well-contained maxims" (p. 111). Thus, the attested situation for wisdom in Egypt does not support the later dating of Proverbs 1–9 common in mainstream scholarship and later evidenced in this handbook.

The chapter by Mariam Kamell Kovalishyn on wisdom in the New Testament is particularly instructive. She suggests that "the link between wisdom and right worship should continue to gain focus," and observes that wisdom can no longer "be discussed apart from the Crucified Lamb" (p. 184). Her conclusion rightly highlights the importance of the Spirit's empowering and the necessity of obedience to Christ "to participate in the Wisdom of God."

Part 2 commonly exaggerates the possible parallels with other literature and tends to underestimate the superiority, depth, and complexity of the biblical texts. Contemporary interpreters must face the problem of explaining how Ecclesiastes can be considered late (as most scholars tend to believe) while also being discussed in connection with the Gilgamesh Epic or even earlier texts from the ANE.

Part 3, the weakest section in the handbook, explores the concept of wisdom in the modern world by interacting with the Islamic tradition, Jewish theology, Christian theology, feminist theologies, wisdom in nature, and the pervasiveness of wisdom in (con)texts, particularly in the Far East. The essay on wisdom in Islam stands out as one of the most informative. The articles on wisdom in Jewish and

Christian theology are also useful, even if understandably superficial (e.g., Emmanuel Levinas is covered in less than a page).

I find especially useful Paul Fiddes's division of wisdom into "Wisdom A" and "Wisdom B," where the former is *practical* and the latter is *relational* ("Wisdom in Christian Theology," ch. 16). In reality, they are "one, displaying two different *aspects* of wisdom. On the one hand, wisdom comes from ... the careful collecting of evidence; it is a skill requiring discipline and humility, or 'the fear of the Lord.' On the other hand, wisdom has a personal, relational quality, symbolized by the figure of Lady Wisdom; wisdom is learning to be attuned to creation and its creator, vibrating with its rhythms of life, living in sympathy with others. The wise live in a world where they are always receiving the offer to participate in God's wisdom, seeing the world as God sees it. Practical and relational wisdom thus belong together, each assisting each other" (p. 257). For Fiddes, Christ as both prophet of Wisdom (Sophia) and God's Wisdom "expresses the integration of wisdom as observation (A) and participation (B)" (p. 270).

The fourth part focuses on the category of Wisdom Literature and comprises five chapters. It covers Solomon and the Solomonic collection, the social setting of Wisdom Literature, the literary genres of OT wisdom, its chronological development, and the theology of wisdom. Readers should note Markus Witte's essay on the literary genres of OT wisdom, while Longman's article on the theology of wisdom is a must read as it effectively demolishes the idea that the book of Proverbs (and wisdom in general) was originally secular. He demonstrates well that "the consistent message of the Hebrew Bible is that true wisdom is found in God and that humans can only acquire wisdom through a relationship with God characterized by 'fear' (p. 403). All three basic wisdom books of the Old Testament reveal "a pervasive theological dimension focused on the concept of the 'fear of the Lord' (p. 404). Thus, one must trust, fear, and obey YHWH, the God of Israel in order to obtain wisdom.

The fifth part of this handbook contains five chapters. John McLaughlin proposes three useful overlapping criteria to evaluate "Wisdom influence": the presence of distinctive Wisdom elements, Wisdom usage, and "the presence of a number of different Wisdom elements distributed through a significant portion of the work in question" (p. 420). Jonathan Burnside guides his readers toward a complementary (not dichotomous) understanding of Law and Wisdom (ch. 26). God gave both Torah and wisdom in order to establish a human society based on justice and righteousness. Suzanna Millar briefly discusses the methodology for finding wisdom influence in historical texts, but she decides to pursue an intertextual approach in which "Wisdom" (human and divine) is used as a helpful lens for reading (ch. 27). She looks at five different narratives (including Adam and Eve, 1 Kings 1–11, Esther) and concludes that they "can be fruitfully read through a Wisdom lens" (p. 456).

Mark Boda's article on prophecy and Wisdom Literature (ch. 28) is the highlight of part 5. He effectively challenges the common misconception that "wisdom in the Hebrew Bible is largely anthropocentric, a search for truth and meaning apart from divine revelation and illumination" (p. 468). Though Wisdom Literature is different from prophecy, it has a clear revelatory nature that is expanded to include "all humanity." By advocating an intertextual approach to texts often associated with Wisdom and Prophecy, Boda demonstrates "the creational and international quality of prophetic literature" (p. 470). In the last essay of this section, Bennie Reynolds III makes a good effort to clarify the relationship between wisdom and apocalyptic (ch. 29).

The sixth and final section comprises eight chapters devoted to the texts usually associated with Wisdom Literature, including Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Song of Songs, Wisdom psalms, Ben Sira, the Wisdom of Solomon, and the wisdom texts found at Qumran. In general, all of these articles are

useful in bringing students up to date on the latest issues associated with each text. The most useful and balanced articles in this section are those dealing with Proverbs and Wisdom psalms. Most of these authors could have saved space by skipping the parts dealing with ANE parallels, as experts in the field cover these parallels in section two. They could have, instead, focused on theology and the contribution of the books to wisdom as skill for living the optimal life.

Overall, Kynes's handbook successfully brings scholars up to date with the latest issues in wisdom and Wisdom Literature. The essays I highlighted are worth reading carefully with pen and paper in hand. Unfortunately, some sections provide limited gain and require considerable discernment to separate unfounded speculations and poorly argued conclusions. Although the book offers valuable insights, it may confuse and even mislead inexperienced students.

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Jeffrey Stackert. *Deuteronomy and the Pentateuch*. The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022. 272 pp. £45.00/\$65.00.

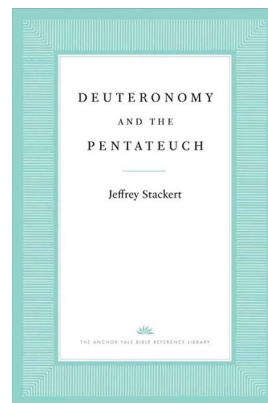
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For the past two hundred years, critical scholarship has feverishly been engaged in the task of investigating the origins of Deuteronomy. Quite understandably, non-specialists often find it challenging to stay abreast of recent scholarship on this issue. In *Deuteronomy and the Pentateuch*, Jeffrey Stackert, professor of Hebrew Bible at the University of Chicago, presents his understanding of the origins of Deuteronomy but, in the process, also provides readers with a much-needed overview and analysis of recent scholarship on this issue.

*Deuteronomy and the Pentateuch* consists of seven chapters. The introduction focuses on two starting points that shape the author's approach. First, Stackert approaches Deuteronomy from a Neodocumentarian perspective, an updated version of the Documentary Hypothesis popularized by Wellhausen. The Documentary Hypothesis suggested that the Pentateuch was composed by combining four originally independent literary sources: the Jahwistic (J), Elohist (E), Deuteronomistic (D), and Priestly (P) sources. Second, Stackert approaches Deuteronomy not as Scripture but as literature. For Stackert, this means that the primary audience for the speeches of Deuteronomy needs to be found within the narrative world created by Deuteronomy rather than readers from the seventh century BCE or the exilic/post-exilic periods.

In chapter 1, Stackert argues that a distinction should be made between D (Deut 1:1–32:47) and the Scroll of Deuteronomy. According to Stackert, D originally existed as an independent work. The Scroll of Deuteronomy, on the other hand, is the form Deuteronomy took when it was incorporated into the Pentateuch to form a single, five-scroll work. The balance of the chapter focuses on repudiating what Stackert identifies as an allegorical approach to interpreting Deuteronomy that strips its speeches of their narrative setting and views them as direct speech to people in seventh-century BCE Judah.

Chapter 2 addresses D's reuse and modification of material from earlier Pentateuchal sources. Stackert argues that the laws of D should be viewed as an adaptation of the Elohist Covenant Code



(Exod 20:22–23:19/33). D's non-legal material, on the other hand, reused and adapted narrative material from both E and J. A key example is the fate of the exodus generation. According to Stackert, J presents Israel's time in the wilderness as a period of punishment, resulting in the deaths of the entire exodus generation (Num 13–14). D, on the other hand, presents it as a time of testing (Deut 8:2–5) and indicates that the exodus generation survived its time in the wilderness (e.g., Deut 11:2, 7). Passages in D that align with J's view (Deut 1:35, 39; 2:14–16) are viewed as later interpolations.

Chapter 3 addresses possible influence from Hittite vassal treaties and the Assyrian ruler Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty (EST). Stackert argues that the parallels between D and Hittite treaties are insufficiently precise to suggest that D was influenced by them. By way of contrast, Stackert argues that the similarities between EST and Deuteronomy 13 and 28 show that D used EST as one of its sources.

Chapter 4 deals with the reception of both D and the Deuteronomy Scroll in biblical and post-biblical literature. Stackert suggests that the authors of Jeremiah and the Holiness supplement to P had access to D as an independent work. Chronicles, Nehemiah, and the Temple Scroll, on the other hand, only had access to the Scroll of Deuteronomy as part of the Pentateuch.

Finally, in chapter 5, Stackert argues that D was written in the first half of the seventh century BCE. This is based on the parallels between EST and Deuteronomy, the connection between the law of the king (Deut 17:14–20) and the reign of Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:2–9, 2 Chr 33:2–9), and the archaeology of seventh-century BCE Judah.

The greatest strength of Stackert's work is its ability to acquaint readers with recent scholarship on the origins of Deuteronomy. His discussion in chapter 3 about the relationship between EST and D is particularly helpful. With regard to the relationship between EST and Deuteronomy 28, Stackert should be commended for avoiding the less convincing parallels identified by Hans Ulrich Steymans (*Deuteronomium 28 und die âde zur Thronnachfolgeregelung Asarhaddons: Segen und Fluch im Alten Orient und in Israel*, OBO 145 [Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1995], 239–312) and championed by Eckart Otto (*Deuteronomium 23,16–34,12*, HThKAT [Freiburg: Herder, 2017], 1988–1990) and others. Stackert rightly notes that the parallels between EST and D are limited to isolated portions of D and identifies the implications this has for why D may have adapted material from EST. Also noteworthy is Stackert's critique of the parallels between D and Hittite vassal treaties, which are difficult to maintain in light of the methodological advances that have been made since these parallels were first identified. Finally, Stackert's emphasis that the primary audience of the speeches of D needs to be found within the narrative world of D will resonate with traditionalist readings of Deuteronomy.

Despite these strengths, there are a few drawbacks. First, Stackert's adherence to a Neodocumentarian perspective may limit its usefulness for readers who, for example, view the sources of the Pentateuch in terms of P, non-P, and D material or from a traditionalist perspective. For an alternative approach to the composition of Deuteronomy from a traditionalist perspective, see the excellent article by Daniel I. Block, "Recovering the Voice of Moses: The Genesis of Deuteronomy," *JETS* 44 (2001): 385–408. Second, Stackert fails, at times, to situate D's reuse of earlier non-legal material within the rhetorical aims of Deuteronomy. For example, does D's depiction of the wilderness experience differ from the depiction in J because they have different perspectives on these events? Or is D's depiction shaped by the rhetorical strategy of Deuteronomy 8?



Stackert has produced a well-researched overview of recent scholarship on the origins of Deuteronomy. Even if one disagrees with his conclusions, this work provides an excellent window into the current state of debate on this issue.

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Gregory Vall. *Ecclesial Exegesis: A Synthesis of Ancient and Modern Approaches to Scripture*. Verbum Domini. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2022. xii + 361 pp. £36.95/\$34.95.

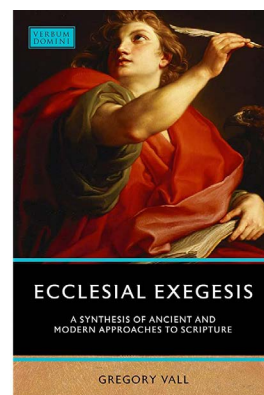
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For more than two centuries Christian scholars and pastors alike have wrestled with the different worldviews of modern critical exegetical methods and the creeds of premodern churches. Sometimes this resulted in an anti-academic faith commitment, at other times the mainly historical work of biblical scholars turned out to be unsuitable for the pulpit. It is delightful to live in a period in which both worlds are being integrated more and more. The proposal of Gregory Vall in *Ecclesial Exegesis* is, therefore, a step in the right direction, but unfortunately not the final solution.

This publication comprises a series of articles Vall published during his career of exegetical work in the Catholic tradition. In general, he recalls the engagement of the recently deceased pope Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger), who in the 1980s declared it time to integrate traditional exposition (method A) and historical exegesis (method B) into a revolutionary new way of doing exegesis (method C). Ratzinger already expected it would take a whole generation of scholars to fulfill this vision (p. 6 and repeated multiple times). Vall now looks back to see to what extent this third approach has indeed become compelling and shares some of his “best practices.” The volume consists of two-thirds earlier work, complemented with a formulation of its theoretical framework and some new examples.

Two important threads can be distinguished throughout the work. Firstly, Vall analyzes the recent Catholic discussion with a theoretical-hermeneutical lens in order to understand what method C actually is and also what it is not. It is not, for example, a simple two-step exegesis (p. 103), in which one first does the “historical” work (to understand what the text *meant*) and only afterwards tries to relate this to our time (what the text *means*). On the contrary, modern methods and traditional expositions must be in constant dialogue. Secondly, concrete exegetical examples are presented in which Valls tries to find this perfect mix. The widely diverse topics include Psalm 22, the Sabbath laws, and filial adoption in Romans 8. In these chapters, a particular patristic interpretation of a biblical passage is joined to more recent scholarly findings. In many cases, Vall’s specific exegetical remarks are quite helpful. Yet, regarding the general hermeneutical gains the result is less positive.

While the hermeneutical approach as such is certainly to be applauded, it falls short in two major ways. Firstly, traditional (A) and historical (B) interpretation are constantly imbalanced. For example, one chapter ended up more like a study in church history than an exegetical-hermeneutical proposal (pp. 123–52 cite no contemporary exegetical work), while another chapter functions as a biblical theology without any pre-twentieth century references (pp. 227–66). Next to this material imbalance, there is also





a more systematic discrepancy: traditional and historical interpretation are arguably unequal quantities for Vall. The dogmatic voice of the text seems overall more important than recent scholarly findings (see pp. 22, 117, 165, 217, among others). So I would categorize Vall's hermeneutical approach as an A+ method, in which the exegetical shortcomings of the patristics are supplemented but not fundamentally altered by modern studies.

Regrettably, Vall is also not in dialogue with other recent proposals outside of the specific intellectual environment of the Ratzinger school. His main opponents are important Catholic theologians at the end of the twentieth century in the wake of Vatican II (mainly Raymond E. Brown and Joseph A. Fitzmyer). Since then, however, other proposals have been added both inside and outside the Catholic church. For example, Vall is silent about the recent approach called Theological Interpretation of Scripture (he only notes its existence in the introduction, p. 13). Additionally, the debate between traditional and historical interpretation has become more complicated with the rise of contextual approaches like feminist and social-scientific criticism. The binary debate Vall encountered during his years as a student in the 1980s has, for better or worse, developed into a plurality that is bigger than the opposition between theological and diachronic methodologies. Therefore, more than three alphabetic letters are needed to categorize this whole field.

Vall's approach is thus quite similar to the recent work of Jamieson and Wittman. These Baptist theologians retrieve some exegetical rules of the early church, while seemingly neglecting recent historical and contextual findings. Their conclusions on the possibility of divine regret (*Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2022], 84–90; cf. Thomas Haviland-Pabst's review in this issue) are also to a great extent comparable to the ones of Vall (pp. 70–71). So while the approach of Vall and others is certainly both contributing to a recent debate and a great ecumenical opportunity, the past generation has (with some exceptions) not yet succeeded in bridging the gap between more critical academical work and faithful listening to God's word in Scripture. Apparently, it is still hard to fully combine the capacities of our mind and our heart, but Jesus taught us to love God with all we have to offer, both intellectually and spiritually (Mark 12:30). In this way, this work offers yet another stimulus to continue the exegetical-theological dialogue with all our Christian brothers and sisters.

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## — NEW TESTAMENT —

David P. Barry. *The Exile of Adam in Romans: The Reversal of the Curse against Adam and Israel in the Substructure of Romans 5 and 8*. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2021. xvi + 219 pp. £77.00/\$100.00.

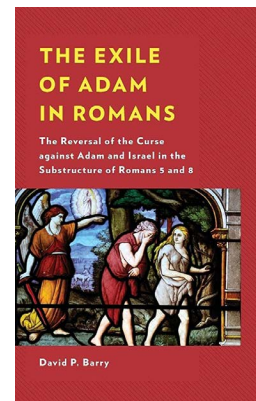
This book is an edited form of Barry's doctoral dissertation, completed at Westminster Theological Seminary and discussing the intersection of exilic and Adamic themes in Romans 5 and 8. His central thesis is that Romans 5 and 8 depict Christ's work as reversing the effects of Adam's exile from the garden, and bring Christ's people to their originally intended *telos*.

After introducing his topic in his first chapter (pp. 3–9), Barry surveys first century Jewish understandings of exile (ch. 2, pp. 13–31). His particular foci are the *duration* and the *characterization* of the exile. By surveying the Hebrew Bible, Second Temple literature, and (very briefly) the New Testament, he shows that, while heterogeneous, Jewish understandings of the exile generally characterized it as a *theological* problem, and not merely a geographical one that was over simply because some Jews had physically returned. Furthermore, while “many texts ... suggest that the exile has ended *in some sense*” (p. 31, emphasis original), there was widespread hope for a future restoration of God's people to the fulness of his blessings. Exile was generally *not* viewed as an entirely past event.

Barry's third chapter (pp. 41–63) then delves into the relationship between Adam and exile in the Hebrew Bible, Second Temple literature, and the New Testament (outside of Romans 5 and 8). This chapter moves very quickly through a wide variety of background texts, drawing connections that, though suggestive, may not be convincing for a reader who is skeptical of Barry's thesis. For example, he connects Adam's expulsion from the garden to the Deuteronomic concept of exile, but his argument appears to depend largely on the repetition of the common word ἐκβάλλω in Genesis 3:24 LXX and Deuteronomy 29:27 LXX (pp. 44–45). As a purely lexical connection (which is how it is presented), this is tenuous in Greek and has no basis in the underlying Hebrew. While I am sympathetic to Barry's implicit *thematic or theological* connection of these two texts, his explicit exegetical argument is weak. Whether the reader is convinced by Barry's argument for an Adamic concept of exile in first century Judaism may therefore depend somewhat upon theological presuppositions—though I, at least, find his overall argument persuasive.

Having argued for an Adamic notion of exile, Barry's remaining chapters then investigate this theme in Romans 5 (ch. 4, pp. 75–95); 8:1–30 (ch. 5, pp. 103–31); and 8:31–39 (ch. 6, pp. 141–65). These chapters make several interesting connections, showing that Adam's explicit presence in Romans 5:12–21 extends below the surface in 5:1–11 and chapter 8. I was particularly intrigued by his connection of humanity's *exchange* ([μετ]ἀλλάσσω; Rom 1:23, 25, 26), which has often been associated with Adam, with humanity being *reconciled* (καταλλάσσω; twice in 5:10, cf. 5:11). Barry thus argues that “reconciliation” is a solution to an Adamic problem (pp. 76–77).

As in Barry's argument for an Adamic concept of exile, these latter chapters are rich in theological and thematic connections, but weaker in detailed exegesis. For example, Romans 5:5 is repeatedly cited as a reference to “the Spirit's outpouring” (p. 81, cf. pp. 95, 103, 107, 111, 174), but this verse explicitly describes the outpouring of “the love of God,” *not* the Spirit. The Spirit is rather the agent or means of



the pouring. While Romans 5:5 may offer legitimate theological resonances that support Barry's wider argument, his use of it is exegetically careless. Similarly, while Genesis 1:26–28 describes the creation and commissioning of humanity *in general*, Adam's specific creation is not described in Genesis 1:27 (contra p. 55, cf. Gen 2:7), nor is the commission of Genesis 1:26–28 specific to him (contra p. 44). Barry's underlying points are probably legitimate, but this exegetical imprecision is unfortunate since it distracts from an otherwise interesting contribution to discussions of Paul's Adamic theology.

Rather than dwelling on these distractions, though, it is worth dwelling on Barry's wider contribution. He argues persuasively that the things that are *not* able to "separate [believers] from the love of Christ" (Rom 8:35) derive (mostly) from Deuteronomy 28, which describes a future exile (pp. 149–57). Likewise, Psalm 44:22 (cited in Rom 8:36) "depicts the experience of the righteous in exile" (p. 157).

By firmly establishing this exilic background (at least for this conclusion to Paul's argument so far), Barry's work has potential to contribute to readings of Romans 5–8 more broadly by more clearly highlighting the significance of the concept of exile in Paul. For example, this exilic theme has already been suggested as background to Romans 7 (Will N. Timmins, "Romans 7 and the Resurrection of Lament in Christ: The Wretched 'I' and His Biblical Doppelgänger," *NovT* 61 [2019]: 386–408). Both Barry's clarity on the concept of exile and the book's potential to contribute to further study of Romans 5–8 make it well worth engaging.

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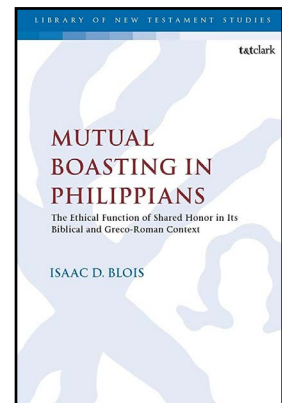
Isaac D. Blois. *Mutual Boasting in Philippians: The Ethical Function of Shared Honor in Its Biblical and Greco-Roman Context*. Library of New Testament Studies 627. London: T&T Clark, 2020. xv + 207 pp. £28.99/\$39.95.

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*Mutual Boasting in Philippians*, by Isaac D. Blois of the Torrey Honors College, is a welcome addition to studies on Pauline boasting, Philippians, and Paul's self-understanding.

In the introduction, Blois blends three strands of scholarship: studies on Pauline boasting, his use of Scripture, and κοινωνία in Philippians. He does not define boasting; rather, "the present study will employ terms from the language of honor—for example, glory, majesty, praise, boasting—not as technical terms but as various designations referring to the broad semantic field of positive value judgment" (p. 5). This breadth is one factor allowing him to trace the intertextuality of Paul's boasting language in the mode of Richard Hays and N. T. Wright, and it also enables him to study boasting in connection with the theme of κοινωνία in Philippians, yielding the concept of "mutual boasting."

In part 1, Blois shows that the concept of mutual boasting (or shared glory) encapsulates the blessings of the covenant as expressed in Deuteronomy (ch. 2, pp. 41–56), and that the concept is developed in Isaiah to include the figure of the servant, who restores the shared glory of YHWH and Israel and participates in that glory as well (ch. 3, pp. 57–74). Both Old Testament texts employ the language of boasting (Deut 26:16–19 LXX; Isa 60:19 Aquila). Significantly, Paul alludes to these texts in Philippians.



In part 2, Blois highlights mutual glory in Greco-Roman conceptions of relations between family members, friends, and between teachers and pupils (ch. 3, pp. 79–91). This context suggests itself to Philippians, given the theme of *κοινωνία* in the letter. Greco-Roman letter writers such as Cicero, Seneca, and Fronto appealed to shared honor when persuading recipients of certain course of action (ch. 5, pp. 93–108). Something akin to mutual boasting served as a “motivational spur” within parenetic letters.

In part 3, Blois studies the Philippians’ boast in Paul in Philippians 1:25–26 (ch. 6, pp. 113–28), his boast in them at 2:14–16 (ch. 7, pp. 129–50), and the interplay between the two (ch. 8, 151–62). Paul envisions believers as a new covenant version of the Deuteronomic community, with himself as the Isaianic servant who both restores and participates in the shared glory between God and God’s people. This “triple mutuality of honor” (p. 153) recasts the believers’ understanding of what it honorable and motivates them to remain steadfast when persecuted. Thus, mutual boasting is a “motivational spur” in Philippians.

This monograph advances the conversation on Pauline boasting in at least three ways. First, Blois gives the most extensive review of studies on boasting to date, including the lesser-utilized studies of Ragner Asting (“*Kauchesis*: Et bidrag til forståelsen av den religiøse selvfølelse hos Paulus,” *NoTT* 26 [1925]: 129–204) and J. Sánchez Bosh (“*Gloriarse*” *Según San Pablo: Sentido y Teología de Καυχᾶσθαι* [Barcelona: Biblical Institute Press, 1970]). Second, by considering boasting in Philippians, he diversifies a conversation that typically centers on the Corinthian correspondence. Finally, he takes the well-known synthesis of Jewish and Greco-Roman elements of Paul’s boasting in new directions. This last point is worth exploring at length.

