

themelios

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DESCRIPTION

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EDITORS

General Editor: Brian Tabb
Bethlehem College and Seminary
720 13th Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55415, USA
brian.tabb@thegospelcoalition.org

Contributing Editor: D. A. Carson
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School
2065 Half Day Road
Deerfield, IL 60015, USA
themelios@thegospelcoalition.org

Contributing Editor: Daniel Strange
Crosslands Forum
MEA House, Ellison Place
Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE1 8XS UK
dan.strange@crosslands.training

Administrator: Andy Naselli
Bethlehem College and Seminary
720 13th Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55415, USA
themelios@thegospelcoalition.org

BOOK REVIEW EDITORS

Old Testament: Peter Lau
Equip Gospel Ministries
31A, Jalan SS 2/64, SS 2
47300 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia
peter.lau@thegospelcoalition.org

New Testament: David Starling
Morling College
120 Herring Road
Macquarie Park, NSW 2113, Australia
david.starling@thegospelcoalition.org

History and Historical Theology:
Geoff Chang
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
5001 N Oak Trafficway
Kansas City, MO 64118
geoff.chang@thegospelcoalition.org

Systematic Theology: Julián Gutiérrez
United Church of Bogotá
Carrera 4 # 69-06
Bogotá D.C., Colombia
julian.gutierrez@thegospelcoalition.org

Ethics and Pastoralia: Rob Smith
Sydney Missionary & Bible College
43 Badminton Road
Croydon, NSW 2132, Australia
rob.smith@thegospelcoalition.org

Mission and Culture:
Matthew Bennett
Cedarville University
251 N. Main St.
Cedarville, OH 45314 USA
matt.bennett@thegospelcoalition.org

EDITORIAL BOARD

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REVIEWS

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EDITORIAL

On Disagreements in Ministry

— Brian J. Tabb —

Brian Tabb is interim president and professor of biblical studies at Bethlehem College and Seminary in Minneapolis and general editor of Themelios.

“And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.” (Acts 15:39–40)

Every seasoned pastor and organizational leader experiences significant conflicts and disagreements with fellow staff members, elders, or ministry colleagues. There are various reasons for such disputes: theological convictions, ministry strategies and priorities, leadership styles, communication gaps, perspectives about partnerships, and more. While many conflicts can be resolved to preserve and strengthen ministry partnerships, disagreements often prompt coworkers to part ways.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones and John Stott, the most prominent evangelical pastors in London in the 1960s, famously clashed at the National Assembly of Evangelicals in October 1966.¹ The older Lloyd-Jones addressed the assembly (chaired by the younger Stott) with a provocative call for evangelicals to show “evangelical ecumenicity” and separate from doctrinally mixed denominations. Stott then took the stage and sharply criticized Lloyd-Jones before the assembly, warning attendees not to “make a precipitate decision” in response to the Doctor’s moving message.² Their public dispute opened a rift in the evangelical movement of the day. This parting of the ways was followed a few years later by the difficult split in July 1970 between Lloyd-Jones and J. I. Packer over the latter’s decision to co-author *Growing into Union* with another Anglican evangelical and two Anglo-Catholics. This separation brought an end to the Puritan Studies Conference that Lloyd-Jones and Packer had co-founded.³ Three decades after Lloyd-Jones’s death, Packer reflected irenically on the legacy of his longtime friend and mentor:

To be sure, our ways parted abruptly when he realized that on the question of local church alignment I, a would-be reforming Anglican, was not with him nor was ever

¹ The definitive account is Andrew Atherstone, “Lloyd-Jones and the Anglican Secession Crisis,” in *Engaging with Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Life and Legacy of “the Doctor,”* ed. Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones (London: Apollos, 2011), 261–92.

² Cited in Atherstone, “Lloyd-Jones and the Anglican Secession Crisis,” 271.

³ Atherstone, “Lloyd-Jones and the Anglican Secession Crisis,” 291. Cf. Iain H. Murray, “The End of the Puritan Conference,” *Banner of Truth*, 12 March 2010, <https://tinyurl.com/mwvwaye5>. Lloyd-Jones’s formative influence on Packer is discussed by Kenneth J. Stewart, “The Young J. I. Packer as a ‘New Warfield’? A Chapter in the Post-1930 Revival of Reformed Theology,” *Themelios* 37.3 (2022): 516–17.

likely to be. But I have never ceased to regard him as a great man ... a man whom God used powerfully to recall British evangelicals, both individually and corporately, to their true roots in the Bible, in the gospel and in theology—in other words, in Christ—at a time when such a recall was badly needed.⁴

Acts 15:36–41 recounts the end of the early church’s most important and fruitful missionary partnership between Barnabas and Paul.⁵ This article reflects on the history of their partnership, the nature of their “sharp disagreement,” and their reasons for separating, in order to glean lessons for leaders today who face challenging conflicts in ministry.

1. Paul and Barnabas’s Ministry Partnership

The stunning transformation of Saul (Paul) from violent persecutor to bold preacher was repeatedly met with suspicion and resistance by disciples. When the Lord instructed Ananias in a vision to go and minister to Saul, the disciple voiced strong reservations: “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem” (Acts 9:13). Further revelations about Saul’s future suffering and ministry finally moved Ananias to embrace this formidable opponent as “brother Saul” and baptize him (9:17–18).⁶ Several years later (Gal 1:18) when Saul traveled to Jerusalem and attempted to join the church, he again faced questions and apprehension: “they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple” (Acts 9:26). But for the Jerusalem saints, it was not a heavenly vision but a courageous mediator that helped them to overcome their fears about Saul: “Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus” (9:27). He vouched for Saul’s genuine encounter with Christ and his fearless preaching in Christ’s name. Barnabas’s efforts led the apostles and Jerusalem saints to welcome Saul as a fellow believer and trusted minister partner, as “he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord” (9:28). This new relationship between Barnabas and Saul soon developed into a remarkably fruitful ministry partnership.