Duane Watson has said,

Paul’s understanding of boasting is a unique mix of boasting as understood within Judaism and within the dominant Greco-Roman culture. Paul uses boasting in the situations prescribed as appropriate by the Greco-Roman culture, and he uses boasting according to its conventions for those situations. However, his understanding of the content of boasting itself is borrowed from his Jewish heritage and his newfound faith in Christ. (Duane F. Watson, “Paul and Boasting,” in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, ed. J. Paul Sampley, 2nd ed. [New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2016], 1:108)

At first glance, *Mutual Boasting in Philippians* seems like a larger version of Watson’s synthesis, but Blois argues not that Paul’s boasting language came from his Greco-Roman context, but that it was “culturally intelligible” within it. Because he considers the hortatory function of mutual boasting, he does more than ask whether it was culturally acceptable.

Blois’s monograph contributes to studies on Philippians by shifting interpretation from the Roman character of the colony to the Jewish character of Paul’s theology. This somewhat polemical shift depends in part on the validity of intertextual interpretation, so scholars critical of this methodology may not be convinced (p. 1).

Finally, other works have discussed connections between Paul and the Isaianic servant and between the church and the new covenant; what Blois does especially well is to discuss the two in tandem, and to provide a solid exegetical framework for doing so.

There are four areas that might have been improved. First, the division between Paul’s Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts is sometimes too neat. For example, Blois notes connections between shared

glory and kinship in both covenantal and Greco-Roman familial contexts. The implication is that Paul's what made sense to Paul would have proven intelligible to his audience, even if they lacked his theological framework. But is this all that can be said?

Second, Blois references the Aristotelian rhetorical triad toward the end of the book: "Hence, whereas the reference to the Philippians' boast in 1:26 establishes ethos, the reference to Paul's boast in 2:16 garners pathos" (p. 157). While interesting, this is a departure from the author's typical analysis and could have been developed at length independently or integrated into the rest of the volume—and does Paul's boasting language not also build the *logos* of his argument?

Third, Blois intentionally does not focus on the relationship between boasting and judgment (p. 17), nor, fourth, on that between boasting in Philippians 1–2 and chapter 3. Although dissertations necessitate limitations, our understanding of boasting in Philippians remains partial if we do not consider the aforementioned relationships. Blois himself cannot completely avoid the issue of judgment (see pp. 1, 5, 7, 16–17, 44, 59, 70–71, 119, 122, 131–39, 153), and he turns to Philippians 3 briefly (pp. 153–54). The author's forthcoming volume on emotions in Philippians will likely provide a fuller treatment of some of these issues.

*Mutual Boasting in Philippians* has an elegant structure and makes a strong case. The criticisms raised are minor compared to the helpful and compelling contributions it makes to studies of Pauline boasting, Philippians, and Paul's apostolic self-understanding. Blois's scholarship throughout is meticulous, charitable, and worthy of emulation.

One last note: this book reminds readers that ministry unites minister and congregation such that the eschatological destiny of one is intertwined with that of the other. Pastors, missionaries, and others may be encouraged, roused, and alarmed to discover that they share in "Paul's dangerous mutual boasting" (pp. 160–61).

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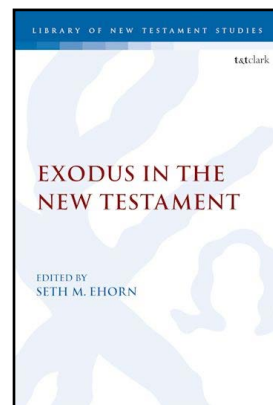
Seth M. Ehorn, ed. *Exodus in the New Testament*. Library of New Testament Studies 663. London: T&T Clark, 2022. xii + 259 pp. £28.99/\$39.95.

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This multi-author volume is a continuation of a series on the NT use of the OT initiated by Steve Moyise and Maarten Menken. While earlier volumes were linked to the Seminar on the Use of the OT in the NT hosted annually in Hawarden, Wales, this one is independent of the Seminar.

After a preface and introduction by editor Seth Ehorn, chapter 1 by Drew Longacre, "Exodus in the Second Temple Period," serves as an introduction to Exodus, summarizing the book's contents, key themes, composition history, text, and reception history. Two sections on the text of Exodus get the most attention, with extensive discussion of the Hebrew and Greek texts and their transmission.

In Chapter 2, Jeannine Brown examines Exodus in Matthew's Gospel. She arranges her chapter around Matthew's handling of major thematic movements in Exodus, starting with



key personages common to Exodus and Matthew: (1) Moses, Israel, and Jesus; (2) Exodus Redemption; (3) Wilderness and Torah; and (4) Tabernacle and Presence. While Jesus is at times typologically associated with Moses, Brown argues that this is only one layer of Matthew's primary Israel-Jesus typology. She concludes that Matthew views Jesus as Israel's representative who comes out of Egypt, highlighting the new exodus that brings restoration from exile and covenant renewal through Jesus's missional death. Jesus is the authentic interpreter of Torah, who teaches a higher ethic implicit in the law (p. 47). The final scene in Matthew (28:20) brings together two key Exodus/Sinai themes: teaching ("obey everything I have commanded you") and divine presence ("I am with you always").

In Chapter 3 on Mark's Gospel, Daniel M. Gurtner examines the four quotations and twenty-one allusions and verbal parallels from Exodus cited in the NA<sup>28</sup> and UBS<sup>5</sup>. These occur in a wide range of contexts, and only a few relate to the exodus deliverance itself. Gurtner concludes that "while Mark may indeed advance a motif of an Isaianic New Exodus [as proposed by Rikki Watts] ... his use of the 'old' Exodus does not seem to accommodate such singularity of purpose" (p. 60).

Chapter 4, by Brian J. Tabb and Steve Walton, deals with Exodus in Luke-Acts. Like other NT writers, Luke-Acts alludes to texts in Exodus for a variety of reasons. Yet "Luke and Acts also commonly draw attention to *major events* and *themes* of the Exodus narrative, including YHWH's promises to the patriarchs, his power to save his people from slavery, his glorious presence and enduring revelation to Moses at Sinai, as well as Israel's stubborn rebellion against God and his chosen leaders" (p. 61). For Luke the exodus is not only the paradigmatic model of God's redemptive activity in the OT, it also points forward to the new "exodus" (9:31) deliverance accomplished by Jesus.

In Chapter 5 Andreas J. Köstenberger examines the Exodus in John's Gospel. He focuses little on specific citations from the book of Exodus, instead tracing Moses/exodus typology, exodus events and themes, and new exodus imagery from throughout the OT. Some of these include: God's self-revelation in the tabernacle and the giving of the law being surpassed by God's definitive self-revelation in the Son; John the Baptist as the harbinger of the new and greater exodus led by Jesus; the depiction of Jesus as the Moses-like signs-working Messiah, providing heavenly manna; and the portrayal of Jesus as God's ultimate Passover lamb. According to Köstenberger, the identity-defining Exodus narrative "hovers constantly in the background of John's story" (p. 88).

Chapter 6, by David M. Westfall, examines the references to Exodus in the undisputed Pauline letters (discussing texts in Galatians, 1–2 Corinthians, and Romans). While Paul only occasionally quotes from Exodus, events that occur there, like the covenant at Sinai and the golden calf incident, play a major role in Paul's theological reflection and examples for exhortation to his churches. Westfall concludes that "Exodus played a deeply formative role in Paul's theological imagination, providing him with a pattern for understanding God's new act of eschatological redemption in Israel's Messiah and the situation of his people in the last days of the present evil age" (p. 126).

In Chapter 7 Seth Ehorn (editor of the volume as a whole) discusses allusions to the exodus tradition in the disputed Paulines (Ephesians, Colossians, Pastorals). While the theme of exodus does not play a major role in these letters, individual texts and Jewish traditions (e.g., 2 Tim 3:8–9) are utilized for encouragement and admonition.

In Chapter 8 on the book of Hebrews, David Moffitt argues that while Hebrews likely quotes explicitly from Exodus (LXX) only two times (8:5; 9:20), Exodus provides narrative elements that help to structure the main contours of the author's argument. This is especially true in chapters 1–4, where the author's exodus-generation metaphor serves to shape the identity of the intended audience as those

who have been freed from bondage and are now in the wilderness waiting to receive their inheritance. Furthermore, Exodus provides material that influences the author's belief in the existence of significant heavenly realities, especially the heavenly tabernacle (p. 147). As a creative theologian, the author not only draws from the exodus narrative but also feels free to adapt it for moral and theological illustration (cf. 11:23–29; 12:18–24).

Chapter 9, by Katie Marcar, examines the quotations and allusions to Exodus in the General Letters. While these vary from letter to letter, none of the letters demonstrates a systematic or sustained interest in exodus traditions. James contains only one likely quotation, in a reference to the Decalogue (James 2:11). First Peter makes the greatest use of Exodus. Yet these quotations and allusions are less about the central themes of Exodus than a part of a larger hermeneutical strategy of appropriating Israel's scriptures and narrative for the church through Christ (p. 169). Exodus material appears only once in Jude, where the wilderness generation is one illustration of those who suffered God's judgment because of unbelief (Jude 5).

Michelle Fletcher begins Chapter 10, on Revelation, by discussing the unique hermeneutical challenges of the book's use of the OT. While Revelation is infused with the Hebrew Bible at every level, the OT is never explicitly quoted and Exodus themes are often mediated through earlier Jewish traditions. She proposes to read Revelation "with" Exodus rather than "for" Exodus, using Exodus to give a flavor of the complex way the Hebrew Bible resonates throughout Revelation. Some of the traditions discussed include the divine name (Rev 1:4), manna (Rev 2:17), the Lamb (Rev 5), the Son of Moses (Rev 15), and the plagues of Egypt (Rev 16).

The volume concludes with a review essay by Carmen Joy Imes, who focuses on several common themes, including the indispensability of the book of Exodus for NT theology, the complexity of Exodus traditions, and the challenges and possibilities for future work. This is followed by two case studies, one on "Jesus as a New Moses?" and the other on the source of allusion in 1 Peter 2:9.

This volume as a whole does an excellent job of surveying the scope and significance of Exodus citations and allusions throughout the NT corpus. As such it is a commendable addition to the series. The greatest challenge (and inconsistency) throughout is that while most authors survey quotations and allusions from Exodus in their respective NT books, others focus almost exclusively on exodus themes, such as God's deliverance, the Sinaitic covenant, obedience to the law, Moses typology, etc. (see Imes's comments with reference to Köstenberger on p. 203). Indeed, when I first saw this book I misread its title as the *theme of exodus* rather than the *use of the book of Exodus* in the NT. For my own research, I was particularly interested in the expansion and transformation of the exodus theme in Isaiah and the prophets, and how the NT writers exploit this motif.

Clearly aware of this challenge, Ehorn says in his introduction, "Following the pattern of prior books in the series . . . contributors have been allowed to work within their own preferred intertextual framework(s)" (p. 3). This, then, is less of a weakness than a necessary observation. Indeed, the diversity of approaches by these authors echoes and recalls the diverse ways the text and themes of Exodus are picked up and developed in Second Temple Judaism and among the various NT authors.

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Gregory Goswell. *Text and Paratext: Book Order, Title and Division as Keys to Biblical Interpretation*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022. 256 pp. £22.42/\$26.99.

“Every bible is a study Bible,” declares Greg Goswell in this introduction to the interpretive value of the book order, titles, and divisions of our earliest copies of Hebrew and Christian Scripture (p. 4). In *Text and Paratext* he details how the various features that lie “beside the text” influence and shape how readers understand and interpret a passage of Scripture or a biblical book. As Goswell puts it, “There is more in the Bible than just the words!” (p. 1).

Goswell’s argument is possible because, contrary to popular belief, earliest versions of the biblical text were not copied exclusively *scriptio continua* (continuous script). Preserved in the “paratext” of most manuscripts (MSS) are titles, book orders, textual divisions, scribal corrections, marginalia, and a myriad of sentence-level markings. Specific elements range from the open and closed paragraph marks supplied by the Masoretic scribes of the Hebrew Bible to the use of punctuation and text segmentations to divide or “delimit” the words and phrases of Scripture in New Testament Greek MSS. All these markings precede the 12th century chapter divisions in Bibles, attributed to Stephen Langton, that present-day readers use. While not part of the “inspired text,” they pre-shape how scholars, translators, preachers, and students understand the text (as much as Bible Project videos, study Bible headings and even sermon titles pre-shape our interpretation of Scripture). In Goswell’s own words, “The order of the biblical books, their titles, and their internal divisions provide a built-in commentary on the text. These paratextual elements have the heuristic value of starting points for interpretation.” (p. 7)

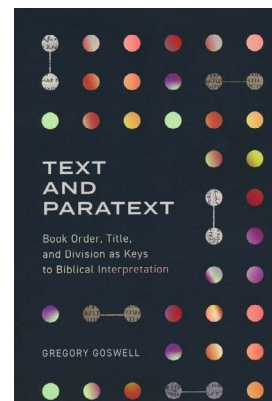
With this understanding of paratext, Goswell ventures through each book of the Bible exploring in interpretive value of three kinds of paratext:

**1. Canonical structure (chs. 1–3):** For example, how has placing the Pauline writings ahead of the Catholic Epistles (a result of the Vulgate determining the order of our Western bibles and by no means the only “book order” found in early MSS) resulted in the “Protestant penchant to give priority to Paul”? (p. 64)

**2. Book titles (chs. 4–5):** For example, does “Numbers” (from the Septuagint title Αριθμοί, as found in Vaticanus and Alexandrinus) offer a better interpretive key to the fourth book of the Pentateuch than the Hebrew title בְּמִדְבָּר, “in the wilderness”? (p. 84).

**3. Textual divisions or delimitations (chs. 6–7):** For example, should εν αγαπη (“in love”) in Ephesians 1:4 be read with what precedes or what follows? (p. 162)

The bulk of *Text and Paratext* collates and refreshes Goswell’s years of research and writing into observations from various biblical manuscript traditions, with several sections having begun life as journal articles (chs. 1–5). However, far from contenting himself with merely esoteric discussions (as specialised works on scribal habits can sometimes tend to be), he is happy to venture into the interpretive significance of paratextual features. At times, however, this leads to more conjectural reflections, such as his view that as the title “Jonah” for a critical account of the prophet suggests another individual’s authorship (p. 92), or that the mention in 2 Timothy 4:13 of τας μεμβρανὰς (“the parchments”) refers to Paul’s own letters in codex form (p. 115).





More helpful is how Goswell ends each chapter with practical guidelines on how to interpret the order, titles, and text divisions of Scripture. The careful reader is rewarded with a range of helpful exegetical insights to serve their own personal reading and study, such as allowing the Hebrew and Greek versions of the Old Testament canon to suggest different but complementary ways of reading the same book (p. 31) or to highlight features and themes that are obscured or less appreciated otherwise (p. 53).

As an introductory volume, *Text and Paratext* leaves much unsaid and unexplored. Goswell's background as an Old Testament scholar means that the detail and familiarity found in discussions of books like Daniel and Esther are not evenly matched across the Bible: in particular, the text divisions in several New Testament books attract only brief and cursory discussion. Nevertheless, there is plenty of interpretive "food for thought" throughout *Text and Paratext* for readers to appreciate. This is not because the paratext of Scripture should be seen as unquestionable or sacrosanct, but because it "encodes the evaluations of early readers" (p. 179) who were linguistically and culturally closer to the biblical world than our digital-first, information-saturated environment where Scripture is too often read and shared without meaningful context (p. 180). Employed with humility and care, the set of tools Goswell introduces in this book will help readers gain a richer and deeper appreciation of the biblical storyline, as preserved in the text—and paratext—of Scripture.

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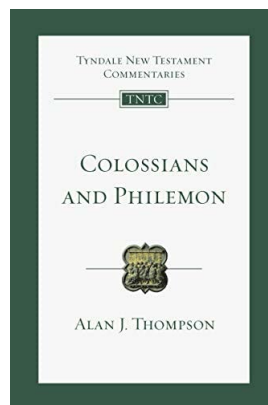
Alan J. Thompson. *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 14. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022. xviii + 256 pp. £16.99/\$25.00.

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Few would envy the scholar tasked with writing a replacement volume for N. T. Wright's 1986 commentary on Colossians and Philemon in the Tyndale New Testament Commentary Series. Wright's commentary is exemplary in insight and brevity, and it has been a starting point for all who want to learn about these biblical texts. Happily, Alan J. Thompson (senior lecturer in New Testament at Sydney Missionary and Bible College, Croydon, New South Wales, Australia) has not only undertaken this endeavor, but he has also done a fine job.

Thompson does not set out to correct Wright's work but neither does he constrain himself to Wright's views. Instead, Thompson's primary contribution is to update the commentary by interacting primarily—and sometimes seemingly exclusively—with scholarly works published since Wright's volume in 1986. He does, therefore, offer a contemporary commentary that stands on its own merits as a contribution to the field. Like Wright's before him, Thompson's work should be seen as a reliable introduction or "first commentary" for the student of Colossians and Philemon.

For both letters, Thompson sees Paul as the genuine author and Rome as the place of provenance. For Colossians, he identifies responding to false teachers as Paul's purpose in writing. Thompson "tentatively" concludes that this false teaching was a "localized form" of legalism derived from the Old Testament that included "elements of asceticism" and was propagated by teachers who boasted of their



superior “spiritual status” (p. 20). Though these teachers are present in Colossae, Thompson suggests they have not infiltrated the church. Thus, Paul writes preventatively rather than correctively (p. 21), lest the Colossians should be deceived rather than because they already have been, and Thompson mirror-reads many of Paul’s positive statements in Colossians against this false teaching (e.g., pp. 41, 42, 76, 77, 96, 109, 131, 161, 185).

Regarding Philemon, Thompson takes the traditional view that Onesimus was a runaway slave who has providentially met Paul and been converted, and Paul is now sending Onesimus back to his master, Philemon. In his commentary on the text of both Colossians and Philemon, Thompson fairly represents multiple views on key issues and offers his own conclusions with sound reasoning. He generally follows well-established lines of interpretation rather than embarking on novel theories—a proper approach for a commentary intended as an introduction for new students of the text.

Perhaps the most interesting part of his entire commentary is his one-page reflection on how Colossians helps interpret Philemon (p. 210). Most commentaries only mention in passing, if at all, the evidence that these two letters were simultaneously composed by Paul, carried to Colossae, and read aloud to the gathered church in Philemon’s house. For example, Wright calls Philemon “the companion piece” to Colossians, with both letters being carried by Tychicus on the same journey alongside Onesimus (*Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC 12 [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986], 39, 165–66). But Wright, like most other commentators, does not reflect substantively on the relationship between the two letters. Even when he calls the letter to Philemon the high point of Paul’s theology and assumes Philemon had access to Paul’s theological substructure and worldview, Wright looks to the entire corpus of Paul’s writings for that substructure without considering that Paul may have presented it more succinctly in his companion letter to the Colossians (Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013], 1:16–74).

Thompson, on the other hand, muses that if indeed the two letters were written together, then “it is also worth reflecting on how the letter to the Colossians might help interpret the letter to Philemon” (p. 210). Yes, indeed! Thompson then suggests various themes in Colossians that have broad relevance to Philemon, such as reconciliation, forgiveness, love, and slavery. He also notes throughout his commentary on Philemon various instances where the theology of Colossians directly undergirds the message in Philemon. As one example, Thompson observes (pp. 244–45) that when Paul offers to repay Onesimus’s debt in order that he might be forgiven (Phlm 18), Paul is likely thinking of his theological principles from Colossians, where Paul said not only that believers have forgiveness in Christ (Col 1:14; 2:13) and must forgive one another (Col 3:13), but also that all wrongs will ultimately be repaid in the judgment (Col 3:25). Paul’s offer in Philemon seems to be a practical application of his theology in Colossians.

Thus, Thompson is right to suggest that Colossians helps interpret the letter to Philemon, and he provides some intriguing examples of how this might work. I find myself wondering whether Thompson has gone far enough—it seems there is much terrain left to be explored, if Paul’s letter to Philemon really is the apex and practical application of the theological substructure of his letter to the Colossians. What if we read Philemon through the lens of Colossians—where else might we find the theology of Colossians imprinted on Paul’s words to Philemon? This may lead to fresh readings of Philemon abounding with new insights.

Further, what if we were not only to read Philemon backward in light of Colossians, as Thompson does, but also to read Colossians forward in light of Philemon? In other words, what if Paul wrote

Colossians with the Philemon situation in mind? How might viewing Colossians through the lens of Philemon bring new insight into what Paul says and why in Colossians? Could we reverse-engineer the book of Colossians, presuming that Paul intended for Colossians to be the theological substructure for the superstructure he knew he would then construct upon it in his letter to Philemon? Articles and dissertations are begging to be written on such questions!

In the end, Thompson has written a reliable introductory commentary and I commend it as such. And in so doing, Thompson has perhaps given us the greatest gift of all, an insight that sparks further reflection on the text. Hopefully future scholars will follow his cue and explore the mutually-interpreting relationship between these two letters.

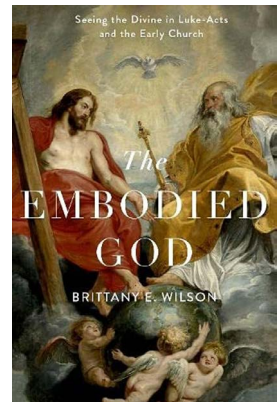
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Brittany E. Wilson. *The Embodied God: Seeing the Divine in Luke-Acts and the Early Church*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. xvi + 333 pp. £80.00/\$99.00.

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Brittany Wilson is a fine Luke-Acts scholar, presently associate professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School. She here provides us with an interesting, thoughtful and provocative argument. Her first book, *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke-Acts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), gave us a fresh look at some key men in Luke-Acts through the lens of Graeco-Roman expectations of elite masculinity, arguing cogently that the nature of being a man was reshaped by Luke's portraits of Jesus, Paul, Zechariah, and the Ethiopian eunuch. This book turns to God and argues that traditional Christian understanding of God as invisible and immaterial is not found in Luke-Acts (or wider in the NT, for that matter). Moreover, Luke's understanding reflects the view Dr Wilson detects in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.



As Wilson notes, the embodied nature of God has recently become a topic of discussion in OT Studies, notably in the work of Benjamin Sommer, Esther Hamori, and Mark Smith. The most controversial of these works, Francesca Stavrakopolou's *God: An Anatomy* (New York: Knopf, 2021), appeared soon after Wilson's work was complete.

The argument falls into two parts: the first three chapters consider the portrait of God in the OT and Luke-Acts, arguing that God is understood to be both visible and embodied; the later three chapters focus on Luke's portrait of Jesus, arguing that Luke portrays Jesus as one way in which God becomes physically manifest, in human flesh.

The introduction helpfully sketches the philosophical background to regarding God as invisible and immaterial before turning to discuss what Wilson means by "seeing God." She notes, importantly, that she is studying textual representations of God's body rather than material remains (for example). She clarifies that her study is of God as bodily in relation to human bodies rather than (for example) animal bodies. Notably, she makes clear that she is not suggesting that God has a body like human bodies: she is clear that God has a tangible and visible form, but argues that the sources are not clear on the nature

of this form. Indeed, she notes that at times the scriptural witness does not portray God's "body" as "material"; her particular focus is on *sight* and how humans "see" God.

The first chapter then engages with the biblical prohibition of images of God, persuasively showing that this prohibition is predicated on the danger of idolatry rather than on God's lack of bodily form. The second considers times when God is visibly manifest in visions and theophanies, and argues that there is some overlap in the OT and in Luke-Acts between these events and the appearances of angels, the Spirit, and Jesus.

The third chapter, the crucial part of the argument, presses the discussion further by seeking to show that Luke-Acts is part of a biblical tradition of God's "fluidity," by which she means that God can appear in multiple forms, some of which involve bodies. She enters the debate on whether intermediary figures such as the angel of the Lord stretch the boundaries of monotheism, agreeing with those who claim "Jewish affirmations of God's 'oneness' were held alongside more complex apprehensions of the deity" (p. 103), against scholars such as Hurtado and Bauckham, who see a strong boundary between God and any creature, including intermediary figures. Here I found myself wanting to see clearer evidence of this "inclusive" view. The argument goes on to study divine attributes (wisdom, glory, God's name, power, the Spirit) that are in some sense personalized, angels (conceding that they are nowhere called "divine," p. 114), and exalted humans (e.g., Adam, Enoch, Moses and Elijah—although the texts she cites in this regard are extra-canonical). The last part of the chapter goes on to consider divine attributes, angels, and exalted humans in Luke-Acts, applying conclusions from her study of the OT to Luke's writings. Here I would have liked more persuasive evidence; in a number of places I wrote dissenting notes in the margin to her exegesis.

The second part of the book is less controversial, as Wilson engages with Luke's witness to Jesus. The fourth chapter contains a thoughtful section-by-section study of Luke's Gospel, noticing epiphanic encounters with Jesus in the birth narratives, Jesus's ministry, and the resurrection narratives. Jesus's body is not stable, but can be altered—note the transfiguration, and the nature of his resurrection body. The fifth considers Jesus's humanity and fleshly form in Luke-Acts, and tracks these themes through the birth narratives, Jesus's ministry, the crucifixion, and the resurrection narratives. She argues cogently that Luke portrays Jesus as fully and really human, and as "the most concrete site—and sight—in which God becomes embodied" p. (230).

The sixth chapter considers Christophanies and the embodied form of Jesus in heaven post-ascension. A study of Luke's ascension narratives shows that Jesus' exalted life is bodily—he ascends as an exalted human. Visions and Christophanies in Acts resemble divine appearances mapped in the OT (ch. 2). Wilson carefully observes how much language of sight there is in these appearances, by contrast with much scholarship's focus on speech and word. The exalted Jesus is a human and is corporeal. A brief conclusion helpfully reviews the overall argument, and bibliography, and indices of ancient sources and modern authors follow (I'd have also liked a topical index).

This is a book which should provoke discussion and debate, for Wilson is highlighting features of the portraits of God and Jesus that have been neglected. She gives reason to think that the bodily language used of God in the OT is not "mere metaphor," while being clear that God's embodiedness is not of the same kind as humans'. She provides a cogent and well-argued case for Luke's portrait of Jesus as both divine and human, but from this fresh angle of considering embodiedness. This is a book that libraries will want to have, and one that those studying Luke's understanding of God, and of Jesus, will

want to read. Let's hope for the day when the publishers make a paperback available at a price mere mortals can afford.

One small note on Greek accents: in a number of places the final accent of a Greek phrase (or just one word) is a grave. This is impossible, for such an accent is only found where there is a following Greek word, and the convention I would expect is to change it to an acute. Am I just rather old-fashioned in this regard?

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Kent L. Yinger. *The Pharisees: Their History, Character, and New Testament Portrait*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022. xx + 224 pp. £28.00/\$31.00.

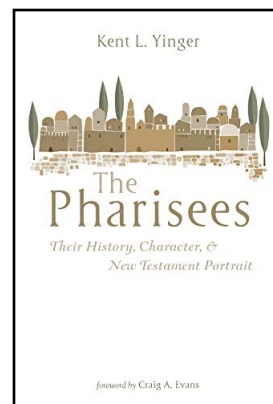
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As part of a growing body of recently published works on the Pharisees, Kent Yinger's introduction provides an accessible and clearly written treatment of the historical background of the movement, its influence among the Jewish people, its teachings, and the manner in which it is portrayed by the Gospel writers.

Following a brief introduction that offers a concise survey of the relevant historical sources for the study of the Pharisees, Yinger considers what may be known of its origin and history in the first two chapters. He suggests that the Pharisees likely "began sometime in the mid-second century BCE in connection with the Maccabean struggle against Hellenism over Israel's true identity" (p. 15). He also concludes that any significant political influence of the Pharisees is likely to have been limited to the period in which Salome Alexandra ruled over Judea (c. 76–67 BCE), that is, to a brief period shortly before the Romans began to exert their influence in Judea (pp. 17–20). On several other occasions, the Pharisees were embroiled in significant controversy with Jewish leaders or were the subject of harsh treatment.

Chapters 3–5 consider the unique practices and beliefs of the Pharisees. As Yinger explains, the Pharisees were known for their careful and meticulous observance of the Law and a number of traditions which they assumed were implied by the written Law or were at least consistent with it (pp. 33–37). He offers an insightful discussion of key doctrines that were affirmed by the Pharisees but were either rejected or not emphasized by members of the Sadducees or others (e.g., the acceptance of fate, the hope of a future resurrection, and post-mortem rewards and punishments). Yinger also notes that the Pharisees enjoyed a favorable reputation among the general population, an achievement that would be difficult to explain if they were the oppressing ruling party that is sometimes assumed.

At the heart of the volume (chs. 6–12) is a substantive treatment of Jesus's interaction with the Pharisees. Yinger considers not only how each of the canonical Gospels portray the Pharisees, but what might be concluded about Jesus's rebuke of their teaching and lifestyle. Among other things, Yinger suggests that Jesus shared many of the same beliefs and practices as the Pharisees (p. 86), that the Pharisees did not despise the common people (pp. 101–3), and that many of its members were not, at least in the majority of cases, the legalists they are often thought to be. As Yinger contends, "Concerns



about trying to earn God's favor through good works, through eating the right food with the right people, played no role in the Pharisees' thinking" (p. 107). He further explains that conflict with Jesus largely centered around matters of purity and authority, that is, over the precise manner in which the Law is to be applied and who possesses the right to instruct the people.

The final chapters of the volume (chs. 13–15) make several conclusions about the nature of the Pharisees and address some of the common ways that they are often portrayed. Yinger is sensitive to the fact that many contemporary readers may be conflicted by the noticeably more positive manner in which the Pharisees are portrayed by Josephus (see *Jewish War* 2.162–66 and *Jewish Antiquities* 13.171–73; 18.11–25) than in the Gospel accounts. How could members of this group manage to exert such widespread influence if they were anything like the way they are described and characterized in the gospels, it might be asked. For Yinger, it is unnecessary to side with either Josephus or the Gospel writers. The Gospels provide reliable and credible testimony, he explains, but their characterization of the Pharisees has often been misunderstood. Rather than an oppressive group which espoused a legalistic understanding of the Law, Yinger argues that many Pharisees understood that "the Torah was built on a foundation of God's electing grace to Israel and was seen as the way to walk in faithfulness to this God, not the way to earn his love" (p. 152). But even if this point is granted, is it not clear that Jesus charged the Pharisees with hypocrisy? Yinger concedes that Jesus did make such a charge but contends that his criticism of the Pharisees has been largely misunderstood. He emphasizes that Jesus's notable rebuke of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:13–36 should be understood as a "warning-invective," a particular type of criticism that was characterized by generalization, exaggeration, and stereotyped language (p. 173). On the basis of this observation, Yinger concludes that the Pharisees were indeed hypocrites in the sense that they "claim[ed] to love and listen to God," while "refus[ing] to listen to the one whom God had sent." As a whole, however, the "Pharisees were not characterized by hypocrisy" (p. 176).

While some readers may not resonate with all of Yinger's conclusions, his introduction serves as an ideal starting place for non-specialists looking to learn more about the background and teachings of the Pharisees. In addition to addressing a number of important questions related to their practices, beliefs, and traditions, Yinger makes a compelling case that some of the modern caricatures of the Pharisees are in need of reevaluation.

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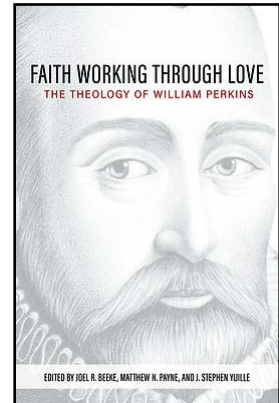
— HISTORY AND HISTORICAL THEOLOGY —

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Joel R. Beeke, Matthew N. Payne, and J. Stephen Yuille, eds. *Faith Working through Love: The Theology of William Perkins*. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2022. 227 pp. £23.00/\$30.00.

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In the past decade, historians and theologians have shown an increased focus on the thought of the English theologian William Perkins (1558–1602). From W. B. Patterson’s book on Perkins’s thought (*William Perkins and the Making of a Protestant England* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018]), to Andrew Ballitch’s work on Perkins’s interpretation of Scripture (*The Gloss and the Text: William Perkins on Interpreting Scripture with Scripture* [Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020]), to Richard Muller’s treatise on Perkins’s understanding of the human will (*Grace and Freedom: William Perkins and the Early Modern Reformed Understanding of Free Choice and Divine Grace* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020]), scholars are demonstrating a renewed interest in Perkins. Additionally, the recently completed multi-volume publication of *The Works of William Perkins* (WWP) adds to the renaissance of Perkins scholarship.



The publisher of WWP released a “companion volume” of essays entitled *Faith Working through Love: The Theology of William Perkins* (preface). This companion book contains 12 essays focused on elements of Perkins’s thought. Almost all the different authors represented have written on Perkins elsewhere. Matthew Payne, Stephen Yuille, and Joel Beeke—each an editor and contributor of *Faith Working Through Love*—have rightly earned their reputation as experts on Perkins. Payne and Yuille’s other recently released book—*The Labors of a Godly and Learned Divine, William Perkins: Including Previously Unpublished Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2023)—is superb and required reading for every Perkins’s scholar.

*Faith Working through Love* has much to commend it. First, it proffers a close reading of Perkins’s corpus. In each chapter, the author engages at length with WWP. Second, some chapters offer fresh and ground-breaking contributions to the field of Perkins’s scholarship. For example, the final chapter on Perkins and Ramism is a remarkably learned treatise that upends parts of the established view of Perkins and Ramism. Third, other chapters pave new ground as they study largely neglected themes in Perkins’s corpus. For example, Matthew Hartline’s discussion of eschatology traces and Wyatt Graham’s chapter on the Trinity trace themes in Perkins’s thought that have largely escaped the attention of scholars.

Instead of listing the many additional positive points in *Faith Working through Love*, I will offer two comments in the spirit of advancing Perkins’s scholarship and aiding in reading the volume under review. First, the book and scholarship on Perkins could have been helped with an account of Perkins’s historical context aimed at Perkins’s life and works. Perkins’s social, cultural, political, and theological context profoundly shaped him. An opening chapter could have been added that would have better helped readers understand Perkins’s life, context in Cambridge, and milieu in late Elizabethan culture.

Second, the book contains a few assertions about Perkins’s thoughts that could benefit from additional context. For example, Roman Catholics are repeatedly referred to as “Catholics” (e.g., p. 1). Or, chapter authors speak of “the Catholic view” (e.g., p. 122) in referring to the Roman Catholic view. Throughout Perkins’s corpus, he spoke of Roman Catholics thousands of times. However, only in a tiny minority of times did he label them as “Catholics.” Instead, he typically referred to them as “Roman

Catholics,” “papists,” or other similar terms. This difference between “Roman Catholics” and “Catholics” was not an insignificant linguistic distinction. Instead, it represented a crucial part of Perkins’s thinking about the nature of Christian catholicity and the errors of Roman Catholicism. Also, David Barbee adumbrates Perkins’s “list of the marks of the church. Perkins identifies only three” (p. 130). In fact, Perkins put forward at least four different lists of marks that collectively presented five (potentially six) different marks of a church (WWP 2:309; 4:217; 5:378; 5:384).

Despite these small issues, I want to make clear that this book is an important, helpful, and largely accurate work that deserves wide readership. *Faith Working through Love* makes a strong contribution to the study of Perkins. The book should prove useful to a wide range of readers, including scholars of Perkins, English Puritanism, and Elizabethan England; and theologians, pastors, and laity alike.

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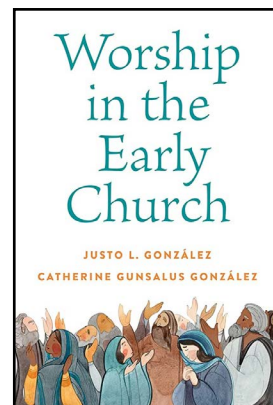
Justo L. González and Catherine Gunsalus González. *Worship in the Early Church*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2022. 281 pp. £32.00/\$35.00.

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Very many readers of this journal are familiar with Justo González, well known as the author of the two-volume *The Story of Christianity*, revised ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2010), a companion *History of Christian Thought*, revised ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), and many other titles. His spouse, Catherine, is known in her own right as a church historian with a strong interest in the field of homiletics; one of her recent titles was *Difficult Texts: A Preaching Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005).

In *Worship in the Early Church*, this accomplished duo examines the worship and practices of the early Christians, a subject that receives basic but non-detailed treatment in *The Story of Christianity*. Justo González’s earlier work emphasized the great divide between the church’s worship pre- and post-Constantine. But now, in this new volume, the husband-wife team shed interesting light on additional factors. For example, they consider Christianity’s original indebtedness to Judaism in the first century, which was displaced as the church oriented itself more and more to the Gentiles of the Roman world. They also allude (as earlier) to the consequences of Constantine’s policies of toleration, and they extend their treatment further with a discussion of what the barbarian invasions meant for the worship of the church.

It is clear that ‘team González’ (one cannot discern which of the two historians contributed to any particular chapter) wrote with a sense of urgency. In the mainline churches with which they identify, they are confronted with a neglect of heritage and theology which allows divine worship to become a kind of “blank canvas” on which a bewildering range of actions and activities are now designated “worship.” They write not as traditionalists but as advocates of the heritage of Christian antiquity. It becomes more and more clear as one reads that they believe that fresh attention to the original Jewish and early Christian rhythms of worship will restore the absent “perpendicular,” which is increasingly difficult to locate in their churches. Evangelical Protestants will identify with the anxiety shown by these





writers, though the contributing reasons for evangelical concerns are not strictly identical to those that spur the authors.

This reviewer found the approach taken to be interesting. I had missed many of the clues left across the New Testament about the initial Christian indebtedness to practices associated with the temple and synagogue. This is the background, for instance, of references to stated hours for prayer in the account Luke provides regarding the teaching ministry of the Apostles in the temple precincts (Acts 5:21) and the vision Peter had of a sheet full of animals (Acts 10) (p. 39). There is a helpful investigation of “godfearers” and “proselytes” (e.g., Acts 13:16); these were terms applied initially to Gentiles who hovered on the perimeter of the Jewish synagogue. The large-scale recruiting of these into the young church became a major tension point between the synagogue and the church. *Worship in the Early Church* is also helpful in its explanation of the way in which the post-100 AD church (the point after which this earlier Jewish influence declined) extended the catechetical period prior to baptism and reception into the church. This extension was a reflection of the pagan (rather than Jewish) past of converts and of the great danger of their apostatizing under Roman persecution (p. 129–30). The best parts of this book have to do with the era of the church up to 312 AD.

But the question arises: “How truly useful is this volume, and how much of it is new?” The reviewer’s strong impression is that what we find here is extensively an expansion of what we can already find in the first volume of *The Story of Christianity*. There is an elaboration on earlier themes, to be sure. But this is not exactly engaging material. *Worship in the Early Church* lacks all illustrations (which were present in the earlier volumes). Apart from adequate in-text references to Patristic literature, this volume lacks any documentation, footnotes, or reference notes; it lacks even a closing bibliography. This is to be regretted because, if anything, the book abounds with judgments and verdicts about the often-unwise course followed in the church’s first five centuries. These judgments are, not infrequently, open to question. This is not adequate. Justo González’s recent *A Brief History of Sunday: From the New Testament to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), a smaller book than this, came with both end-notes and a list of suggested readings.

Here then, is an interesting and useful book from a formidable team. The writers work from a stance supportive of early orthodox belief and practice. But it is a book whose usefulness could have been far greater if important features had been included.

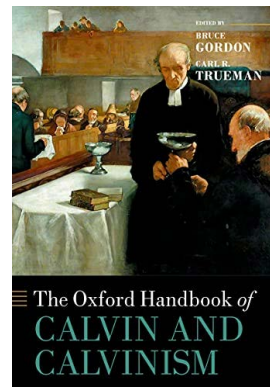
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Bruce Gordon and Carl Trueman, eds. *The Oxford Handbook to Calvin and Calvinism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 720 pp. \$110.00/\$145.00.

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In 1948, the distinguished Calvin scholar, John T. McNeill, composed a survey of recent Calvin research. Entitled “Thirty Years of Calvin Study” (*Church History* 17.3: 207–40), it was massive in its scale, filling more than thirty pages. McNeill was attempting to locate what significant study of Calvin and Calvinism had been carried out in both the confusing inter-war years (when many came to question the adequacy of the liberal-modernist Christianity, which had been dominant) and the subsequent years of global war. There was a lot to tabulate! As one looks at McNeill’s survey today, one is struck by its theological inclusivity. Numerous orthodox writers whose names still carry weight are there: Emil Doumergue, August Lange, Adam Hunter, T. H. L. Parker, and the young T. F. Torrance were all there alongside the names of others whom we might consider less trustworthy.



For reasons too complex to be explored in this review, this kind of theological inclusivity became harder to find after 1950. It is not that those of a conservative theological persuasion stopped studying Calvin and Calvinism. Rather, they seemed to operate in a separate theological world. An example of this, still illustrating a high standard of scholarship, was the volume edited by Jacob Hoogstra, *John Calvin: Contemporary Prophet* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1959). The same compartmentalizing trend was demonstrated even more clearly in connection with the Calvin 500 celebrations in 2009. On the whole, conservative Protestants did their celebrating separately. Had they been frozen out, or had they preferred to stay away? Reviewing Bruce Gordon’s fascinating *John Calvin’s Institutes: A Biography* in this journal in 2017 (*Themelios* 47.1, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/review/john-calvins-institutes-of-the-christian-religion-a-biography/>), I noted that in his treatment of the reception history of the *Institutes* in subsequent centuries, Gordon did not show an adequate awareness of the significant role conservative Protestants had played in fostering this theological tradition. This suggested that needed conversations were not happening. But as we will see, this was not the whole story.

In reality, there have been encouraging signs of late. That same Calvin centennial of 2009 demonstrated, in a number of theologically-inclusive collections, that conservative Protestants such as David Bebbington, Paul Helm, A. N. S. Lane, Richard Mueller, Jennifer McNutt, Herman Selderhuis, and Carl Trueman (to name but a few) have all claimed places at the larger Calvin table. Theological conservatives have *never* been utterly absent from these discussions; what was needed was their fuller representation.

All of which brings us to the *Oxford Handbook*. This hefty volume does just what it says on its cover: It “provides scholars and graduate students with compelling new perspectives upon a wide range of subjects.” The inclusivity is there from the start, with Bruce Gordon and Carl Trueman themselves representing the perspectives of the research university and the confessional Protestant world, respectively. They have evidently each used their wide circle of academic contacts to draw in what is extensively a new generation of scholars on Calvin and Calvinism. Since theological conservatives are well represented, it is noteworthy that the older generation of conservative scholars of Calvin and Calvinism referred to above is not generally relied upon in this collection. Trueman, and no doubt also Gordon, have found many scholars younger than themselves to provide the essays that make up this

wide-ranging volume. In addition to their being, on the whole, youthful (there are notable exceptions), we find contributors who are widely international, drawn from a world of global Calvin scholarship which now reaches well beyond the West. We find actual diversity in the constituencies represented by the contributors—women and men, mainline and conservative Protestants, the research university and the confessional theological school. Southeast Asia, Latin America, and West Africa all find representation, as well as the to-be-expected Western Europe and North America.

Of particular significance for this reviewer was the jointly-authored introduction to this volume, in which the editors indicate that it was their desire to draw together a “mildly unusual collection [meant] to broaden the scope of ... thinking on Calvin” (p. 3). They wisely caution against a perspective that “reverence[s] Calvin as the Father of the Reformed faith ... in isolation from his contemporaries and historical circumstances” (p. 4). They wish us to see him as the one “who brought stability and order to the next generation (after Zwingli and Luther) of the Reformation that followed ... the break with Rome” (p. 6). These are words that set out a mildly revisionist agenda. Has the volume succeeded in fulfilling such corrective aims?

This reviewer would answer with a resounding “yes.” It is impossible, in the confines of this review, to say something about each of the thirty-eight topics that follow the thoughtful introduction. The aim here will be to draw attention to genuinely innovative material since many of the chapters represent distillations of research already in print elsewhere. Chapter 2, “Calvin, Calvinism, and Medieval Thought,” provides a thoughtful re-assessment of where the discussion of the Reformation’s relation to scholasticism stands. Author Ueli Zahnd shows that the discussion has moved beyond the critique made by Richard Mueller and others of the older scholarship (represented by neo-orthodox theologians of a half-century ago), which claimed that the Reformation was thwarted by a relapse into medieval scholasticism. A similar re-assessment was provided in chapter 8, “Calvin’s Geneva: An Imperfect School of Christ.” Karen Spierling shows that, despite stereotypes that keep alive the notion that Geneva was monochrome and uniform under Calvin’s leadership, the city—surrounded by Roman Catholic territories—had gates that opened both ways, admitting non-Genevan Roman Catholics on business and allowing Protestant citizens to maintain their commercial interests beyond Protestant territory. Eight chapters in all (9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 20, 21, 22) explore the common relations of England and Scotland (jointly ruled after 1603) with Calvin and Geneva.

Especially timely for the conservative Protestant world is Aza Goudriaan’s chapter 23, which explores the theme of “Seventeenth-Century Calvinism and Early Enlightenment Thought.” Is this reviewer the only person who suspects that our current conservative obsession with Puritans and Reformers from pre-Enlightenment Europe too often entails a dodging of important questions? Goudriaan shows that Calvin was diversely appealed to as the Enlightenment advanced. Since this same constituency has an almost-equal fascination with reprints from early Victorian Britain, Carl Trueman’s “Classical Calvinism and the Problem of Development” (ch. 23) makes for vital reading, as it demonstrates the defined theological “ceilings” under which writers like William Cunningham thought and wrote. Having reached the nineteenth century, it is worth pointing out that the volume offers helpful entries on the relation of Schleiermacher (ch. 27) and Kuyper (ch. 31) to Calvin and his teaching. Karl Barth’s growth of familiarity with Calvin and his writings is insightfully explored in Ryan Glomsrud’s chapter 32.

Not to be ignored are insightful chapters investigating the past and present influence of Calvin’s teaching in Korea, post-1949 China, Brazil, and Ghana (chs. 33–36). In these, one is struck by the penchant Korean Calvinists have had for division (a tendency that surely did not begin in Korea) and

how—in both China and Brazil—Calvinist teaching has served to steady the ship of pre-existing pietistic and Pentecostal movements.

One cannot leave consideration of this *Handbook* without drawing attention to the fine concluding chapter on the current high-visibility Calvinist resurgence within North America. Flynn Cratty's "The New Calvinism" is a model of vigorous research; it shows both a personal familiarity with his subject as well as a utilization of an impressive range of sources.

Are there weaknesses in the *Handbook*? Assuredly. But let us dwell on the positive. Having also read and reviewed the rather comparable and similarly-priced *Calvin in Context*, edited by Ward Holder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), this *Handbook* has the edge because of (1) the range of topics explored, (2) the quality of chapter-end bibliographies provided, and (3) its eagerness to extend its thematic explorations into our own day and time.

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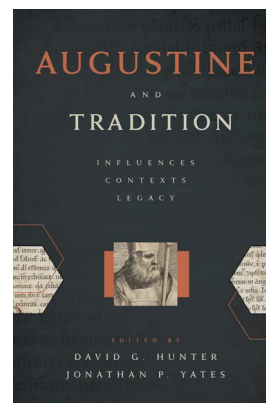
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David G. Hunter and Jonathan P. Yates, eds. *Augustine and Tradition: Influences, Contexts, Legacy: Essays in Honor of J. Patout Burns*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021. xix + 481 pp. £64.99/\$80.00.

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This collaborative work, exploring primarily the relationship of Augustine to the Christian and Pagan tradition that he would have known and studied, comes highly recommended by specialists in Augustine studies and even received the first-place book award in Theology from the Catholic Media Association. It lives up to the hype. This book is essential reading for anyone who wishes to study Augustine in any depth. The editors, Hunter and Yates, selected 15 excellent essays placed into 4 main sections: (1) Augustine and the North African Tradition, (2) Augustine and the Philosophical and Literary Tradition, (3) Augustine and the Greek Patristic Tradition, and (4) Augustine and His Latin Contemporaries/Successors. The book also contains an extensive and helpful bibliography, and indexes of authors, subjects, and both scriptural and ancient sources used. All these features make this book a helpful tool for the student of Augustine. In what follows, I provide an overview of each section, along with some evaluation. The book opens with a short biography of J. Patout Burns, for whom this book was written, who is a specialist in Augustinian and North African theology.

In the first section, looking at Augustine's interaction with North African Christianity, we find chapters that discuss Augustine's reading of Genesis, his interaction with the tradition of liturgical readings in North Africa, his approach to Tertullian, his use of North African martyrology, and his interaction with Optatus of Milevis. The second section, devoted to Augustine's use of the philosophers and poets of the Greco-Roman world, includes essays considering his interaction with the Platonists in general, Porphyry in particular, Classical ethics, and classical Latin literature. There are two studies in the third section, which address Augustine's interaction Origen and his use of the Cappadocians. In the fourth and final section, we find essays on Augustine's engagement with his contemporaries Marius



Victorinus, Ambrose, and Ambrosiaster, and a study of the use of Augustine in the 9th century debate on Predestination.

When studying authors of the past, or from entirely different cultures, we often have trouble fully understanding them because we are unaware of key influences in their lives, whether they be church practices of the time, cultural or social norms, or lesser-known scholars who have influenced them in various ways. This book does an excellent job of awakening the reader to this reality in relationship to Augustine. We are reminded about just how much our approaches to doctrinal issues can be shaped by circumstances and people in our lives. This is not to suggest that Augustine's doctrine is situationally or culturally relative, but that the way in which he emphasizes certain truths, in certain circumstances, often has to do with the situations he finds himself in, whether it be refuting a heretic or preaching a homily. This book reminds us that we are in a living tradition in which important truths must be defended and articulated in the face of new challenges.

In light of current discussions within Protestant circles concerning Christian Platonism, John Peter Kenney's article on the subject will be of particular interest. He shows how deep and important the influence of Neo-Platonist thought was on Augustine's spiritual trajectory, while also arguing that Augustine rejected many of the fundamental claims of the Neo-Platonists—notably, that it is possible to ascend to the contemplation of the divine without Christ. Therefore, Kenney argues that it is best not to call Augustine a Christian Platonist. Kenney is certainly right that Augustine rejected many of the key teachings of Platonism. However, due to his use of the central metaphysical, epistemological, and moral teachings of Platonism in his articulation and defense of Christian doctrine, it still seems appropriate to refer to him as a Platonist. Also, of interest on this issue are the articles by James Wetzel and Dennis Trout. Wetzel argues that Augustine so challenged classical ethics that he can be thought of as bringing it to an end. Trout discusses Augustine's general interaction and appreciation of classical literature. These articles, together, help to temper our understanding of Augustine's interaction with classical thought in general, teaching us to be critical readers of pagan writings, recovering the gold and rejecting the pyrite.

In conclusion, this book presents us with a veritable feast for anyone interested in the exercise of Christian theology, in the development of important doctrines, or, in the study of Augustine and Patristic theology. This book provides us with the most up-to-date research on Augustine's engagement with the Christian and pagan tradition of his time, teaches us how to read Augustine better, and in so doing, teaches us to read tradition better. We get a better understanding of how the early church fathers engaged each other and the pagan literary and philosophical culture which surrounded them. This book teaches us to be careful about overly dogmatic statements about, for example, Augustine's "Platonism" or his use of "classical literature." As we see Augustine's engagement with his predecessors and contemporaries, we learn how to better engage our own predecessors (including Augustine) and contemporaries. This book is not just an exercise in historical theology (which is important *per se*), it is an exercise in theology: engaging in the theological enterprise today in conversation with the great theologians of the past.

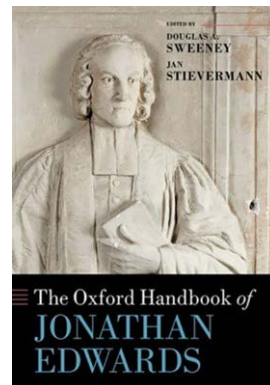
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Douglas A. Sweeney and Jan Stievermann, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Jonathan Edwards*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. xix + 596 pp. £110.00/\$145.00.

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*The Oxford Handbook of Jonathan Edwards* is one of the newest additions to Oxford University Press's fine handbook series. For those unfamiliar with this line, their stated goal is to collect some of the best "state of the art" scholarly essays on a subject. *The Oxford Handbook of Jonathan Edwards* fits this description well. This being the case, Edwards enthusiasts should understand what this book is *not*, namely a general introduction or overview of Edwards's thought and work. There are many other fine books that do this: *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards*, edited by Stephen J. Stein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); or *Jonathan Edwards: An Introduction to His Thought*, edited by Oliver D. Crisp and Kyle C. Strobel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018); or *A Reader's Guide to the Major Writings of Jonathan Edwards*, edited by Nathan A. Finn and Jeremy M. Kimble (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017). In contrast, *The Oxford Handbook of Jonathan Edwards* is more academic in nature. Yet, it is not overly technical. Thus non-academic, Edwards aficionados could enjoy and benefit from this work as well.



Editors Douglas Sweeney, founding director of the Jonathan Edwards Center (formerly) at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and Jan Stievermann, current director of a same-named center at the University of Heidelberg, Germany, are both well-established scholars in Edwards and early American Christianity. Sweeney and Stievermann have assembled an excellent array of well-known and up-and-coming Edwards academics for this volume.

It is difficult for a book review to do justice to any large, edited collection of essays. In such books, there are often too many different essays to cover well, and it is rarely the case that someone will read such a book from cover to cover. Therefore, I briefly review this volume in broad sections, while highlighting a couple of individual essays.

*The Oxford Handbook of Jonathan Edwards* categorizes its various essays into helpfully themed sections. Part 1 is on Edwards's backgrounds, sources, and contexts. Part 2 is by far the largest section—over 250 pages, twice the length of any other section in the book—and is entitled "Edwards's Intellectual Labors," a collection of essays on Edwards's understanding of various theological and philosophical topics. Part 3 is on Edwards's religious and social practices. Part 4 is a collection of essays on Edwards's global reception.

Part 1 contains primarily historical content. Essays in this section treat Edwards's family life, his pastoral ministry, and also various historical and ecclesiastical contexts that help to make sense of Edwards's life and ministry. A couple of essays also address the history of the revivals and the First Great Awakening in relation to Edwards, as well as the intellectual history of Edwards's life.

As already stated, Part 2 makes up the lion's share of the book. This is unsurprising since Edwards's sermons and treatises have long been a central focus in studying Edwards. His Calvinist orthodoxy and theological originality, as well as his philosophical precision, are well-known, and there is still much to be gleaned from Edwards's insightful works. Most of the essays here are topically categorized by standard theological divisions, like Edwards's understanding of the Trinity, the person of Christ, the Holy Spirit, revelation, creation, etc. But there are also essays on other more philosophically oriented

topics. (Though, as Mark Noll famously coined, these are still “God-entranced” topics for Edwards.) Some included topics are Edwards’s ethics, his aesthetics, and his understanding of the sciences.

Essays in part 3 focus on Edwards’s personal devotional life, his understanding of biblical exegesis, and his approach to writing and preaching sermons. But this section also includes broader social topics, including essays on Edwards’s understanding of education, missions, politics, and economics. One essay worth noting is historian John Saillant’s “Edwards’s Ministry to the Bound and Enslaved” (ch. 28). It is usually emphasized in our day and age (often resoundingly) that Edwards was a slave owner—a very sad historical fact. But Saillant’s essay argues that Edwards’s experience among the Stockbridge Indians, though later in his life, probably led him to typological interpretations of certain sections of the Bible that would eventually be used by others to inform North American abolitionism. Saillant’s argument does not attempt to excuse Edwards’s complicity in slavery or in perpetuating racial inequality, but it does convincingly show that Edwards’s Christian convictions show some growing inner struggles with these particular injustices in his day.

Part 4 is a very interesting section with essays about Edwards’s reception in various places across the globe, including his American literary reception. Adriaan Neele’s essay on the African reception of Edwards also reveals some of the complicated subtleties of Edwards on slavery and racial inequality (ch. 35). The last essay is by Douglas Sweeney, addressing the topic of contemporary Edwards studies (ch. 37). Sweeney gives a clear overview of recent history on the topic and suggests future avenues of study.

*The Oxford Handbook of Jonathan Edwards* is a superb addition to the ongoing academic research on Edwards, with various sections that will appeal to non-academics as well. As someone with a Reformed Christian perspective, I also am one of those who “revel(s) in the current resurgence of Edwards studies” (p. 493). But, as should be expected, this volume is more of an even-handed and critical scholarly volume. As an academic philosopher, I found several articles of great interest and use for my own studies in Edwards, though I was less interested in the essays more focused on historical concerns. In sum, I think *The Oxford Handbook of Jonathan Edwards* is an excellent academic volume with a diverse array of high-level articles for various interests. It is a worthy contribution to Edwards studies.

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Yudha Thianto. *An Explorer's Guide to John Calvin*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022. x + 240 pp. £18.28/\$22.00.

In *An Explorer's Guide to John Calvin*, Yudha Thianto, professor of History of Christianity and Reformed Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, sets out to introduce readers, with little or no prior knowledge, to Calvin as “a person, a pastor, and a Reformer,” helping the reader understand his main theological teachings as explicated in the 1559 edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (p. 5). Thianto explicitly focuses on the *Institutes* because it provides a manageable scope for a primer.

The book is divided into two main parts, Part 1 focuses on Calvin, the person, and Part 2 provides an overview of Calvin's teaching in the *Institutes*. Thianto begins with a chapter explaining why Calvin and his teaching are worthy of contemporary study, namely because of his work as a biblical theologian and his impact on the global church through the past 500 years.

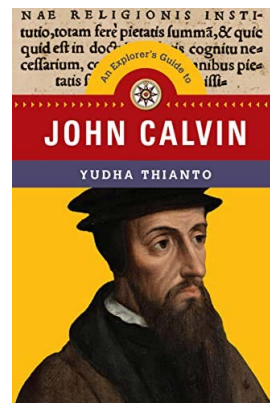
In chapter 2, Thianto provides a brief but helpful overview of Calvin's life. He primarily follows Theodore Beza's biographical sketch, but he also adds many insights not included in Beza's account. In the process, Thianto highlights Calvin as a normal human being who was shaped by a variety of mentors and who experienced real challenges and sorrows, including the death of his only son at one month old and the death of his wife a few years later. Thianto also provides a helpful introduction to the political and civic setting of Geneva, repeatedly reminding the reader that Calvin was not an autocrat but was fulfilling his invited role in Geneva. Thianto also introduces a variety of controversies that Calvin faced in Geneva, especially detailing Michael Servetus's controversial execution and pointing out that the city council in Geneva, not Calvin, was responsible for the execution.

In chapter 3, Thianto briefly addresses several of the common questions that arise regarding Calvin and his legacy. These include queries about predestination, the origins of TULIP, the perception of Calvin as a dour autocrat, Calvinism's link to colonialism, and Calvin's teaching on human nature, economic exchange, the relationship of church and state, and other religions.

In chapter 4, Thianto reminds the reader that “Calvin was a pastor first and a theologian second.” Accordingly, his greatest hope was to provide God's people with “spiritual nourishment and guidance” (p. 82). Calvin also valued the preaching of the word of God, the right administration of the sacraments, pastoral care, catechesis, congregational singing (in one's mother tongue), and preparing ministers to be good pastors. In one of the most insightful sections of the book, Thianto provides a brief glimpse into the ways that Calvin corresponded as a pastor through letters, demonstrating a deep love for people, empathy, and a desire to edify the church.

In chapter 5, as he transitions to Part 2 of the book, “A Guide to the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*,” Thianto provides a brief overview of the various editions of the *Institutes* from 1536 to 1560, illuminating the fact that the core of the mature 1559 version was included from the 1536 edition onward and pointing out that much of the added material was included as a result of Calvin's debates with critics.

In chapters 6–9, Thianto surveys each of the four books of the *Institutes*. His stated goal is to help the reader “follow [Calvin's] logic and increase [the reader's] understanding of the Christian faith broadly as well as the Reformed tradition more specifically” (p. 120). Diverging from his approach in





Part 1, Thianto here provides little personal commentary on Calvin's teaching, instead simply seeking to condense Calvin's 2,000 compact pages of teaching into 100 pages. These chapters draw attention to various themes of Calvin's teaching, including God's unmerited grace, all theology as Trinitarian, and the work of the Holy Spirit. Inevitably, Thianto has been forced to leave out a number of valuable insights or nuances that one reading the *Institutes* would find for themselves, but in my opinion, Thianto highlights Calvin's central themes in an effective manner. In short, he summarizes the *Institutes* in alignment with his understanding of Calvin's intent in writing them, to help "his readers to know and understand the truth of the gospel and what it means for their lives" (p. 111).

Throughout the book, Thianto proves himself a good reader of Calvin, who knows Calvin's theology well and summarizes it succinctly and effectively. Although his open admiration of Calvin might at times inhibit harsh critique, it also helps the reader approach Calvin charitably and with an openness that foregoes quick judgments or off-hand dismissal of Calvin's teaching as irrelevant.

As one might expect in an overview, one weakness of the book is that Thianto's descriptions lack precision at times. For example, in discussing Calvin's teaching on sin in Book 2, Thianto states that "all human nature is empty of all the goodness that God has created in us." A few sentences later, he says more carefully that "sin affects all aspects of our nature and being" (p. 147). The second is a more accurate depiction of Calvin's teaching on the nefarious effects of sin that extend to shatter and corrupt every bit of human existence without removing the goodness of God's image that humanity bears. Similar comments could be made regarding Thianto's description of Calvin's teaching on creation in six days, the emphasis on the individual (instead of communal) nature of the sacraments, and Christ's descent into hell. An interested reader of Calvin will find clarification and correction in Calvin's writings themselves.

In sum, Thianto's volume is a well-written, pastoral, accessible, and fair introduction to the teaching of John Calvin, particularly in the *Institutes*. Although nothing compares to the feast of reading Calvin's teaching itself, this book can serve as a great preparation for the meal!

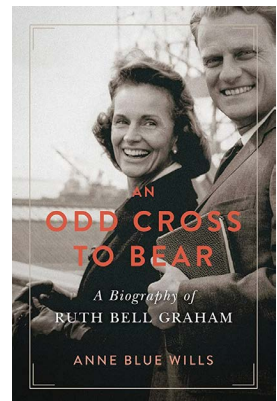
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Anne Blue Wills. *An Odd Cross to Bear: A Biography of Ruth Bell Graham*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022. 273 pp. £20.53/\$24.99.

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In her biography *Ruth, a Portrait: The Story of Ruth Bell Graham*, author and family friend Patricia Cornwell shares Ruth's words about the tension of her fame: "It's an odd kind of cross to bear. Yet those who have not been through it would consider it some kind of glory" (p. 133). Anne Blue Wills draws on this quote as the title for her new biography on the well-known wife of evangelist Billy Graham, seeking to flesh out her picture from the lens of an academic interested in gender issues. This work comes on the heels of her former professor Grant Wacker's biography *One Soul at a Time: The Story of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019). As a student, Wills was encouraged by Wacker to write a gender perspective conference paper on Billy Graham



and his relationship with Ruth. Her biography, which emerges out of that essay, argues that as an ultrafeminine, ultracapable woman, Ruth helped to strengthen her husband's manly image. Ruth Bell Graham, the wife of the "people's pastor" Billy Graham for more than 60 years, has long been revered by white evangelical women. This new biography presents her as the epitome of the twentieth-century white evangelical woman with all of its nuances and complexities.

Anne Blue Wills (PhD, Duke University) is professor and the chair of religious studies at Davidson College and an expert in American religion, culture, and 19th-century women's religious activism. In her article published in *Fides et historia* in 2017, "Heroes, Women, Wives: Writing other Lives," she reflects on Ruth Graham as a case study for scholars writing women's history. She also co-edited *Billy Graham: American Pilgrim*, published by Oxford University Press (2017), making her well-suited to give a more nuanced, feminist perspective on the significant evangelical woman, Ruth Bell Graham.

This well-researched biography, which relies heavily on Ruth's published poetry, articles, TV appearances, and Nelson Bell's correspondence, took Wills ten years to write. While she did not have access, like Cornwell, to Graham's letters and journals, she interviewed two of Graham's five children, Gigi and Bunny. In addition, she painstakingly researched Ruth's life from her childhood in China as the daughter of Southern Presbyterian missionary parents to her burial next to her husband on the grounds of the Billy Graham Library in Charlotte, North Carolina. As she explains in her "Note on Sources," Wills also makes use of feminist and gender research, such as Margaret Lamberts Bendroth's *Fundamentalism and Gender: 1875 to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). In eight chapters, she paints a picture of Ruth as a woman who "devised her own ethic of Christian womanhood, characterized by 'adjusting' to Bill." She effectively argues, "in doing so, she helped bring his preaching to the world" (p. 8). In a loosely chronological narrative, Wills covers the various periods of Graham's life: her experience as a missionary daughter and student years at Wheaton College (chs. 1–2), her marriage and early years of ministry with Billy (ch. 3), her role as homemaker and Christian mother (chs. 4–5), and her later decades, devoted to writing and caring for prodigals such as former televangelist Jim Bakker (chs. 6–8).

In her critical yet appreciative examination of Ruth's life, Wills asserts that Ruth was more than Billy Graham's wife. She was a complicated woman who spurned second-wave feminism while still maintaining her independence; who supported the death penalty while befriending an inmate on death row; who shunned the limelight and fiercely protected her family while publicly supporting her husband's successful career as an evangelist. Wills establishes a nuanced picture of Ruth as having achieved a balance of gratitude and acceptance, submission and strength. At times this work focuses on details rather than on Ruth herself, such as the log cabin in Montreat, North Carolina, or her children's marriages—understandable divergences, given that the author did not have access to Ruth herself or her personal writings. The author holds Ruth Bell Graham in high regard without making her out to be a flawless hero, as biographers often do. For instance, Wills points out how Graham was a woman of her context and generation in terms of perspectives on race and white privilege, her law-and-order view of the world, and her not taking an active public stand for women. Yet, the author still recognizes Ruth's value in accomplishing what she most famously set out to do—evangelize the world for Jesus Christ. Not only would there have been no Billy without Ruth, according to Wills, but evangelical women would not have had the powerful example of a woman who chose to "embrace the role as background player" (p. 146).

The feminist historian aptly argues that for better or for worse, Ruth used her agency to partner with her husband. This book is well-suited for those interested in American evangelicalism, Billy and Ruth Graham, Ruth's poetry, and the role women have played in American evangelical culture. For someone looking for an intimate look into Ruth and Billy's relationship or a biographical novel about Ruth, this may not be the best choice, as the author situates this work in the academic gender studies category of biographies.

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## — SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY —

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Mark James Edwards. *Christ Is Time: The Gospel according to Karl Barth (and the Red Hot Chili Peppers)*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022. xxii + 185 pp. £25.00/\$28.00.

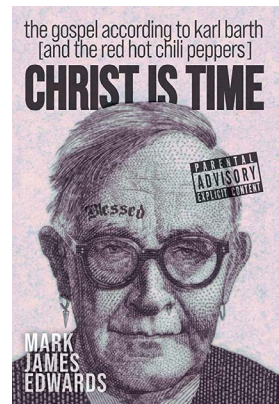
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Rarely, one finds books on Barth's theology that are deep, lighthearted, and readable. One exception is Mark James Edwards's *Christ is Time*, which displays a rare combination of creativity, joviality, and academic seriousness. *Christ is Time* contains twelve chapters and an appendix, "The Trinity and Election Debate," based on a seminar held at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2012.

The first chapter discusses the self-giving God. Edwards expounds Barth's view of the Trinity as the God who is relational by nature. God chooses to "give Himself away" out of divine love— a revolutionary act given the qualitative difference between the Trinity and humanity. Nonetheless, God has invited humans as covenant partners in Jesus Christ. Edwards juxtaposes this Barthian assertion with the Red Hot Chili Peppers' song, "Give It Away." This chapter is a good partner while reading *CD II/1* §25, especially if readers want to understand "objectivity," a repeated word in §25.

In chapter 2, Edwards focuses on God's eternity by using Aquinas and Barth as interlocutors. Readers are introduced to Barth's theology of time: God's eternality is before time (pre-temporal), above time (supra-temporal), and after time (post-temporal). Chapter 3 concentrates on what revelation is. Humans can only know God in His revelation. But God's disclosure is a verb, an event, not a list of propositions or statements. God is the *Wholly Other* who cannot be at human disposal.

In chapter 4, Edwards presents some models of creation in the thoughts of Plato (creation by formation), Meister Eckhart (creation by emanation), and Augustine (*creatio ex nihilo*). Since this is a book about Barth's theology, one would expect Edwards to elaborate on Barth's own account of creation. Surprisingly, this is not the case; the author limits it to include a block quote from *CD II/1*, p. 648. Edwards discusses the doctrine of sin in chapter 5. Readers will encounter the perspectives of some theologians such as Calvin, James Cone, Augustine, and also Paul's account in the book of Romans. Augustine's sin as hereditary, Schleiermacher and the social transmission of sin, and Barth's ontological notion of sin, may help readers as they reflect on the universality of sin and death.



Christology and anthropology are the focus of chapter 6, which seems to echo a typical Barthian move. Instead of understanding the nature of human beings by defining what it means to be human, Edwards directs us first to Jesus as the “truth about humanity” (p. 72). Barth’s Christology teaches us not to start from a general category of humanity and then ascribe that to the humanity of Christ. Instead, we should begin from the particular to the general. And this particular is Jesus Christ. We do not understand what humanity is by starting from our perspective but by allowing Jesus to explain and define what it means to be human. Edwards’s explanation of humanity here is excellent and it may capture the attention of some Asian thinkers. For example, Edwards’s “a kind of being-with-and-for-others” is captured as “kapwa” (self in the others) in Filipino culture.

Chapters 7 and 8 discuss justification and ecclesiology. Concerning the former, readers will meet Aquinas, Calvin, and Barth. This chapter may encourage readers to go to Barth’s view of election in his *Church Dogmatics*. Edwards explicates Barth’s view of the church as a witness to Christ, which is never called to coerce and control others. Barth’s cautionary warning is a reminder of the negative effects of a triumphalist attitude when Christianity engages in dialogue with other religions.

Related to ecclesiology is the Lord’s Supper, which Edwards treats next. He uses it to present a brief theological account of the sacrament by using food as an analogy. Again, under Barth’s influence, Edwards writes, “Even salad becomes witness. This means that we can see food, in the here and now, as a concrete real presence of the grace that is complete in Jesus Christ and who is Himself really present ‘wherever two or three gather in my name’” (p. 119). Chapter 10 looks at the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the subject of ethics. We read how Barth inspired Bonhoeffer to risk his life by reflecting on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

At last, Edwards brings readers to an interesting discussion about time. Drawing on Barth, readers can learn that time is not past, present, and future, but Christ. This does not mean that created time is Christ per se, but rather time is *about* the God who meets the world face-to-face through Jesus Christ. Edwards’s book title, *Christ Is Time*, derives from Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*: “the presence of Jesus Christ is God’s time for us” (CD I/2, p. 45). Edwards concludes with a deliberation on the possibility of pop culture “becoming” a witness to Christ.

Edwards gifts us with some of Barth’s rich theology with clarity and depth. Using pop culture to explicate matters about life, humanity, time, sacraments, the Trinity, and election is an interesting way of theologizing. I argue that this book is a good supplementary reading for those interested in the intersection between theology and culture. Readers who are not acquainted with the debate between traditionalist and revisionist interpreters of Barth will also benefit from the appendix.

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R. B. Jamieson and Tyler R. Wittman. *Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022. xxvi + 289 pp. £20.99/\$29.99.

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Jamieson, associate pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, and Tyler Wittman, assistant professor of theology at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, present one of the clearest expositions of theological exegesis to date. Jamieson, writes the introduction and the last four chapters of part two, while Wittman is the author of the first six chapters and the conclusion. Part 1 gives attention to biblical reasoning and part two establishes the Christological and Trinitarian rules for exegesis.

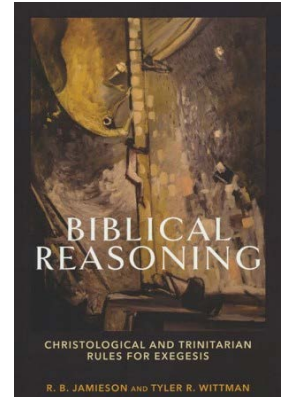
Jamieson states that the goal of this book is “to assemble a toolkit for biblical reasoning” (p. xvii). Hence, “the body of the book articulates a set of theological principles and their corresponding exegetical rules” (p. xx). The focus is on the Trinity and Christology for two reasons: (1) these two foci lie at the heart of the gospel, and (2) the “breach between theology and exegesis” (p. xxi) is most keenly perceived when considering these two foci.

Drawing from his doctoral supervisor John Webster, Wittman notes that “biblical reasoning” denotes two modes of reasoning: “exegetical and dogmatic” (p. xviii). Exegetical reasoning gives attention to the contours of the biblical text, whereas dogmatic reasoning “attends to the theological claims of the text” (p. xviii). He describes the relationship between these forms of reasoning as an exchange whereby each aspect is made more complete by the other. In other words, “theology thinks from Scripture, with Scripture, and to Scripture” (p. xviii).

The first three chapters explore the end, context, and source/practice of biblical reasoning, respectively. Wittman rightly notes that the goal of biblical reasoning, which is at the same time the goal of Scripture, is “the vision of Christ’s glory, and therein eternal life” (p. 4). In his discussion of Scripture as the source of said reasoning, Wittman helpfully notes two essential exegetical rules: (1) the analogy of faith, i.e., reading “Scripture as a unity, interpreting its parts in light of the whole” (p. 41), and (2) reading “Scripture in such a way that you learn how its various discourses both form and presuppose a larger theological vision” (p. 41).

In chapters 4–6, Wittman draws theological principles and exegetical rules from the theological foundation of God’s attributes and triune nature. In chapters 7–8, Jamieson explores the relevance of the full humanity and divinity of Christ for understanding Scripture. Chapter 9 argues for the importance of the *taxis* or ordering of the three persons of the Trinity for biblical reasoning and chapter 10 applies the ten exegetical rules to John 5:17–30.

Given the stellar quality of this book, a few highlights should suffice to demonstrate its usefulness. Wittman helpfully discusses the role of faith as a form of contemplative sight through which we perceive God. He beautifully states, “Contemplation is a spiritual perception of Scripture’s deepest truths relating to Christ’s glory, in a manner that stirs up delight and conforms us to Christ” (p. 21). He later argues that the unity of Scripture found in both testaments asserts a “pressure to acknowledge” God speaking to and thus teaching us (p. 55, drawing from C. Kevin Rowe). In discussing the nature of Scripture, he walks the reader through the “God-fittingness rule” (p. 65), i.e., language about God ought to conform to what is worthy of God when one considers God’s aseity and holiness as the creator of everything. Using statements that imply a change occurring in God (e.g., Jer. 18:1–11; Hos 11:8–9), he concludes, based on





this rule, that these texts describe God responding to changing human attitudes or circumstances, not changing who he is. Moreover, drawing from Psalm 110 and 1 Corinthians 8:4–6, Wittman persuasively argues that God speaks “of himself in two ways ... as God is one, and ... as God is three” (p. 105). It is clear then from these four examples that the coupling of exegetical and dogmatic reasoning is necessary for sound biblical reasoning.

This book is truly a breath of fresh air. The authors are not afraid to take a traditional approach to who God is by affirming divine impassibility, the ontological (and thus economic) Trinity, and the person of Christ, since they show how these doctrines support and are true to a sound reading of Scripture. Furthermore, they write clearly about complex theological concepts, and it is evident that their aim with this book is to honor God and magnify Christ in their reading of Scripture and to encourage their readers to do the same.

The sophistication and thoroughness of the authors’ argumentation makes clear that theology is not something irrelevant to the study of the biblical text, nor can Scripture be truly understood and applied by reading it in a neutral, theologically disinterested manner. The authors have succeeded in building a bridge between the disciplines of dogmatic theology and exegesis and that alone makes this book worth consulting. Additionally, *Biblical Reasoning* will serve as an excellent refresher for the busy pastor or student as they seek to read Scripture in a manner that gives due honor to the dual mysteries of the Trinity and the person of Christ.

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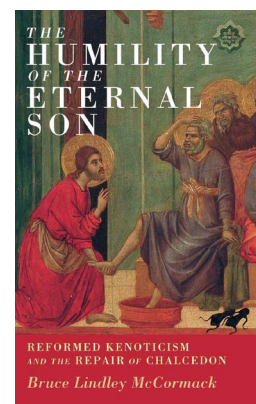
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Bruce Lindley McCormack. *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon*. Current Issues in Theology 18. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. xi + 316 pp. £29.99/\$39.99.

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McCormack’s book is the first in a trilogy whose goal is to ‘construct a personal ontology of the triune God that takes as its starting point the act of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ’ (p. 6). His work makes two claims: (1) ‘the eternal Son has an *essential* relation to the personal life of Jesus’ and (2) ‘the nature of that relation is best understood in terms of “ontological receptivity”’ (p. 7, original emphasis).

The book unfolds in three parts according to critical history, biblical material, and constructive theology (p. 20). Part 1 provides a ‘Critical History of Kenotic Christologies and Their Antecedents’. This critical history covers ancient Christologies and nineteenth and twentieth-century kenotic theories (i.e., the ‘self-emptying’ of the Son of God). It clarifies the modern Christological tradition to which McCormack’s Christological construction belongs and identifies Christologies from which this construction departs (p. 195). Part 2, on ‘Returning to Scripture’, seeks to provide a ‘biblically funded picture of the Self-humiliating God’ (p. 199). Part 3 is all about the repair of Chalcedon by way of McCormack’s ‘Reformed Version of Kenotic Christology’.



By way of commendation, McCormack's book challenges one to think carefully about what metaphysical ideas are biblically appropriate for describing the unity of Christ's person. McCormack reminds us that ontological reflection about this unity cannot ignore Chalcedon's contribution, even if one wishes to reconstruct Chalcedon's Christology.

In what follows, this review focuses on five points of analysis. First, the reader needs more engagement with both primary and secondary literature in several areas. McCormack leapfrogs much of medieval and early modern Chalcedonian accounts. If the claim of the book is to offer a repair of Chalcedon, then surely this invites further analysis of post-Chalcedonian Christology. Indeed, McCormack perceives that Chalcedonian orthodoxy needs to be repaired because it presents a logical aporia: human properties can and cannot be predicated of the Logos (pp. 31, 58, 63). It would be helpful if this claim was discussed in relation to scholarship on scholastic treatments of the incarnation (e.g., Richard Cross). Theologians have variously understood the person-nature distinction in the metaphysics of the incarnation. Here, McCormack ought to have defined more clearly the categories of person and nature as represented by Chalcedonian expositors.

Second, McCormack's discussion of Reformed Christology is thin: he invokes John Calvin, Francis Turretin, and John Owen in particular as representatives of Reformed Christology (pp. 250–51). Extending this discussion would help to distinguish clearly 'essential commitments' from 'non-essential commitments' of Reformed Christology. One is not persuaded that McCormack's reconstruction of Chalcedon does not 'violate the fundamental commitments of classical Reformed Christology' when he rejects the doctrine of divine simplicity (pp. 252, 254–55).

Third, McCormack's exegesis of Philippians 2:6–8 requires extended analysis. He understands *kenosis* as an expression of equality with God because equality with God 'continues' in the incarnation (p. 210). True, as McCormack notices, equality with God 'continues' and a parallel exists between the 'form of God' and 'equality with God'. But if *kenosis* expresses 'equality with God', why does Paul say in v. 6 that Christ did not take advantage of that equality? McCormack informs us that Christ 'did not regard what was his by nature (equality with God) as something to be used for his own advantage', but argues that Christ expressed that equality with God in the 'act of taking the form of a slave' (pp. 209–10). Of course, McCormack foregrounds the single Christological subject in his divine-human unity, but what precisely does 'equality with God' mean?

Fourth, according to McCormack, *kenosis* as 'ontological receptivity' is the 'personal property' of the Son; it is what establishes the identity of the Son in eternity (pp. 19, 260–61). How this logically squares with the Father's generation of the Son needs extended clarification. He speculates that 'self-emptying' could be 'contained in the Son's eternal (equally necessary) response to his eternal generation by the Father' (p. 211). This likely means that the Son's mission of humiliation is rooted in eternal generation (p. 279). But does all this imply that the Son's identity is not established in the Father's generation but in the Son's relation to the 'human Jesus'? Is the Son generated in order to be personally constituted in relation to the 'human Jesus'? Does the Father generate a 'composite person' (p. 264)? What exactly is eternal generation? And does this also imply that creation is necessary? Clarity on the Father-Son relationship is needed here.

Fifth, granted that McCormack rejects the idea of inequality in God, his account warrants reflection on how the eternal obedience of the Son squares with divine unity (pp. 19, 279). McCormack writes: 'Clearly, the Son is in some sense subordinate to the Father—not just in time but in himself' (p. 288). The word 'clearly' only makes sense within McCormack's Christology. And 'in some sense' is somewhat

vague: what precisely is this subordination in the context of divine unity and co-equality? Discussion of 'equality with God' would also serve to explain this.

For many of the points that I have raised, we must await McCormack's next volume on his reconstructed doctrine of God. Agree or disagree, McCormack's work asks the right questions and will doubtless be an important interlocutor for research on modern Christology.

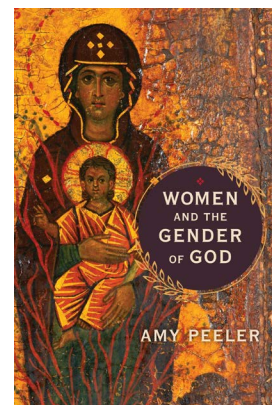
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Amy Peeler. *Women and the Gender of God*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022. 286 pp. £20.76/ \$24.99.

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Amy Peeler, associate professor of New Testament at Wheaton College, has written a book with an ostensibly obvious thesis: "God does indeed value women" (p. 7). This thesis, which she calls "audacious," has a lurking theme present throughout the book that is intended to strengthen its point: God is not male. To understand the impetus for Peeler's book, we refer to the Conclusion, where she relates a story about her son's eight-year-old birthday party. When one of the male attendees expressed he likes boys better than girls, Peeler asked him why. The child's response? "Because God is a boy." As Peeler puts it, "I could not have articulated the problem this book seeks to address with any greater clarity" (p. 187).



With this thesis and motivation clearly in view, we have a way forward to reviewing the book's contents. Peeler's first chapter, "The Father Who Is Not Male," is designed to counter the possible assumption that the biblical attribution of fatherhood implies that God is male, or that he is more masculine than feminine. She indicates that, besides the name "Father," God is also referred to as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. As such, to conceive God as gender-transcendent, "that God is Parent or Mother and not only Father, helps to work against the 'phallacy' that God is male" (p. 17). While it is important to refer to God as Father, she readily admits, it is equally important not to project merely humanly conceived notions of masculinity onto God as a result.

Chapters 2 and 3 are dedicated to Jesus's mother, Mary, who has a significant role in the book. Peeler seeks to demonstrate the significance of this particular woman in the story of God's redemption of humanity. Chapter 2, "Holiness and the Female Body," works decidedly against any assumption that God disdains the female human body. After all, the birth of Jesus shows that "God has decided that women's bodies are deemed worthy to receive the ultimate expression of holiness, the very body of God" (p. 33). This puts to shame, she believes, "the seemingly unending examples of misogynistic patriarchy" in the history of the Christian Church (p. 59). Chapter 3, "Honor and Agency," is written to oppose the assumption that Mary was prevailed upon by a masculine, male God (e.g., "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son") in her conception of Jesus. Peeler insists that Mary freely consented to the "offer" and "invitation" from God to bear the Christ-child. The miracle of the incarnation, in other words, is contingent upon Mary's agential consent.

Chapter 4, "God Is Not Masculine," follows from Peeler's thesis that God is not male, and that God does not act in an obviously male or masculine way when he conceives Jesus in the womb of Mary.



Indeed, apart from the incarnation, Christ might have referred to God as “Father,” “Mother,” or “Parent.” It is the nature of the incarnation, Peeler asserts, which provides the “fitting choice for divine address. Jesus does not call God ‘Mother’ because he already has one” (p. 115). This strange assertion seems at odds with Jesus’s *pre-incarnate* relationship to his Father.

Surely the most provocative and theologically eccentric chapter of this work is chapter 5, “The Male Savior.” Given Peeler’s thesis that God values women, and that God is neither male nor masculine, the fact that God definitively reveals himself in Jesus Christ as male, rather than female, might appear to contradict the book’s thesis. Peeler has a ready solution: while she grants Jesus is certainly male, he is nevertheless male like no other male has ever been (p. 141); not because Jesus is fully divine, but because Jesus is a male conceived from a female alone, with no contribution from a human male. Jesus, in other words, is a female-only derived male. “In short, a male-embodied Savior with female-provided flesh saves all” (p. 137).

It is important to state plainly the book’s genre: it is quite obviously a feminist theology. Whether such a book ought to find commendation among Protestant evangelicals—who have historically understood feminist theology as a species of liberal theology—may be left to the reader. But the fact that we have before us a contemporary iteration of feminist theology cannot be in dispute. Predictably, Peeler sounds several of the notes that are common to feminist theology. First, the determinative hermeneutical starting point is that God values women. Second, she typically avoids masculine imagery and language regarding God and rarely uses masculine pronouns to refer to God throughout the book, despite her admission that it is the *overwhelming* preference of God’s written word. Third, Peeler seeks to qualify, to one degree or another, God’s revelation of himself as Father given that he is neither male nor masculine. As Peeler puts it, “Masculine conceptions of God are deeply problematic” (p. 112). And, finally, she reflects on why God becoming male—rather than female—in the incarnation is not a problem for the salvation of females.

It is on this last point that Peeler’s book presents the most disturbing and, quite frankly, bizarre and disquieting conclusions. Her female-flesh-only Jesus—a Jesus she believes secures the significance and value of women—leads her to consider the “intriguing and often fruitful speculation” among feminists that Jesus may have been “intersex” (p. 140). This speculation, we must assume, is derived from her insistence that, although it has been commonly assumed that theological and gender studies may be “kept neatly apart ... this assumption is false” (p. 188). Given Peeler’s assumption that theological and gender studies are inextricable—a historically unprecedented theological claim if there ever was one—it is not surprising that she has discovered a male Jesus that is female-only derived to account for the value of women. One may well wonder: does Jesus also need to be derived from Gentile-provided flesh to account for the value of Gentiles? Does Jesus need to be derived from black-provided (or white-provided) flesh to account for the value of black or white people? Such questions could multiply. Perhaps that is why, contra Peeler’s special pleading, the Christian tradition has maintained that Jesus is consubstantial with us according to his humanity (e.g., the Chalcedonian Creed). This accounts sufficiently for the eternal value of *all humans*, irrespective of any other identity—sexual, ethnic, or otherwise. God values women, in other words, for the simple reason than he values all human beings.

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## — ETHICS AND PASTORALIA —

Kirsten Birkett. *Imperfect Reflections: The Art of Christian Journaling*. Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2022. 104 pp. £9.99/\$12.99.

Kirsten Birkett's *Imperfect Reflections* was my first read of 2023 and I am so thankful that this little book found its way into my hands in that precious space between the weary end of one year, and the busy start of the next.

As someone who, after filling many notebooks with angst, weaned herself off journaling because it seemed rather self-absorbed, this book has invited me to enjoy again the weight of a pen and the texture of paper and, as I offload my thoughts onto the page, to find in the process opportunities for remembering, for gratitude and for praise.

Birkett was inspired to take her journaling more seriously by an academic paper written on the Puritan practice of diary keeping, which argued that it was not a “sign of morbid introspection or evidence of Puritan self-flagellation. On the contrary, it is a spiritual practice” (p. 10).

In the book's introduction, Birkett speaks candidly of the spiritual benefits of this practice:

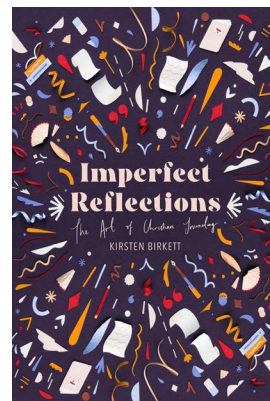
I write, mostly, because I feel bad about something, and by the end of writing I generally feel better. I have also used writing in my journal for specific spiritual ends—because I'm struggling to forgive someone; or I'm smarting from a well-deserved rebuke—and I want to examine what happened and help myself come to a godly response. (p. 10)

Each of the book's chapters starts with the date and then a description of the author's location (always a Sydney café, except when all the cafes are shut, and the Moore College library gets a mention!). This gives readers the sense that we are perusing someone's diary, but with their permission.

Birkett writes in way that is warm, personal and honest, providing us with a glimpse into her daily life, before then helping us to think about how we might turn our own journaling into praise, thanksgiving, and opportunities to remind ourselves in a tangible way of the glorious truths by which we can face the world in which we live. By writing in this way, Birkett models what she is encouraging us to do.

The first chapter, simply entitled “Write,” reminds us of the lost art of handwriting. Birkett is a careful researcher, and this chapter describes the proven benefits of writing over typing. There is, it appears, not only a connection between handwriting and academic achievement among children, but also, interestingly, a correlation with emotional well-being and social skills. She explains: “There is something about handwriting that seems to have a stronger connection to our personalities and ourselves than typing does. Research continues to show that handwriting is connected to self in an intimate way that typing simply does not achieve” (p. 16).

If we want to download a lot of information quickly, then the laptop is the way, but, Birkett challenges, “I find that the very slowness of handwriting is part of what attracts me to it. When I put down my thoughts by hand, I process my emotions, and come to conclusions, in a far more profound way than when I do the same sort of writing by laptop” (p. 17).



Of course, it matters why and how you journal, and in the following chapters, Birkett provides a clear and biblical framework that ensures this practice is spiritual, disciplined and God-focused. At the end of each chapter, Birkett also suggests how we might put its content into practice. For example, in “Write Prayer,” we are encouraged to write our own psalm—following the familiar pattern by which the psalmist would present a problem or a struggle, before recalling God’s character and remembering his plans, and so re-evaluating life in the light of God’s presence. She encourages: “Writing your own psalm is a great way to pray. It means your prayers are not just bringing to God the real issues on your own heart, but also that you are doing so according to His agenda” (p. 50).

The final chapter is entitled “The Covid Diaries.” This is a wonderful ending to this short book, so much so that I have re-read it several times. Birkett shows again and again how much she needs to keep writing things down as the hard stuff of life comes her way, how writing cements memories, how it connects with the soul, how it reminds us of the hope we have, and how it keeps turning us back to God. As I return to journaling myself, I find it fits naturally into my quiet times and helps me to concentrate, deepens my thinking and lifts my gaze from my naval to my God.

Journaling really is an art, as Birkett’s subtitle describes it. It is not a matter of reproducing a formula. But like any art, it also takes practice. But it is thoroughly worth it. And so, whether you find it all too easy to endlessly pour out your heart on a page and need discipline, or whether you find it hard to pause and reflect and need to slow down, this short book will provide the reasons why we should and help us to see how we can.

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Kirsten Birkett. *Living Without Fear: Using the Psalms to End Your Worry and Anxiety*. Carlisle: Kirsten Birkett, 2022. 168 pp. £12.77/\$14.99.

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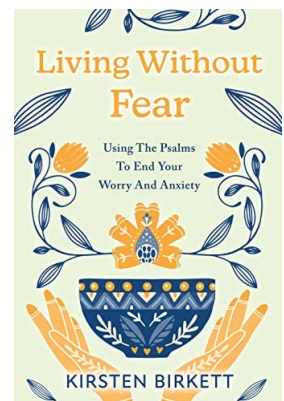
Kirsten Birkett. *Living Without Fear: Using the Psalms to End Your Worry and Anxiety Workbook*. 77 pp. £5.86/\$6.99.

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Kirsten Birkett. *Living Without Fear: Using the Psalms to End Your Worry and Anxiety Journal*. 202 pp. £9.21/\$10.99.

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Dr Kirsten Birkett brings a wide range of intellectual interests to the Psalms. She has written books on science and the Christian faith, the epistemology of the Reformers, the spiritual practices of the Puritans, psychology, feminism, and the family. While on faculty at Oak Hill College, London, she also published in the area of pedagogy and theological education. Her latest book, in three small volumes, draws on many of these interests. As the subtitle clarifies, *Living Without Fear* seeks to address our anxieties, and Birkett applies tools from psychology and the science of human behaviour to the task. Fears are often deep-rooted and hard to alter, but pedagogical insights can help us move knowledge from the head to the heart. Most importantly, however, Birkett



understands that the answer to our fears does not lie within, nor in anything we might do to alter our circumstances, but is only found in knowing God himself.

This, then, is a therapeutic book. In some circles that is not a compliment. Many contemporary theologians have written trenchantly against therapeutic Christianity, and the claim that Christ died to give us a comfortable and untroubled life is indeed a terrible distortion of the gospel. But that does not alter what our world is. Whether it is the affluent West or the aspirational majority world, we are more plagued than ever by anxieties, depressions, dysphorias, and all the other poisoned fruits of our idolatry. We do not only need books that explain why the therapeutic gospel is bad. We need books that are both therapeutic and Christian, that place our wellbeing into its proper gospel framework. The aim of *Living Without Fear* is to bring us to Christ and deepen our longing to be like him.

True therapy lies in the gospel itself. To be properly therapeutic, a book on the Psalms must first be Christian. The book of Psalms takes readers on a journey with Israel's Messiah: a journey that passes through fear and failure, despair and endurance, before finally arriving at fulfilment and joy. The Psalms are ultimately about Jesus, but they are also for us. They invite each of us to take up our cross and follow him. Birkett is sensitive to these interpretive horizons. She moves from the original context and significance of the Psalms in the life of ancient Israel, and deftly draws out their fulfilment in the life of the Lord Jesus. Along the way, she reflects continually on how these poems about the Messiah work to strengthen his people to be like him.

*Living Without Fear* is not a technical book. It consists of chapters on twelve psalms (3, 16, 22, 29, 27, 30, 33, 51, 59, 71, 72, 32) oriented around twelve topics, including various attributes of God and specific human fears. It reads like a series of expository sermons or talks for a general audience, with a strong focus on application. The Psalms demand a kind of reading that Psalm 1 calls *meditation*, and it is meditation rather than, say, linguistic or poetic analysis, that characterises Birkett's expositions. For example, Psalm 3 presents the prayer of a man surrounded by enemies, who boldly trusts God to protect him. Along the way the poet uses an image that captures this sense of confidence in the midst of helplessness: 'I lie down and sleep; I wake again because the LORD sustains me' (Ps 3:5). The metaphorical tenor of this image could easily carry an interpreter into generalities, but Birkett is not so casual. Meditation on this image serves to speak the psalm into a fundamental aspect of our experience. For many people, sleeplessness is a sign of anxiety and fear. Could meditating on the Psalms actually enable us to say, with David, 'I lie down and sleep'?

For that to happen it is not enough to be encouraged or even inspired by an exposition. We, the readers, must do the work of meditation for ourselves, both in the company of others and by ourselves. The accompanying *Living Without Fear Workbook* aims to send a group of readers back to the text with enough guidance to meditate on it more deeply together and begin to let its words work their way from head to heart. Adding a journal is an unusual step, though the recent popularity of journalling Bibles makes this a well-timed innovation. It taps into a truth about behavioural change: 'It takes time for truths to sink into our hearts, so that they genuinely change our reactions to life' (*Workbook*, p. 26). The *Living Without Fear Journal* invites an individual to meditate on single verses in the light of all they have learned about a psalm, without further constraints of explanation or practical suggestions. Letting a single word from God settle within oneself during the course of a day can be a powerful way of reframing the thoughts and experiences that wash over us.

Ultimately, however, the therapeutic power of the Psalms, and the therapeutic power of this book on the Psalms, lies in the fact that we are not in the end performing self-analysis. We are meditating on

God himself. And, as Birkett sets out to show, it is only in the contemplation of God that other fears can begin to fall away.

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Greg Johnson. *Still Time to Care: What We Can Learn from the Church's Failed Attempt to Cure Homosexuality*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021. £21.55/\$25.99.

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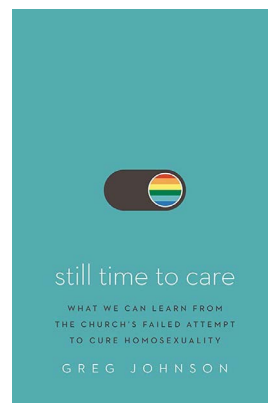
Greg Johnson's *Still Time to Care* is an important book. His aim is to chronicle and reflect on the very real trauma that was often inflicted on people by "ex-gay ministries"—like Exodus International, which rose to prominence in the 1970s and continued into the 2010s. Although the efforts of such groups were often well-meant, they were often profoundly damaging. As a theologian, pastor and person who battles homosexual desires, Johnson is well-equipped to write this book.

The first part of the book starts in the past, before ex-gay ministries ever existed. Johnson shows how Christian luminaries like C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, Billy Graham, John Stott and others found ways of ministering to people beset by homosexual desires. As Johnson notes, they cast a "positive and biblically orthodox Christian vision for gay people who follow the call of Jesus Christ" (p. 4). For example, he recounts the story of Billy Graham's generous response to a high-profile gay sex scandal. He tells of Francis Schaeffer's disposition of "compassion and empathy" (p. 11). He notes, too, the positive vision set by various denominations, including one which, already in 1973, identified the great failing of the church as a lack of "sympathy and concern for the plight of homosexuals among them" (p. 15).

In each case he shows how these Christian leaders and churches affirmed the biblical ethic that same-sex sexual behavior is wrong, while also affirming that disciples of Jesus who experienced homosexual desires ought to be welcomed, loved and embraced.

Nevertheless, these early days were not without tragedies. Johnson, for instance, tells the story of Egon Middelmann, a pastor who was himself same-sex attracted. Middelmann fell into sexual temptation and in despair took his own life. Middelmann had never opened up to anyone about his sexual orientation. So although there was something of a positive pastoral posture in these pre-ex-gay ministry days, those who were same-sex attracted remained largely in the closet.

The book's second part, however, tells a story of what happened later, beginning from the early 1970s. It tells of the rise and fall of "ex-gay ministries." These were ministries to people who experienced homosexual attractions. They were largely run by those who experienced those attractions themselves. At one level, the story of these chapters is tremendously encouraging—people coming to faith and leaving old lifestyles behind, and safe spaces being created where people with homosexual desires could talk, pray and find love and acceptance. Johnson quotes one person: "I felt known. I no longer felt uniquely twisted, uniquely perverted" (p. 57). But there are also many disturbing stories, some, perhaps, more graphic in Johnson's recounting than they needed to be. There are also accounts of highly suspect "therapies"—like men sitting naked together in a room exchanging stories of sexual encounters (p. 67).



Johnson, too, piles up stories of ministry leaders who, having sought to minister to others in their sexual brokenness, ended up falling headlong back into sin themselves—some completely abandoning the Bible's sexual ethic.

Yet, undoubtedly the most tragic stories are those of the people whose lives were shattered by buying into the false hope peddled by the ex-gay ministries. They had been sold a narrative of certain or near certain cure. But when that did not eventuate, as it almost always didn't, they were left desperate and hopeless. Johnson tells stories of suicide, self-harm and self-destructive behavior (pp. 92–97). He also recounts the disturbing response of many churches to those who continued to struggle, such as the church pastor who declared one sufferer “‘too needy and too broken’ to be allowed to come to church” (p. 96).

Johnson continues with the story of how the movement changed and improved in the light of some of its errors. But despite change, the movement “died” with the decision to shutter the most prominent organization, Exodus International. Then, in the last chapter of part 2, Johnson gives his assessment of what went wrong. This is one of the most helpful chapters of the book. The two main weaknesses he highlights are: (1) an underdeveloped theology of sin (especially not understanding concupiscence), and (2) an over realized eschatology. Much of the ministry approach seemed to be influenced by the Word of Faith movement, with the result that people were taught that if they simply believed a new reality about themselves—that they were heterosexual—it would come to be. A further problem was that the movement had been started by “anyone with a story to tell” and who often “invented things on the fly” (p. 135). Consequently, it was not only characterized by theological naivety but led by people without the theological acumen to help them steer clear of classic theological blunders.

Personally, I found part 2 the most enlightening, if not the most disturbing, part of the book. I often found myself reading these pages in a state of near disbelief. I suspect that this is partly due to my location in Australia rather than the United States. It seems to me that the ex-gay ministries, while present in Australia, never had the prominence that they gained in the US. Nevertheless, the stories in part 2 helped me to understand the severely allergic reaction that many have to “conversion” ministries. Although often painful to read, I was grateful to Johnson for compiling this history.

In the light of the trauma created by these ministries, part 3 takes the time to ask whether part of the problem the ex-gay movement faced was that it got the biblical sexual ethic wrong. That is, did the movement flounder because homosexuality really is okay after all? In three straightforward chapters, Johnson shows that this is not the case. The Bible's clear view is that sexual intimacy is intended only for a man and woman within the bounds of marriage. The job that Johnson does in these three chapters of defending the biblical ethic is masterful, not least because it is so brief and to the point.

Finally, part 4 maps a way forward for Christians to care for members of the church who experience same-sex sexual attraction. Johnson suggests four things. First, we need to kill off the remnants of the orientation change ethos that underpinned ex-gay ministries. Second, we need to end the “ex-gay script” in which people are encouraged to conceive of themselves as “not gay.” Third, we need to need to establish a gospel culture that focusses on forgiveness and care, rather than cure. Fourth, we need to give back to celibacy the legitimacy that such luminaries as Jesus and Paul gave it, rediscover friendship and cultivate hope.

In many ways, Johnson's vision of how the church can grow to support same-sex attracted Christians is incredibly helpful. The “ex-gay” movement seemed obsessed with complete cure from any ongoing sin. But a biblical view of the Christian life will recognize that, this side of eternity, sin remains. What

Christians need then is a community of believers that cares for and supports them as they continue to wrestle with indwelling sin, while holding out to them the full and free forgiveness of God, even for the one-millionth time. So, too, the movement often conflated freedom from homosexual desires with heterosexual marriage, such that to be freed from the first necessarily implied the second. But that was a profound mistake. Might it not be a blessing that some people don't want to marry? Paul certainly thought so. Johnson is right that the church needs to move from the frequently implicit expectation that every Christian should marry, to valuing celibacy as a calling for the sake of the kingdom.

But it is with Johnson's first two remedies that I have some concerns. For Johnson, care for those with homosexual desires necessarily involves abandoning the ethos of orientation change. It involves "holiness not heterosexuality," as he frequently notes. The difficulty, however, is working out exactly what that means. If it means abandoning the expectation that same-sex attracted people will end up in heterosexual marriages, that seems fair enough (although clearly some do). Similarly, if it means abandoning the hope that homosexual lust will be replaced with heterosexual lust, that too seems fair enough (p. 140). Both are profound mistakes, and both are mistakes that, disturbingly, Johnson gives evidence to suggest Christians have made (e.g., p. 139).

But, confusingly, Johnson's vision of "holiness not heterosexuality" seems to be at odds with his rejection of any suggestion of orientation change. For instance, in chapter 17, he critiques organizations that "seek to change underlying predispositions 'regardless of whether residual struggle remains or returns on occasion.'" He also highlights the statement of another key leader who writes: "There is sure hope that one can enjoy freedom from driving homosexual temptation and the pounding desires of same-sex lust, which many call same-sex attraction." Johnson responds: "Whatever name they give it, this program is still very much focused on the promise of sexual orientation change" (p. 191). Likewise, at the beginning of chapter 18, he criticizes well-meaning Christians who inflict "emotional wounds" by suggesting, "You may start out there, but God won't leave you there" (p. 200).

But I struggle to see the problem with these statements. Certainly, the expression "*sure* hope" might be seen to overpromise, but the subsequent language of "driving" and "pounding" seems to indicate that the promise is not of complete "cure," but of some measure of freedom from being dominated by homosexual temptations. Is that wrong? Doesn't the gospel offer that much? In rightly critiquing the "ex-gay ministry" promise of "cure," Johnson seems to have carried on too far and abandoned any hope for the diminution of homosexual desires.

Moreover, it is hard to see how Johnson's examples of problematic "orientation change" materially differ from his affirmation that "the biblical sexual ethic calls us away from homoeroticism to holiness, but that holiness doesn't mean heterosexuality" (p. 243). How, for example, does calling people to move away from "homoeroticism" differ from "freedom from driving homosexual temptation"? It seems to me that Johnson wants to affirm two convictions that, in his explanation of them, don't quite go together. The first is the biblical demand to eschew homoeroticism or homosexual lust. The second is that orientation change is impossible to do and damaging to try. The problem is that Johnson's definition of "orientation change" at times includes the reduction of homosexual desires. Therefore, it becomes unclear how one can encourage people away from such desires without that being construed as a form of damaging orientation change. In my view, it would be better to limit the critique of the ex-gay ministries to the *promise* of either heterosexuality or the complete absence of homosexual desires.

The other problematic aspect of Johnson's care rubric is the second plank: ending the "ex-gay" script. Johnson's target throughout the book is those who say or want to say (or want others to say) that



they are no longer “gay.” Johnson criticizes attempts by people to distance themselves from their sexual proclivities and embrace their new position in Christ. For example, he finds fault with those who say, “I have same-sex attractions and do not consider myself gay or homosexual.” For Johnson, this is not successful orientation change but simply a “successful change in sexual orientation terminology” (p. 191).

Similarly, in a section polemically entitled “Weaponizing Identity in Christ,” Johnson quotes the father of the early ex-gay ministry movement, Frank Worthen, who on a cassette tape titled “Introduction to Love in Action” explained, “Does Christ’s life-changing power mean that I will suddenly become heterosexual? No, it certainly does not mean that. What will I be then? Neither homosexual nor heterosexual. You will become a new creature in Christ.” This, to me, seems like a fairly balanced statement. It does not promise heterosexuality, instead it offers a new life with a new hope, no longer constrained and dominated by the categories of sexuality. Yet, for Johnson, Worthen demonstrates “an unwillingness to accept the ongoing reality of sexual temptations. That’s identity as erasure” (pp. 196–97).

Again, what I find confusing about Johnson’s book is that he criticizes those who want to conceive of themselves as “no longer gay” and vigorously affirms that same-sex attracted Christians should be allowed to define themselves as “gay,” while at the same time castigating the church for making sexual identity the most important aspect of those people’s experience. For example, Johnson writes of himself, “My sexual orientation doesn’t define me. It’s not the most important or most interesting thing about me. It is the backdrop for that, the backdrop for the story of Jesus who rescued me” (p. 195). He writes similarly of C. S. Lewis’s view: “For Lewis, the gay person could not be reduced to their sexual orientation or to sexual temptation. Lewis understood that the homosexual Christian’s biggest struggle might be not with sexual sin but with despair or pride” (p. 7). I completely agree. But Johnson’s aversion to people not conceiving of themselves as “gay” seems to conflict with this point.

More problematic is the fact that it seems to go against the grain of the New Testament. At its heart, Johnson’s strategy is to discourage people who experience same-sex attractions conceiving of themselves differently. But that is exactly what the Bible encourages us to do when it instructs us to reckon ourselves dead to and alive in Christ Jesus (Rom 6:11). It exhorts us to adopt a change in terminology with respect to ourselves; a change that inevitably carries with it a certain “contrary to fact” assessment. That is, it is not that all the temptations of this life, sexual or otherwise, have abated or that we never sin (1 John 1:8); nevertheless, we are no longer to think of ourselves as enslaved to those things. Is Paul then advocating what Johnson calls “identity as erasure,” or is Johnson at risk of losing something biblical and important?

While some of Johnson’s solutions are confusing and concerning, at least to this reviewer, the chief takeaway from this book is the tremendous harm that was inflicted on many people through the “ex-gay” ministries. I found the stories in part 2 incredibly sad and disturbing. Depressing, too, were the frequent stories of those who had set out to help but who then succumbed to their desires and abandoned biblical ethics. The real problem was false goals—marriage—and also false expectations—notably, promises of permanent and complete eradication of sinful desires this side of eternity. In short, the problem was poor theology. A problem that, in my opinion, Johnson himself has regrettably not quite solved.

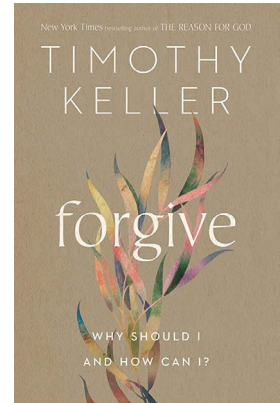
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Timothy Keller. *Forgive: Why Should I and How Can I?* New York: Viking, 2022. 272 pp. £9.99/\$27.00.

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On June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof entered Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church and killed nine African Americans during a Bible study. Grief-stricken families in the city and throughout the country were mourning in light of such a tragic event. Members of the courtroom and thousands of Americans were awestruck though, when families of the victims looked at Roof and said, “I forgive you.” National responses to those three words were mixed: some admired the courage it took to forgive, while others scorned the families for extending forgiveness towards another mass murderer. Forgiveness is an incredibly complex and difficult topic, especially in the current state of American culture. While many argue that forgiveness culture is fading, in his latest book, *Forgive*, Timothy Keller demonstrates why every human person both has an indelible need for forgiveness and why we ought to forgive others (p. xv–xviii).



Keller frames his book around the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant found in Matthew 18:21–35, and he often returns to the themes of the parable throughout the book. Keller’s book begins with an incredibly helpful introduction regarding the current state of forgiveness in Western culture, followed by a chapter explaining what forgiveness is and why it is important. Every act of disobedience requires both a vertical (to God) and horizontal (to others) dimension and our ability to carry out such forgiveness rests upon our understanding of the gospel (pp. 17–18). Following the introductory material, the book is divided into three sections: Loosing and Finding Forgiveness (chapters 2–4), Understanding Forgiveness (chapters 5–7), and Practicing Forgiveness (chapters 8–11).

In the first section, Keller notes that Western society has “anxiety and confusion” regarding forgiveness (p. 21), particularly because of the emergence of the new “shame-and-honor culture” in the 21st century (p. 31). While previous shame-and-honor cultures often exalted the virtuous, Keller notes that “greater honor and moral virtue are assigned to people the more they have been victimized and subjugated by society or others in power” (p. 21). This new shame-and-honor culture is not quick to extend forgiveness, yet, as Keller notes, “our society cannot live without forgiveness” (p. 34). In chapter 3, Keller traces the development of forgiveness in Western culture, which has its origin in the “coming of Christianity” (p. 43). In chapter 4, the Bible is presented as the wellspring of forgiveness, one that we need to return to amidst a forgiveness-stricken culture (p. 53).

In the second section, Keller discusses the balance between forgiveness and justice, which is most perfectly found in the cross of Jesus (p. 71). Christians can be people who walk in forgiveness, relinquishing others’ debt to us, because Jesus has fully born the justice and wrath of God. In chapter 6, Keller tackles the notoriously difficult subject of forgiveness in light of abuse. This chapter draws heavily upon Rachel Denhollander’s work on abuse, particularly in light of her role in exposing Larry Nassar. In chapter 7, Keller argues that in order for forgiveness to be full, one must have both “inward and outward” forgiveness (p. 107). In other words, forgiveness flows from the heart inwardly and pursues reconciled relationships outwardly.

In the final section (chs. 8–11), Keller handles the practicality of forgiving others. In chapter 8, he argues that it is imperative that one understands the concepts of guilt and shame, especially in a particular cultural moment where “secular people are in a strange position of feeling like sinners without having a name for it” (p. 123). Every person, because of their disobedience to God, has a desperate need

for forgiveness. This leads Keller in chapter 9 to explain how one receives God's forgiveness: through repentance towards God. Repentance leads to a life of forgiveness from God, which then leads to a life of forgiveness towards others (ch. 10). In this chapter, he notes that to forgive someone is to follow in step with the gospel, by releasing others from liability and to aim for reconciliation and restoration. Lastly, in chapter 11, Keller practically explains how one can extend forgiveness and mend broken relationships.

One of the great strengths of Keller as an author is his ability to engage the complexities of a subject like forgiveness. Not surprisingly, *Forgive* is not a simple, reductionistic book that is easily codified into a two-step program. Rather, Keller presents a holistic understanding of forgiveness that is grounded in the gospel but extends to all the many and varied permutations of human relationships and life on earth. Important topics are covered in this book, with which Christians often struggle: When is repentance real? How do I forgive someone who hurt me? What role does guilt play in Christianity? How do we talk about justice in light of the gospel's call to forgive? Questions such as these and many more are handled in this important book. Pastors and Christians would be wise to consult this work when dealing with their own personal struggles to forgive or counseling others as they attempt to walk in forgiveness.

As a pastor within a progressive metropolitan era, Keller demonstrates his ability to understand and critique contemporary trends in broader Western culture. Not only does Keller successfully demonstrate the current problems with forgiveness in our culture, but he also provides a beautiful and compelling vision of a better way—the way of Jesus Christ. Keller's chapter on the sensitive topic of forgiveness and abuse is almost worth the price of the book alone. In a moment where many abuse scandals are rising to the surface, Keller's wisdom on engaging such a difficult topic from a biblical perspective is much needed. Lastly, Keller has provided four incredibly helpful and practical appendices on the issue of forgiveness.

Keller's latest work is a must-read not only for pastors and seminary students but for every Christian. For as long as this present age continues, the issues of forgiveness, justice, reconciliation, and restoration are ones that we will inevitably engage on a frequent basis.

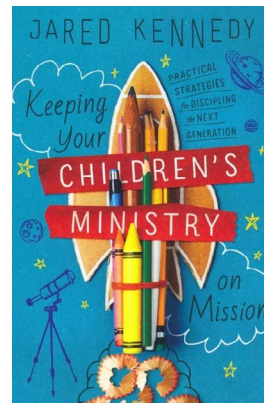
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Jared Kennedy. *Keeping Your Children's Ministry on Mission: Practical Strategies for Discipling the Next Generation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022. 226 pp. \$19.99.

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The terrain of Children's ministry with its many conferences, resources, and philosophies will bewilder the uninitiated. Many throw up their hands, pick a curriculum they like, find someone to run the ministry, and are relieved as long as the classrooms have enough volunteers. But is your children's ministry on mission? Jared Kennedy's *Keeping Your Children's Ministry on Mission* will help you answer that question. Kennedy is a seasoned guide who identifies the key features you *must* know in order to do children's ministry, and he provides other recommended resources for those who wish to explore the necessary topics in greater depth.



Family ministry resides at the complex intersection of three primary institutions: the church, the family, and government. Kennedy's book reveals, in its underlying philosophy, his careful thinking and guidance for how these institutions relate. There are three places where this becomes quite clear. First, Kennedy gives the primacy of Christ as the fuel for ministry (pp. 16–18, 95). Second, he provides clarity for *both* the necessity of the family *and* the church (pp. 21–32, 183–97). Lastly, in his chapter on child protection, he clearly articulates the rightful jurisdiction of church and government in both protecting children from abuse and responding to abuse (pp. 67–83).

A strength of Kennedy's book is his *clear* philosophy of ministry and his *focused* teaching of the essentials. Kennedy is intensely practical, putting forward a ministry vision driven by 1 Corinthians 1:31–2:5 and applied with the strategic approach of hospitality, teaching, discipleship, and mission (p. 16). He writes,

My prayer for those who read this book is that your confidence will be rooted in the simple message of “Jesus Christ and him crucified.” It was all Paul needed, and it's all we need as well.... As we consider the one who welcomed children himself, know the Savior and his good news is enough to keep you, and to keep your children's ministry on mission. (p. 18)

This principle is evident throughout the book: confidence in the sufficiency of the simple message of Christ. Frequently, he reminds us to not put our hope in our ministry model for fruit, but to trust in Jesus (p. 40). As he says early on regarding his methods, “These strategies aren't silver bullets.... My goal in teaching these methods is to help you keep the mission—sharing the gospel with little ones—the main thing” (p. 45).

A further strength of Kennedy's book is that it is Christocentric and theological, while remaining intensely practical. Kennedy thus takes a theologically driven philosophy of ministry, and translates it into four strategies: (1) hospitality; (2) teaching; (3) discipleship; and (4) mission.

(1) *Hospitality*: In part 2, Kennedy gives us practical tools for creating welcoming environments that also protect children from threats (pp. 53–88). In doing so, he reminds us of Jesus's posture towards children and his zeal for protecting them (pp. 53, 68–70). Kennedy rightly stresses the urgency of both hospitality and child protection, providing wise guidance for both.

(2) *Teaching*: In part 3, “*Connect Kids to Christ*,” he effectively describes “three ways to tell a Bible story” with a gospel-centered approach. He then unpacks how to apply these principles to the story of Nebuchadnezzar, and how to teach kids in an engaging and effective way (pp. 91–133). In this section, Kennedy keeps us on mission by narrowing our focus to rightly and effectively teaching gospel centered lessons to children. Pulling from some of the best resources, and synthesizing these with his own contributions, these three chapters may be the best in the book for equipping teachers. Kennedy's principles and illustrations show that he understands children and their developmental stages. Pastors or children's directors could confidently share chapters 5–7 with their Sunday school teachers to provide encouragement and strategies for growing in their teaching.

(3) *Discipleship*: Part 4, “*Grow with Kids and Families*,” showcases Kennedy's commitment to *both* parents *and* the church. One of the challenges of children's discipleship is that children keep growing! Every year they change dramatically in how they understand and experience the world. There are few resources that are accessible to the average children's ministry volunteer or parent to help them grasp basic child development, and even fewer that do so with a theological framework in mind. Kennedy

admirably combines these elements in chapter 8 as he addresses four developmental stages: infant (ages 0–2); toddlers (ages 2–3); preschoolers (ages 4–5); and early grade school (ages 6–10).

Chapter 9 focuses on equipping parents with resources and rhythms (p. 163). Here Kennedy puts forward the goal of child discipleship: “*Gospel-formed identity*—the goal of generational discipleship is for our kids’ thinking, affections, and habits of life to be shaped by Christ’s story” (p. 172). One of the great strengths of Kennedy’s approach is his advocacy of simplicity. He encourages ministry leaders to guide parents toward greater intentionality in what they are already doing, instead of defaulting to more programming (pp. 172–73). In a day and age where digital media compete for kids’ attention, Kennedy cautions against trying to keep up: “Our kids don’t need the latest tech as much as they need an ancient path” (p. 175). He advocates for developing church and family cultures ... where thinking, affections and patterns of life are captured and shaped by Jesus’ redemptive story” (p. 175).

(4) *Mission*: The real test of Kennedy’s commitment to “*both and*” comes through for us in his approach to mission (part 5). Kennedy recounts the history of Robert Raikes and the invention of Sunday School. Kennedy, with appropriate transparency, highlights the ease with which church leaders and parents may inadvertently operate with a creation and fall vs. redemption and consummation dichotomy. Parents may focus on the world, its practical realities, and the challenges sin brings, while neglecting to integrate those experiences with the biblical emphasis on redemption and consummation. Alternatively, church leaders have a tendency to focus on the redemption and consummation, while neglecting the realities of creation and fall. This often leads to a disconnected or aloof approach to ministry that can miss the very context in which we have been called to minister. Kennedy’s “prayer is that family ministries in our churches revive the gap-crossing, risk-taking spirit of Robert Raikes” (p. 189).

Kennedy’s book is a capstone of the many helpful earlier books in the family ministry movement. It masterfully applies essential insights from these resources, with a practical focus that puts legs onto a good philosophy of ministry. Kennedy tempers our idealism by putting parameters around what we should reasonably expect a family ministry model to accomplish, and identifies areas of weakness for us to pay attention to. He presents important challenges like ministry approaches for children from unbelieving homes, and the “pedagogical advantage of age-directed lessons” (p. 42).

If you are looking for a quick fix, you won’t find it here. But you will find a guide with a pastor’s heart, a strategic mind, and the skill of a seasoned practitioner. Children’s ministry is complex, but Kennedy wisely reminds us to keep the main thing at the center. The gospel is at the heart of this book, and gives rise to a series of very practical strategies for effective discipleship of children and their parents. I heartily recommend *Keeping Your Children’s Ministry on Mission* to any ministry leader who takes seriously our call to disciple the next generation.

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Laura Perry. *Transgender to Transformed: A Story of Transition That Will Truly Set You Free*. Bartlesville, OK: Genesis Publishing, 2019. 191 pp. £12.28/\$14.99.

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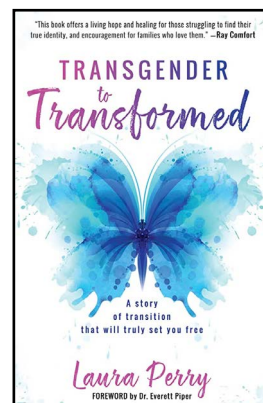
‘Don’t dismiss someone’s feelings even if they don’t sound reasonable’ (p. 74). This is the advice Perry gives readers as she recounts the crushing moment when her teenage plea for help is ignored, a moment which may very well have set her on her transgender journey. It’s a wise piece of counsel, not only for *relating to people* struggling with their gender identity, but also for *reading their stories*.

*Transgender to Transformed* is Perry’s account of how she embarked on the path of gender transitioning before it became as popular and political as it is today. In 2007, Perry admits, ‘I hadn’t even heard the term “transgender”’ (p. 97). It wasn’t until she googled ‘girl becoming boy’ and went along to a local support group that the ‘transgender world’ opened up. Armed with her new-found knowledge, courtesy of Google, she began her three mandatory psychology sessions in order to obtain her ‘ticket to paradise’, testosterone (p. 98). A double mastectomy, hysterectomy and removal of her other female organs soon followed. But to begin her story here is to ignore the many factors which influenced this decision, and risks playing into the false narrative propagated by trans ideology, according to which Perry was simply born in the wrong body.

Perry disagrees with this oft-chanted assessment, and her efforts to chart the various decisions which led her to embrace a transgender identity occupy much of this short book. She recounts the survivor-guilt that plagued her since she was a young child, born of the knowledge that before her conception two brothers had died in-utero (p. 24). As a result, Perry recalls ‘I thought my mom had wanted my brother to live instead of me,’ an admission that at the very least should stand as a reminder to parents to be very careful with their words, and the ways they speak about and to their children (p. 74). Perry was a high-energy, sport-loving, rambunctious child—characteristics which earned her the epithet ‘annoying’—and a self-admitted ‘Daddy’s girl’ (pp. 20–23). At the age of eight she was raped by a friend’s older brother, a violation she kept hidden from her parents for 25 years. After this, she experienced an increasing urge to engage in sexual activities and admits that, as a result, ‘My jealousy of boys in general was rising,’ for she saw them as having the power to give and withhold sex, while to her mind females were a commodity to be discarded after use, just as she had been (p. 28).

Her teenage years were flooded with health problems, fluctuating weight gain, and tempestuous relationships, as she sought to feel loved and be desired. Almost overshadowing these (significant) challenges, however, was her determination to express her hurt and anger by exploring dark spiritual forces. Listening to death metal, exploring witchcraft, sketching demons and praying to Satan only increased the volatility of her temper and rebellion. In an attempt to save their daughter, Perry’s Christian parents sent her to stay first with family in Alaska, and then to a group home where she began to dabble with Christianity.

Even so, it wasn’t long after graduation before Perry reverted to her old ways, pursuing pornography, sex, alcohol and satanic music (p. 91). Becoming dissatisfied with casual hook-ups and loveless relationships, she returned to her childhood fantasies of being male, and thus sexually desirable and loved (p. 96). After a few hours of online research, Laura turned up at a LGBTQ support group and introduced herself as ‘Jake’. She was heralded a hero.



What followed were a few years of joy—for while transitioning ‘there were so many milestones ... to celebrate,’ Perry explains (making me wonder if God’s people are just as good at rejoicing in our own transformation into Christ-likeness)—and many more of exhausting deception (pp. 100–101). In fact, her attempt to leave her female sex behind often meant quitting a job or breaking off relationships as soon as someone discovered her biological sex, and regularly having to reinvent her entire history pre-transition. This, combined with the fact that her political opinions were at odds with those held by many in the LGBTQ community, led Perry and her transgender partner (‘Jackie,’ born Steve) to become virtual recluses.

Yet after almost a decade of living as a man, Perry began to realise that even if she were able to get all the available surgeries she would never *truly* become male. Even so, there seemed to be no way out: she hated being female. It was here that God began to move openly in her life. When her mother (with whom she was barely in contact) reached out and asked Perry to make a website for her Bible study group, Perry agreed for monetary reasons. Soon, however, she was ringing her mum to ask questions about what she was learning as she summarised the studies. In doing so, Perry noticed that God had also transformed her mother—gone was the woman who had tried to earn salvation by works, and in her place was someone with a ‘living, vibrant faith’ who encouraged Perry to ‘trust God’ rather than attempting to fix her daughter’s many problems (p. 124). It was this latter witness which convinced Perry that the gospel was true and led her to give her heart to Jesus.

Still, it wasn’t until Perry had heard several Christian speakers speak about the sin of embracing a transgender identity that she was able to acknowledge that ‘Laura was who [God] had created; Jake had been my own creation, my own self-imposed identity’ (p. 136). Eventually, in 2016, Laura left her transgender partner and drove to her parent’s church clad in a skirt and earrings. There she received a heart-felt welcome from the congregation and her mum’s Bible study group, who had been praying for her for years.

While every detransition account will be different, Perry’s autobiography offers several transferable lessons. First, it’s a reminder that not all who identify as transgender find belonging in the LGBTQ community, are militant, flamboyant, or embrace trans ideology. Indeed, one of the most touching aspects of Perry’s story is Steve’s desire to understand her journey, and the way God uses their relationship to save him too. Second, Perry is clear that it was the love of God and the realisation that she was rejecting who he had created her to be which led her to detransition. Third, it was at first obedient trust alone which gave Perry the courage to return to her womanhood, let alone the feminine clothing she ‘felt so humiliated by’ (p. 155). Detransitioning was difficult and involved periods of heavy mourning, but she testifies that God ‘satisfied [her] soul’ (p. 165). Fourth, Perry’s return was largely enabled by the steadfastness of her parents who through the years continued to remind her of reality by calling her ‘Laura,’ always picked up the phone, opened their home, and (most importantly for Perry), rather than ‘forcing their hand on me’ they ‘allowed me the grace to wrestle with it all, and ... trusted God’ (p. 158).

The risk inherent in personal stories is that the particulars of an individual’s experience can be over generalised—either by the author or by the reader. For example, while Perry’s gender battles were linked to an experience of sexual abuse, it should not be inferred that this is always the case—even though Perry comes close to suggesting as much at one point (p. 172). Some readers may also wonder if the correlation of Christianity with certain political views requires a more nuanced treatment.

As a whole, this book is best suited to a Christian audience, given the often didactic tone, inclusion of unexpounded Bible verses, and the use of Christian terms and assumptions. I personally would have



liked greater clarity and organisation in the final chapter, which is an earnest appeal to those who have embraced a trans identity, as well as their Christian family members. Nevertheless, this chapter contains many nuggets of gold, including Perry's encouragement not to seek familial peace at the cost of truth spoken in love (p. 184).

*Transgender to Transformed* is a fascinating look into one woman's journey into and out of transgenderism, and a redemptive story of God's faithful love. What it lacks in nuance it makes up for by reminding readers that even in the complex and the tragic God is neither dismissive nor silent, and nor should we be.

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Glen Scrivener. *The Air We Breathe: How We All Came to Believe in Freedom, Kindness, Progress, and Equality*. London: Good Book, 2022. 232 pp. £9.99/\$16.99.

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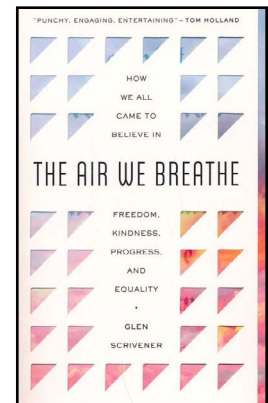
The western world's relationship to the Christian faith is like a celebrity marriage—complicated.

At one level, our culture's rejection of its ancestral faith has never been so enthusiastic, so complete, so aggressive. It looks, for all intents and purposes, like a divorce of the acrimonious variety. And yet, our world remains so deeply Christian. We continue to use the convictions, the thought-forms, and even the metaphysics of the faith we are so keen to reject. Our apparently self-evident commitments to equality, progress, and compassion are Christian artefacts, even as our relationship with the faith that bequeathed them to us comes unstuck. If these values are Christianity's children, their paternity is contested. Their family resemblance to the faith of Scripture is not recognized because the image of their father has become so grainy and low-resolution in our minds that no memory is jogged. Our collective ignorance of Christianity's influence is so complete that we don't even stop to wonder where these values came from. We imagine these things are just *there*. Like a fish in water. Like the air we breathe.

Enter Glen Scrivener's new book, *The Air We Breathe*. In it, Scrivener provides a compelling, well-researched, and confident account of the West's debt to Christianity in general and to Christ in particular. He calls out the negligent parents, produces the DNA test, and gently suggests to the reader some of their options in light of the results.

Glen Scrivener is a UK-based, Australian-born evangelist and apologist, whose suite of resources includes some brilliant spoken-word evangelistic videos on topics such as [Halloween](#) and [Christmas](#), which I find myself sharing and resharing during the relevant seasons. His latest book, *The Air We Breathe*, has been widely acclaimed, winning both the TGC and Christianity Today 2022 Book Award Winner in Evangelism & Apologetics.

When it comes to the West's strange silence on the source of many of its most treasured values, Scrivener joins a growing host of whistle-blowers. Tom Holland's *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019) is a magisterial account of similar space



from a secular perspective; John Dickson's *Saints and Bullies: An Honest Look at the Good and Evil of Christian History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021) from that of a Christian historian; David Bentley Hart's *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) from a theologian's perspective. Scrivener comes in as a straight-up evangelist. And it works. Brilliantly.

The writing is full of pluck and warmth. And, despite its intellectual rigor, the book's tone is more that of an animated late-night argument in a pub—all friendly like, but with no-holds barred. It's written to be read. And the chances you'll finish it having started it are extremely high. The hard-to-put-down force is strong with this one.

Scrivener has three audiences in mind: the “nones,” the “dones” and the “wons.” The “nones” are that increasing group who answer “none” when asked about their religion. These are the books primary target group—those (often left-leaning) secular westerners who are simultaneously the most enthusiastic about many uniquely Christian values and the least likely to know where those values came from. These “nones” often carry an unreflective assumption that the equality of all humans, the value of compassion, and the hope of progress all have a kind of self-evident quality. It is this assumption Scrivener means to disabuse them of.

The “dones” are those who were once Christian, or Christian-adjacent, but are now done with it all. This depressingly fast-growing group (like their secular progressive counterparts) don't usually wander off into some post-ethical wasteland. Rather, they more often than not double-down on particular values, such as freedom and concern for people on the margins, even as they find themselves “done” (for whatever reasons) with the faith that first gave those values their prominence. And the “wons” are those who have been won by Christ. For this last group (which probably includes the majority of those reading this review) Scrivener means to fortify our hearts and fill our cups with confidence and evangelistic spunk.

Between the first and final chapters, Scrivener explores seven deeply held moral or epistemic convictions: equality, compassion, consent, enlightenment, science, freedom, and progress. In each case, he demonstrates that these values, far from being as self-evident as “the air we breathe,” are in fact the products of Christianity, the means by which Christ continues (as Flannery O'Connor puts it) to haunt our culture.

The argument is compelling, and the communication style vivid and energetic. The chapters move more or less chronologically from the birth of Christianity to the present day. We begin with a picture of the ancient world, and, like a printing-press adding one color after another, the book slowly composes a rich picture of how we got from the classical world to our world. How did we come from a world in which equality was unthinkable, compassion undesirable, and consent unimportant to one in which, on May 25, 2020, the death of George Floyd sent us into collective convulsions of moral outrage? Such a response was, in the classical world, unimaginable. By 2020 it was inevitable. Why? The reason, in a word, is Christ.

Some books on this topic are written in service of the culture wars, providing a theological argument for why the West is Best. This is not that book.

Others in this particular genre can be overly timid, addressing the modern, secular person as if Christianity was the Beta version of the moral certitudes progressive secularists now enjoy. Christianity wasn't quite feminist, or LBGT-affirming, or one hundred percent against slavery, but, hey! Look at the trajectory! Can we please have partial credit? This is not that book either.



*The Air We Breathe* is neither cultural warrior nor apologetic apologist. It is *evangel*. It's pugnacious, confident, and willing to call out the assumptions and blind spots of its reader. It leaves us neither sentimental about our past nor smug about our present. It challenges us, calling the reader (respectfully and generously) to be more evidence-based, more critical, and less susceptible to the kind of magical thinking that says these things just are.

*The Air We Breathe* is a swash-buckling adventure-ride of a book. It's academically grounded, culturally attuned, and full of evangelisticchutzpah. I'd put this into the hands of any of my secular friends in a heartbeat.

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Norman Wirzba. *This Sacred Life: Humanity's Place in a Wounded World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 300 pp. £21.99/\$28.99.

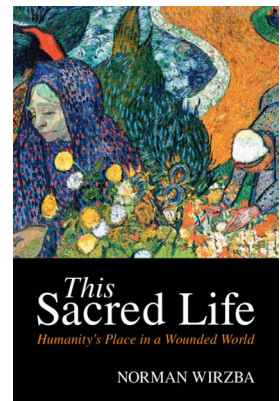
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The place of humanity within the created order is a central concern of Western culture. There are extremists arguing for human extinction and others who describe maximizing the birthrate as a moral duty. The basic questions that underlie humanity's relationship to creation are deeply connected to one's location, one's identity, and one's proper way of life. These are the questions Norman Wirzba takes up in his book, *This Sacred Life*.

Wirzba is Gilbert T. Rowe distinguished professor of theology at Duke Divinity School. Much of his career has been spent exploring topics related to environmental ethics, including attitudes toward creation and a theology of eating. Wirzba understands the challenges of the modern age, recognizes that we cannot simply cease to be citizens of our time and place, and yet continues to call readers to a richer life that involves a deeper appreciation of the goodness of the cosmos.

*This Sacred Life* is divided into three parts. Part 1 offers a description of the problem. Wirzba begins by outlining some of the ways humans appear to have damaged the created order through thoughtless overuse. He then moves on to explore the growing urge to exceed natural human limits through transhumanism; this urge is represented aptly as a pursuit of a "friction-free life" (p. 49). Wirzba's diagnosis of what ails citizens of contemporary Western culture is incisive and balanced, going well beyond handwringing and romantic longing for a supposedly simple age.

In Part 2, the book shifts toward more fundamental concerns. For Wirzba, the way out of the crisis is to consider what led into it. He points first toward the importance of regarding embodied life in a particular time, space, and condition as a good thing. The image of being rooted is useful, because it conjures up thoughts of the lilies from Christ's teaching, or stately trees that flourish for centuries, being fed by the soil in which they stand. He also offers a less mechanistic metaphor of reality than the citizens of modernity often adopt. Wirzba argues this is a "meshwork world" (p. 90), which is intended to break down subject/object distinctions and remind us that humanity is part of creation, even as humans exist as agents within creation. Rather than viewing nature as an "other" that can be acted upon, a meshwork entails acting and being acted upon at the same time.



Part 3 transitions into a discussion of Wirzba's proposed response to the problems and applications of the fundamental principles. He begins, referencing Charles Taylor's analysis, by pointing to the need for a re-sacralization of this world. Such a reenchantment of nature begins with religious accounts of creation, which should be updated to accommodate contemporary scientific understandings. While Wirzba is open to thematic elements from various Indigenous cultures, he is particularly concerned to highlight his own appreciation of the concept of creation through Christ as a way to emphasize the goodness of the physical world. Within this world, humans are creatures who are meant to feel at home and are moved to be creative within their given contexts. Human flourishing is not to be found by transcending the bounds of this world, but by entering into it deeply and engaging with it beautifully for the good of all of creation. That, for Wirzba, is what it means to live a sacred life.

There is much to be commended in Wirzba's careful handling of the question of modernity and his invitation to be healers and creators within a good world that has been much marred by human activity. Wirzba rightly rejects extreme approaches to environmentalism that see humanity as parasitical. He also avoids the opposite error that ignores the potential damage humans can inflict. This is a thoughtful book that deserves careful attention by those evaluating the place of humanity in the created order.

At the same time, the benefits of Wirzba's theories are constricted by inadequate consideration of the importance of the resurrection—both Christ's and the future resurrection of all humans. For Wirzba, the "resurrection life is a new form and modality of life" (p. 207), which is distinctly this-worldly and of the present age. In his attempt to re-sacralize creation, Wirzba seems to reject the eschatological aspects of the resurrection in favor of pursuing the fullness of the resurrected life *now* (p. 136). It is telling that even as Wirzba considers Christ as creator, emphasizing his participation in creation through the incarnation, he offers little analysis of how Christ's transformative resurrection and ascension should impact the human imagination. The literal, physical resurrection of Christ is the central fact of all creation history. It should directly shape the relationship of human beings to the created order. The realization that the body we inhabit in this earthly life will be resurrected and redeemed for eternity inspires us to treat all of creation with dignity, since it too will be renewed at the end of the age. That such consideration is largely absent from this volume limits the vision of hope that otherwise could have been offered.

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Stephen Wolfe. *The Case for Christian Nationalism*. Moscow ID: Canon, 2022. 488 pp. £22.22/\$24.99.

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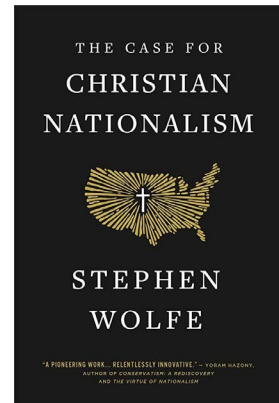
Stephen Wolfe's *The Case for Christian Nationalism* presents a paradox for any reviewer, defying the genre boundaries that usually quarantine works of academic history or theory from the hurly-burly of popular politics. As a scholar of Reformation political theology who has spent more than a decade trying to convince contemporary Protestants to attend to their own tradition, I should be thrilled at the prospect of a book parsing distinctions between the Christian magistrate's authority *in sacris* versus *circa sacra* appearing high on Amazon's bestseller list. And yet, I guarantee you that it was not passages such as these that attracted the enthusiastic attention of tens of thousands of readers.

This volume, as a number of reviewers have observed, is really three books in one. "Book 1" (which comprises the majority of chapters 1, 2, 4, and 6–9) is a generally sober exposition of most of the central principles of magisterial Protestant political thought, full of primary source quotations and answering questions such as: "Would there have been government before the fall?"; "How does government's essentially earthly responsibility relate to the work of the church?"; and "How do we reconcile freedom of conscience with the authority of law?" "Book 2" (sprinkled throughout but see especially chapters 3 and 5) represents Wolfe's distinctive twist on the recent revival of "nationalism" as a political phenomenon, attacking the modern trend toward a borderless world and defending the idea that politics is ordered to the protection of a particular people and its way of life. "Book 3" is something else altogether: a harsh and sometimes angry attack on modern politics (and modern churches) as weak and effeminate, and a stern call to action (and to revolution?) to protect our "homeland" and restore the conditions for a Christian politics. This book-within-a-book appears in many of the chapter conclusions, and at length in a no-holds-barred Epilogue, "Now What?" (For "Book 3," see especially pp. 5, 38, 169–71, 239–41, 276, 278–9, 290–92, 322–23, 325–26, 340–48, 351–52, 380–84, and 433–75.)

More sober readers, alarmed by the appeals for a "great man" who will bring about a "great renewal" of the "national will" in "Book 3" and what may look to many like racist dog-whistles in "Book 2," might understandably be tempted to write the entire book off as crypto-fascism wrapped in a thin Christian cloak.

This would be a mistake. Many of the themes the book seeks to recover were once commonplaces of Protestant political theology. But, sadly, they are now casually neglected, dismissed as irrelevant to modern society, or openly opposed as representing an illiberal theocracy. Given the current crisis of liberalism, in which we are witnessing the rapid emptying of churches, the breakdown of public morality, and a growing alienation between the governing and the governed, these principles at the very least deserve a fresh hearing. Our Protestant forebears were well aware that human law cannot bring about saving faith, but they also understood that society could not well flourish without a religious backbone. To be sure, their prudential formulas for how to foster a "Christian nation" in the seventeenth century will need a lot of rethinking in the twenty-first, and Wolfe acknowledges as much—though sometimes rather grudgingly.

The book is perhaps at its strongest in its forceful defense of much-maligned "cultural Christianity" (see, especially, ch. 5). Rather than seeing public support for religion as a recipe for hypocrisy that will stifle saving faith, Wolfe argues persuasively for the older consensus that stressed the pedagogical



function of even human law and social custom as a schoolmaster unto Christ. Chapter 1's treatment of "Nations Before the Fall" also offers an uncommonly clear, thoughtful, and (at points) groundbreaking survey of historic Christian reflection on the prelapsarian foundations of political order.

That said, those interested in the retrieval and renewal of the great legacy of magisterial Protestant political thought, a tradition which helped birth the American nation, may be dismayed by the company these venerable principles are found keeping in *The Case for Christian Nationalism*. Wolfe's retrieval, as "Book 2" shows, is pursued in service of an idiosyncratic project that at best leaves key questions unanswered, and at worst, may lend energy to some of the worst impulses of disgruntled right-wing radicalism in America today.

To be sure, polarizing though the arguments of "Book 2" may be, it marks an important contribution to the recent revival of nationalism among American conservatives, arguing that there is nothing wrong with prioritizing loyalty to one's own people, place, and polity over others. Given that such nationalist rhetoric has provoked fierce opposition from many Christian leaders in recent years, Wolfe expends considerable effort to persuade his fellow Christians that there is no contradiction between the universal scope of the Christian gospel and having particular obligations to one's own nation. The basic argument here is not difficult to make; a lot of it is just common sense. It is also not hard to find testimonies from classical literature as well as the Christian tradition in defense of it, as Wolfe does, to make the point that "the instinct to live within one's 'tribe' or one's own people is neither a product of the fall nor extinguished by grace; rather, it is natural and good" (p. 23).

If the point is to rein in cosmopolitan globalism or question unrestrained immigration and a borderless world, then these points are well-taken. However, Wolfe often takes his argument rather further than this, in ways that might seem to make the critics of nationalism feel that they were right to sound alarms, stressing that a national people or *ethnos* can and often must act to exclude foreigners and foreign influences and preserve its distinctive way of life.

In response, we must stress that the love of the familiar is only *prima facie*; not *ultima facie*. Wolfe says almost nothing about the capacity of our shared human nature to overcome the minor barriers of cultural and linguistic difference—never mind the implications of the gospel. The foreigner may be harder to love than the neighbor, but it need not take long for him to *become* a neighbor. Wolfe is right that grace does not destroy nature, to be sure; but grace seems almost an unwanted intrusion into a political imaginary containing many basic premises that are more at home in paganism, with its reflexive privileging of kinship bonds over the duties of universal humanity, and its drive to self-assertion rather than self-denial. For example, what Wolfe calls "natural aspirations for national greatness" (p. 171) looks suspiciously like what St. Augustine called *libido dominandi*.

Moreover, we might reasonably ask what the practical upshot of these ruminations on nationhood and cultural particularity is in modern America. For better or for worse, America has been a melting pot for centuries, largely dissolving many ethnic traditions into a diverse national blend. Although Wolfe denies that he uses the word *ethnos* to mean "race," the only real ethnic faultlines in modern America are racial in character. Accordingly, his arguments for re-erecting ethnic barriers will certainly sound racist to many readers, and have indeed been embraced as such by white nationalist organizations like VDARE.

These worries about practical import become particularly urgent when we turn our attention to "Book 3," with its fierce denunciations of contemporary American political institutions and implicit (or explicit?) calls for revolutionary action to overthrow these institutions. Here Wolfe does not

merely leave behind his earlier sober retrieval of historic Protestant political principles, but at certain points contradicts them. Our forebears counseled extreme caution before undertaking active political resistance, even to openly tyrannical authority, and distinguished between the legitimate attempt to *maintain* a Christian commonwealth by law and the foolhardy attempt to *create* one by force. Wolfe, however, explicitly argues that a Christian minority can revolt against a surrounding society that hates them and “after successfully revolting, establish over *all* of the population a Christian commonwealth” (pp. 345–46, emphasis original).

As his Epilogue makes clear, this is no mere hypothetical thought experiment but a genuine proposal for how American Christians should frame their political action in the next generation. Such a proposal is sure to tickle the ears of an increasingly marginalized and angry swath of middle America, convinced that politics as usual is doomed to fail us. And let us make no mistake: they are right to be angry at political and religious leaders who have sold the Christian birthright of their nation and conspired to replace public morality with public immorality. But the true path toward retrieval and rebuilding will be a much longer, slower, and harder one than the revolution of the saints to which Wolfe invites us.

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## — MISSION AND CULTURE —

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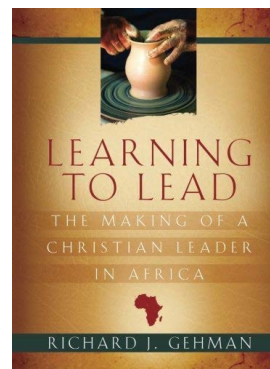
Richard J. Gehman. *Learning to Lead: The Making of a Christian Leader in Africa*. Nairobi: Oasis International, 2008. xiii + 335 pp. £9.99/\$18.99.

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Those of us who have been fortunate enough to witness the perseverance and zeal with which so many African pastors conduct their local church ministries tend to disagree with the old adage that the African church is ‘a mile-wide and an inch-deep’. Nonetheless, rapid numerical Christian growth across sub-Saharan Africa has highlighted the urgent need across the continent for more local leaders of godly character to shepherd such growing flocks in Christ-honoring ways. In pursuit of this goal, Richard Gehrman’s book, *Learning to Lead: The Making of a Christian Leader in Africa* is a valuable contribution toward developing local, African leaders and meeting such needs.

Having been sent from the US to serve as a missionary in Africa, Gehman spent 36 years in Kenya. Most of his ministry was devoted to theological education. Shortly before his retirement he visited and interviewed over 170 of his former students serving in ministry across Eastern Africa. He recounts these travels and interviews in a section entitled the ‘sweet and sour of leadership’, as he records stories of struggles and successes in pastoral work (p. 4). This book beneficially blends these personal testimonies with extensive Biblical examination to call African church leaders to a leadership founded on Christ’s work, rooted in God’s word, and transformed inwardly by the Spirit’s activity.

Conscious of so many moral failings in ministers across the continent—including some he taught and trained (p. vii)—the primacy of a pastor’s godly character is a crucial theme throughout the book. Since this focus on pastoral character resonates outside of Africa too, readers outside of the African



continent will benefit as they reflect on Gehman's reflections about the importance of integrity, humility, and purity. The abundant Scripture references across almost every chapter demonstrate overt trust in the authority, necessity, and relevance of the Bible that characterises so much of the African church today. Sadly, this is a feature that stands in a contrast to some Western Christian leadership texts today that seem more overtly premised on dialogue with management theory and sociology.

*Learning to Lead* contains 40 chapters of 5–10 pages each, with carefully framed application questions at the end of each chapter. As such, the book lends itself to a 40-day commitment to personal study, or several months of weekly group discussions with leadership peers. Gehman acknowledges that the setting and focus of this book is explicitly African. However, the general leadership principles derived through the extensive biblical analysis are of course widely applicable, and I want to emphasize the fact that Western readers will likely find themselves pleasantly refreshed, rebuked, and roused by the diverse testimonies, perspectives, and applications from African believers which they would not find in books from and for their own context. Indigenous tales such as the tracker who so exaggerated his own role in the kill that his fellow hunters abandoned him to drag the heavy carcass alone back to the village communicate aspects of leadership (in that case, humility) in fresh and fun ways to global leaders perhaps weary and wary of leadership anecdotes from Western business settings (p. 83). Gehman's discussion of how far traditional African chieftdom serves as an appropriate contextual model for local church leadership is not only crucial for African pastors but also provides an illuminating and relevant challenge to Western leaders who may have similar questions concerning status and authority but couched in different terminologies and constructs (pp. 97–102).

Despite these praiseworthy strengths, there is an unfortunate lack of extensive discussion on the implications for church leaders of patron-client relationships and social capital. Such an omission misses an opportunity to consider how these fundamental components of many African cultures affect leadership in African churches. Similarly, my seminary students in Uganda would benefit from more extensive and deeper engagement with questions of spiritual warfare and fear-power dynamics in pastoral leadership. Some discussion from Gehman on how his work fits into the emerging field of African leadership studies would make the book more academically significant for those using it as part of formal theological training. Despite these critiques, I use the book profitably in my teaching, and others involved in Christian leadership training across Africa in any form would particularly benefit from engaging deeply with this book alongside their students.

*Themelios* readers may be surprised to find here a review for a book published 15 years ago from and primarily for an African setting. However, given its ongoing publication and widespread use across the continent, its contemporary relevance, its distinctive contextual setting, and its unashamedly biblical approach, there is little reason why the book shouldn't be enjoyed by Western pastors as a fruitful and fulfilling activity in itself. Indeed, biblically based and culturally appropriate models for leadership development deserve a greater place in global training curriculums. Perhaps giving attention to this volume can contribute to encouraging local believers in other majority world contexts to lend their voices to this vital aspect of biblical training. Furthermore, reading it would enable these Western pastors to learn about some of the leadership issues being discussed in an African context. This knowledge can help them to pray more specifically and informedly for pastors of the African church that will soon contain 40% of the world's Christians. Indeed, these are the brothers who will be leading and shaping global theological conversations in the coming years. Given the growth of the church across



sub-Saharan Africa, it is in the best interests for all of us in God's global church to understand, pray for, learn from, and partner with, African Christian leaders.

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A. S. Ibrahim. *Reaching your Muslim Neighbor with the Gospel*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022. 176 pp. £9.99/\$12.99.

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In this brief, introductory volume Ayman Ibrahim departs from his customary academic work to branch out into more popular writing as he offers practical advice on reaching your Muslim neighbor with the gospel.

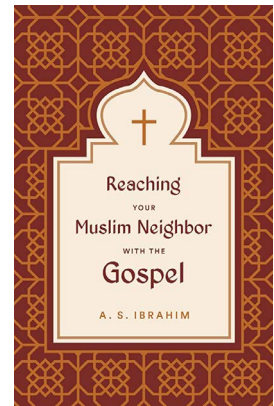
The book is divided into two parts. The first part addresses “Understanding Muslims and Islam” (pp. 17–94). He begins by explaining that there are many ways of living out Islam. This is indeed a practical and important point. Many times, when I have been teaching on Islam, someone has challenged something I have said by anecdotally quipping, “Well, I had a Pakistani roommate, and he didn't believe that.” While we can outline the heart of Islamic teaching and we can trace its historical development and divergence, we cannot provide an all-encompassing definition that would satisfy all Muslims. There are always exceptions. Islam is no monolith.

Ibrahim also challenges the notion that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world. He notes that a good number of people are leaving Islam, and that the Christian should respond with intercession and evangelism rather than fear. And yes, while some Muslims are genuinely militant and violent, the great majority are not.

In chapter 3 he presents us with his own philosophy for Muslim evangelism, which is decidedly Christo-centric. While this might seem an obvious suggestion, it entails abandoning the popular polemic approach of attacking Islam and/or Muhammad. While employed fruitfully by a few highly-educated people—Zakaria Boutros, David Wood—polemical attack is not what Ibrahim advises his readers to emulate. In my own 18 years of experience working with Muslims, Muslim seekers, ex-Muslims, and converts from Islam, Ibrahim's advice is solid.

But this Christo-centric approach also means being suspicious of using the Qur'an to evangelize Muslims. Ibrahim knows the Qur'an well, and if he references it, he is clear that he does not believe it to be a divine book. Again, this stands in contrast with some popular methods that run the risk of endorsing the Qur'an in the way that they encourage its use.

Chapter 4 encourages us to minister out of love, not fear. Chapter 5 covers key elements of how Muslims view the world and live in it. He briefly discusses some important topics, like the *umma* and the *jihad*. Chapter 6 explores some common misconceptions that Muslims have about Christianity. These include crucial beliefs like the Trinity and the validity of the texts of the Bible, namely that they have not been corrupted. Ibrahim offers us some possible paths of apologetics that he has used in the past.



Part 2 of the book turns its attention to offering “Tools for evangelizing Muslims” (pp. 93–161). Having explained some basic things about Muslims and Islam, Ibrahim moves on to address some basic suggestions for how to communicate the Gospel to Muslims. In this chapter the Christo-centric philosophy is applied, and we are told to emphasize the sinfulness of humanity. This advice comes from recognizing that Muslims believe in original innocence. He also offers some practical questions and phrases that can be used to explore topics like the incarnation. And, very practically, he recommends we ask questions and employ good skills as listeners in order to lead to deeper understanding and deeper conversations. Chapters 8 and 9 remind the reader of the importance of prayer and provide some irenic questions for engaging in fruitful conversations about the gospel and for getting to know our Muslim neighbor better.

Chapter 10 focuses on “Proclaiming Christ.” While it may seem an odd critique for a minister to identify, the book has been discussing the proclamation of Christ all along. After the chapter on his Christo-centric approach to evangelism, this chapter appears redundant. Reading the chapter, however, one might find that the error is a misleading chapter title. Instead of “Proclaiming Christ,” this chapter might better be titled, “Using Scripture to Connect with Muslims.” The material in the chapter is good, but the titling risks encouraging readers to skip over what might appear to be repeated material.

Chapter 11, “Avoiding Pitfalls,” is full of helpful, common-sense advice: Do not become angry; do not go too fast, nor too slow; don’t go down that rabbit trail, focus on the main topic; and so on.

As I am reading Ibrahim’s work, the word that comes to mind is “subtle”—a word etymologically linked to the Latin *sub tela*, which refers to a cloth so fine that one cannot feel the individual threads. That is because Ibrahim weaves fine threads of such subtlety throughout his book as he makes proposals in the early part of the book and then employs them in the later part without unnecessarily calling attention to what he is doing. For instance, following his own advice, Ibrahim avoids affirming Muhammad as a true prophet while remaining respectful. Likewise, he references the Qur’an at times, but he does so without insinuating that it is authoritative or trustworthy.

My favorite thing about this book is the various memories that the author shares from growing up in Egypt. Ibrahim sprinkles stories of his childhood throughout, such as his recollections of not being allowed to touch a Qur’an or how the Christians of Egypt often lived in quietness and fear and in so doing, he offers us insights that other authors could not.

This is an introductory book. If you have studied the basic tenets of Islam and or read about apologetics for Islam, you’re not going to encounter much new material in this book. This should not be understood as a critique, however, because introductions have their own place in the academic ecosystem. This is a readable, brief, and affordable book for the Christian who is beginning to learn about Islam and their Muslim friends and neighbors. Ibrahim has provided a great resource for ministers to recommend to those in their churches who are just beginning to grasp the magnificence and wonder of the Church’s mission to evangelize Muslims.

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Sharon James. *Ann Judson: A Missionary Life for Burma*. Leyland, England: Evangelical Press, 2015. 288 pp. £12.99/\$14.99.

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In 1812, Ann Hasseltine Judson left the shores of North America as one of the first female American missionaries and became a catalyst for subsequent missionary endeavors during her generation and for generations to come. Ann's influence flowed beyond the shores of America to Britain, spurring on the missionary movement in both countries through her book, *An Account of the American Baptist Mission to the Burman Empire* (1823). The story of Ann's short life serves as an inspirational commitment to Jesus, to her husband, and to bring the gospel to people who had not yet heard of Jesus.

*Ann Judson: A Missionary Life for Burma* is the new edition to Sharon James's *My Heart in Her Hands* (1998). Trained as a historian at Cambridge, James has written nine books, three of which recount six biographical accounts of historical Christian women. Among the noteworthy lives she has investigated, Ann Judson's story stands out for James (p. 9). In an effort to re-popularize Judson's story, James's book includes significant portions of a memoir initially published in 1829, which also features portions of Judson's diaries along with the writings of Emily Judson, a later wife of Ann's widowed husband (p. 12).

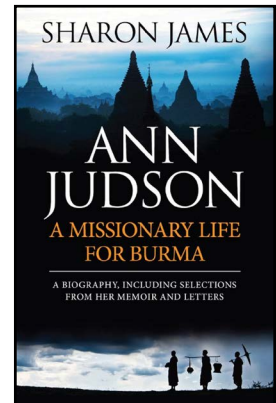
James's book traces Ann's life from her 1789 birth in Bradford, Massachusetts, to her marriage to Adoniram Judson at the age of twenty-three, in 1812. Within two weeks, the couple set sail as part of the first American Protestant missionaries to the East. James writes of their ordination service on February 6, 1812, "The historic significance of this service cannot be overestimated: America was sending abroad the first of what was to become, to date, the mightiest missionary force in Christian history" (p. 47).

While much of the action of the Judsons' ministry took place on the field, James demonstrates that the Judsons' journey to Burma was formative in their subsequent ministry. While traveling to their field, they became baptistic in their theological convictions, separated from their co-missionaries, endured the threat of multiple deportations from India, and suffered the deaths of a fellow missionary-companion and their own stillborn child.

Having delivered the Judsons finally to their field of service, James turns attention to the thirteen years of Ann's ministry in Burma leading up to her early death at the age of thirty-seven. Although immense difficulty and tragedy accompanied the whole of Ann and Adoniram Judson's life together, their final two years captured the imaginations of Christians and inspired others to give their all for Christ. When the Judsons arrived in 1813, there were no known Christians among the Burmese people. However, at the time of Adoniram's death (1850), a Bible, dictionary, tracts, and catechism existed in Burmese, and a church was established among the Karen people (p. 274).

The fact that James has reintroduced a new generation to Ann Judson, especially reviving Ann's journals and letters, is a considerable strength of this volume. Likewise, by recounting Ann's example, the book issues a reminder of the difficulties—and the incredible reward—of sowing initial gospel seeds in an unengaged, unreached culture. James includes a glimpse of the current state of Christianity among the Burmese that is both encouraging (with many in the minority population claiming Christ) and compelling (with only 8.9 percent of the population professing Christianity) (p. 274).

Because of the extraordinary circumstances the Judsons endured, Ann seems almost super-human. This may actually be the one major weakness of this biography: the lack of commentary that would



caution against hero worship or believing Ann's commitment to surpass that of average Christians. Indeed, the kind of veracious devotion Ann exhibited was extraordinary. But it is only possible through the power of the Holy Spirit. And Ann would want us to see the equipping power of the God she served more than seeing her as a heroine of her own making.

Overall, James writes in an easy-to-read format that is accessible to the general reader. James delivers a tragic yet joyful, complicated yet singularly focused story. It is the story of one Christian lady who has inspired generations on multiple continents to count and pay the considerable costs of following the Lord to difficult places so that all may know of Jesus and have the opportunity to follow him.

This book benefits missionaries, pastors, anyone in ministry, and Jesus-lovers alike. Ann's life reminds us of our calling to share in the Lord's suffering (1 Pet 4:12–19) and the importance of counting the cost (Luke 14:27–28) of following Jesus. Both Ann and Adoniram's commitment to the Lord, to one another, to fellow Christians nearby, and to the Christian obligation to take the gospel to the lost (Matt 28:18–20; Rom 1:14–15) is not unique to those specially called to take the gospel to the unreached. The practical outworking of each Christian's commitment to Jesus's commission of gospel proclamation may vary, but a commitment to the cause is shared. James declares her intent for the newest edition of Ann's biography to "stir up concern for the people of Burma" and "inspire concern for the many people groups" who have yet to hear the gospel of Jesus (p. 9). Her success in this aim encourages me to pray that it enjoys wide readership and stirs up many more Judsons today.

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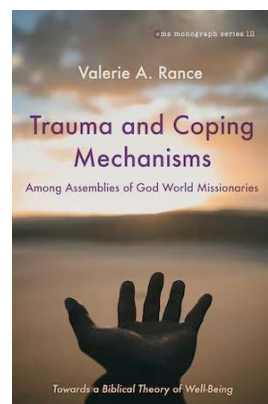
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Valerie A. Rance. *Trauma and Coping Mechanisms among Assemblies of God World Missionaries: Towards a Biblical Theory of Well-Being*. Evangelical Missiological Society Monograph Series 12. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021. 332 pp. £38.00/\$43.00.

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It is common for missionaries to experience frequent traumatic events in addition to the high levels of stressors involved in daily cross-cultural living. The effects of this trauma often lead to missionary attrition. In this published form of her doctoral dissertation, Valerie A. Rance seeks to prevent such attrition by studying the way that 254 Assemblies of God World Missions (AGWM) missionaries serving in seven different areas of the world have handled the traumatic events they have experienced while serving as missionaries. Rance's contribution comes as she combines this contemporary data with an exploration of how twenty-three men and women of the Bible coped with traumatic events. Her aim is to develop a biblical theology of well-being which can "assist missionaries to deal with the trauma they will face on the field" (p. xv).

The author herself has been an AGWM missionary since 1984, living in El Salvador during a civil war and experiencing traumatic events such as armed robbery of her home, violent activity from gangs, and natural disasters. Because she was curious why different missionaries had different responses to trauma, she pursued her MA in counseling focused on trauma and PTSD. Ministerially, her goal was to help traumatized missionaries stay on the field and experience post traumatic growth instead of



merely experiencing post-traumatic stress. Additionally, Rance sought to equip herself and others with the ability to prepare new missionaries with the coping skills needed to endure traumatic events while holding on to faith and calling.

After introducing her research topic and methodology in chapter 1, Rance covers a brief history of research on coping with trauma and understanding suffering, investigating the interplay and areas of similarity and difference in secular and biblical approaches (ch. 2). As one would expect, she details the reasons why missionaries have higher than average levels of traumatic stress and she sketches some of the various negative outcomes of this stress. In addition, however, she intentionally moves beyond this to explore ways of coping with traumatic stress to help prevent attrition and foster missionary well-being on the field. Therein lies her original contribution in the latter portion of her dissertation.

In chapter 3, Rance explores how several biblical characters coped with the suffering caused by the traumatic events they experienced by evaluating them using the Trauma Event Questionnaire and giving them trauma classifications. This allows Rance to use contemporary clinical language to compare biblical characters' experiences with modern-day people living through similar events. Lest the reader accuse her of anachronism, it is important to point out that Rance readily admits that she is necessarily interpreting their stories using her own perspective, since they were not self-reporting but were only described in Scripture.

Among others, Paul is given as an example of a biblical character who endured a traumatic accident (shipwreck), and Moses as someone who experienced natural trauma (witnessing the ten plagues). Many other biblical figures are shown to have experienced violent crime, war related trauma, hostage events, physical and/or sexual abuse, various kinds of secondary traumas, and psychological/physical trauma. Based on external evaluation, Rance concludes—with the concession that this is well-researched conjecture—that Daniel, David, Elijah, Job, and Naomi exhibit some symptoms of PTSD. Rance observes, however, that “most of the 23 biblical characters studied rebounded from their traumatic experiences and thrived. Even those who exhibited PTSD symptomatology seemed to cope with their misfortune and grew godlier in character” (p. 96).

This growth was mediated by various coping mechanisms, chief among which was exercising trust in God. Other means of coping include asking God for help, lamenting, worshiping, holding on to a sense of purpose or call, understanding oneself as working in partnership with God, accepting help from friends and family, and forming a theology of suffering. Rance asserts that by learning from the twenty-three men and women of the Bible which she studied, we can begin to articulate a biblical theology of well-being which will be of use in missionary member care—and perhaps in wider contexts—today.

Chapter 4 contains the synthesis and discussion of a trauma and coping survey which was completed electronically by 254 AGWM missionaries serving in seven regions around the globe to help Rance with her research. She discovered that there were “statistical differences in the development of PTSD and the missionaries' satisfaction with life (optimism) and negative religious coping” (p. 217). Specific training in coping with trauma as well as more general cross-cultural training for missionaries were also seen to decrease incidence of PTSD among AGWM missionaries surveyed. In chapter 5, Rance brings her biblical research and insights from interviews together to formulate her Biblical Theory of Well-Being as a tool which can be used in trauma-management training for missionaries.

Strengths of this book include the author's lived experience as a long-term missionary along with her training as a counselor focused on trauma and PTSD. In addition, the extensive and diverse participants in her missionary survey lend credibility to her research. As Rance herself is aware, the

validity of assessing biblical characters for traumatization and PTSD using tools that require the subject to self-report is open to critique. However, Rance admits the clinical limitations of this method and encourages her readers to simply engage in an imaginative exercise, asking what can be learned if these characters were indeed emotionally affected by the tribulations they went through. I would recommend this book to missionaries, missionary educators, and others who want to glean biblical encouragement for weathering the trials of life with hope.

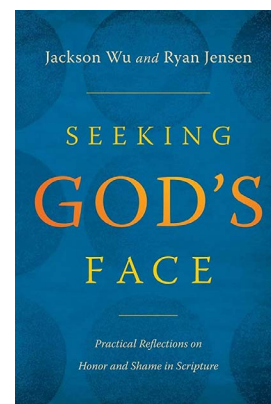
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Jackson Wu and Ryan Jensen. *Seeking God's Face: Practical Reflections on Honor and Shame in Scripture*. Houston: Lucid Books, 2022. xii + 203 pp. £15.70/\$18.99.

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In *Seeking God's Face*, two able scholars have provided the church with a practical resource for considering the biblical concepts of honor and shame. Brad Vaughn (formerly Jackson Wu) is a former cross-cultural servant and instructor in China and author of many books related to issues of honor and shame. Ryan Jensen is also a writer and scholar with several years of his own experience in East Asia. This gem of a book consists of 101 practical reflections on honor and shame from Scripture. Following a similar pattern throughout, the two-page reflections serve as a sort of devotional book. Each chapter includes a brief discussion of a specific biblical text that deals with honor and shame. Rather than importing mere sociological definitions of these concepts, the authors allow the Bible to define and use these terms within its own horizons. The authors reflect briefly on the texts through what they title a “Parting Reflection,” which guides readers to consider the implications of the text for their own life. Finally, a “Parting Prayer” closes each reflection with doxology and devotion.



What the authors provide is not a work that enters the various debates involving honor and shame issues. Neither is it a commentary that carefully explicates honor-shame through exegetical insights mined from the various texts they highlight. Instead, it is primarily a theologically-informed devotional guide that attunes readers to the biblical concepts of honor and shame (along with other notions that carry strong honor-shame connotations such as face, purity, belonging and group membership, reciprocity, hospitality, and status reversal). While devotional in tone, as I scribbled notes and vigorously underlined throughout this book, I was struck by the profundity of these honor- and shame-related insights. The gravity of their contribution was apparent both in the various texts the authors chose to engage and—perhaps more importantly—powerful through the challenges that often deeply moved me and made me consider personally the important points the authors were presenting. In other words, the theological depth and biblical insight contained in this more “practical” work are apparent from the beginning.

Throughout, the authors make these profound and theologically-deep comments directly related to issues of honor and shame. For example, they are keen to point out that biblically speaking, life and worship begin in awe and God’s *awe-someness*. Likewise, they point out the simple-yet-expansive reality that sin is inextricably connected to dishonor. And, Christ’s followers need to “lose face” by admitting

sin and weakness to give God face and honor, a proper sense of shame is a major tool God uses to draw us to the cross. As one might expect, some of the applications and insights involve direct challenges to a Western Christian's inherited way of living. For example, they push readers to ask, "How often do I seek recognition and honor? How much am I centered in divine *enoughness* rather than seeking honor and respect through personal comparisons? Do I make God's honor a significant motivation for my pursuit of holiness and discipleship? Do I take my feelings of shame directly to God in prayer? How often do I make it a point to give God glory in public and in front of others?" One particularly impressive section comes through a meditation upon Jesus's use of rehabilitative and constructive shame with Peter in John 21. There the chapter notes, "Jesus Lovingly Shames Peter." Finally, and perhaps counterintuitively, the authors ponder what it might look like to engage in "Christian boasting" (see the chapter with reflections on 2 Cor 12:6).

While this is a critical review, there is little to critique here. One could wish that the authors had covered some of the expected and important texts related to honor and shame issues. For example, Luke 15 and the parable of the father and two sons is conspicuously absent from the book along with the many honor-shame related texts from the book of Revelation. But what Vaughn and Jensen seem to do, rather, is take many texts that would not obviously contain honor-shame resonances and demonstrate how these in fact lead to significant honor-shame spiritual lessons. This is merely a hypothesis, however, as no explanation is given for the criteria for passage selection.

What I wish to emphasize most is that this book is *not* simply for cross-cultural servants who engage in ostensibly "honor-shame" contexts. In fact, I can see at least four potential uses for this helpful resource. First, and perhaps most obviously, *Seeking God's Face* is perfect for personal devotions. Each discrete chapter draws a reader deeper into the biblical text with penetrating insights but also issues real spiritual challenges to examine one's life and implement these insights. The closing "Parting Prayer" is generally on theme with the chapter contents and forms a nice ending to each chapter. This would also provide an excellent set of resources for small group bible studies, especially for those that might be interested in going deeper into the areas of honor and shame. Additionally, for anyone who engages in teaching, this book would be an immensely helpful resource for highlighting honor-shame dynamics in scripture and how these can impact our personal lives. Finally, this volume might provide an excellent way to nudge those who might question or be resistant to recognizing the importance of honor-shame issues into considering the contemporary and scriptural relevance of such.

*Seeking God's Face* demonstrates the authors' clear and deep understanding of theology, the Bible, and honor-shame issues. Bringing these together, the book creates discrete learning opportunities that also contain a deeply personal, spiritual focus. What Jensen and Vaughn ultimately offer is a guidebook for how to embrace a biblical spirituality of honor and shame. Those who invest time into this book will surely experience the honor-laden blessings of the Priestly Blessing of Numbers 6:24–26, that God's face would shine brightly upon them, and his face would turn toward them.

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