Later, Barnabas traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch to visit the many new converts from among the Greeks. Observing God’s genuine work among these people, Barnabas (whose name means “son of encouragement” [υἱὸς παρακλήσεως, 4:36]), then “encouraged [παρεκάλει] all of them to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts” (11:23). He also wisely recognized that he needed help to shepherd the burgeoning church. So he went to considerable effort to locate Saul, traveling 130 miles to Saul’s hometown of Tarsus (22:3)—an eight-day journey by land.⁷ Barnabas returned to Antioch with Saul, and “for a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people (11:25–26).

⁴ J. I. Packer, “Foreword,” in *Engaging with Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Life and Legacy of “the Doctor,”* ed. Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones (London: Apollos, 2011), 10.

⁵ Luke uses the Hebrew name “Saul” until Acts 13:9 and his Roman name “Paul” thereafter when recounting his missionary outreach in various Greco-Roman cities. See Colin J. Hemer, “The Name of Paul,” *TynBul* 36 (1985): 179–83; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 559.

⁶ I discuss this “double conversion” of Saul and the church more fully in *Suffering in Ancient Worldview: Luke, Seneca, and 4 Maccabees in Dialogue*, LNTS 569 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 143–49.

⁷ For this time and distance calculation, see Schnabel, *Acts*, 523.523. Schnabel posits that Saul was not actually in Tarsus but was engaged elsewhere in ministry, since Barnabas need to “look for” him.

In response to a severe famine, the believers in Antioch sent Barnabas and Saul with a financial gift for the afflicted saints in Judea (11:29–30).⁸ They undertook this lengthy journey during a time of danger and hardship and evidently experienced “the help that comes from God” (26:22) as they completed their service. After successfully delivering relief funds to the Jerusalem church, Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch. Luke notes that John (whose other name was Mark) accompanied them on their return journey (12:25), an important detail that sets up their later dispute about Mark’s involvement in their mission (15:37–39).

While Barnabas and Saul were worshiping with other church leaders in Antioch, the Holy Spirit called them to a new work (13:2), which recalls the Lord’s earlier choice of Saul as his “chosen instrument” (9:15). The church then commissioned the missionaries and they set off for Barnabas’s homeland of Cyprus (13:4; cf. 4:36).

Mark initially accompanied them from Antioch, but he “left them [ἀποχωρήσας ἀπ’ αὐτῶν] and returned to Jerusalem” (13:13). After Mark’s departure, Paul and Barnabas continued together to Antioch in Pisidia (13:14), Iconium (13:51), Lystra and Derbe (14:6), eventually returning to Antioch to report “all that God had done with them” (14:26–27). Throughout their journeys, the missionaries boldly proclaimed the word of the Lord, encountered stiff opposition and persecution, made many disciples, and appointed local church leaders (14:21–23).

Paul and Barnabas then “had no small dissension and debate” with traveling teachers who insisted on circumcision for salvation (15:1–2), and they returned to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders about the matter (15:6). The Jerusalem leaders selected Paul and Barnabas, along with other delegates, to deliver the letter with their decision to the church in Antioch (15:22). Their letter glowingly commends “our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have given over their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (15:26).⁹ After delivering the letter, the missionaries remained in Antioch and resumed their teaching and preaching work that had been interrupted by the earlier theological controversy (15:35; cf. 15:1–2).

Thus, the son of encouragement and the persecutor-turned-preacher effectively partnered to evangelize new regions, establish and strengthen local churches, and promote the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers. Barnabas’s advocacy helped to legitimize Saul before the afflicted saints in Jerusalem, Saul provided essential reinforcement for Barnabas’s ministry in Antioch, and the Holy Spirit directed the church to set apart these two men for a new assignment leading to gospel advance “unto the ends of the earth” (Acts 13:47).¹⁰

⁸ Scholars debate the chronological relationship of events in Acts 11–12. Herod’s death precedes the famine and subsequent relief visit by at least three years, according to C. K. Barrett, *Acts 1–14*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 1994), 594. Alternatively, Schnabel (*Acts*, 535) plausibly understands “at that time” in 12:1 as a general reference to Agrippa’s rule from AD 41 to 44, while Barnabas and Saul travel to Jerusalem in AD 44.

⁹ While English versions customarily render παραδεδωκόσιν τὰς ψυχὰς αὐτῶν (15:26) as “risked their lives,” the phrase more likely conveys their decisive consecration or devotion, not repeated exposure to danger. Cf. Alexander N. Kirk, *The Departure of an Apostle: Paul’s Death Anticipated and Remembered*, WUNT 2/406 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 43.

¹⁰ For further discussion of this passage and its biblical-theological significance, see Brian J. Tabb, “Sharing the Servant’s Mission: Isaiah 49:6 in Luke-Acts,” *JETS* 65.3 (2022): 509–22.

2. Paul and Barnabas's Disagreement and Separation

This dynamic missionary partnership comes to a surprising end in Acts 15:36–41.¹¹ After their extended time of teaching, preaching, and fellowship in Antioch, Paul suggested to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are” (15:36). This follows their earlier pattern of return visits to believers in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, in which they strengthened the disciples, encouraged them in the faith, and appointed elders for the congregations (14:21–23).

While they evidently shared a desire to see and strengthen the churches they had established, Paul and Barnabas differed significantly in their approach to a potential traveling companion. Luke explains, “Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work” (15:37–38).¹²

The narrative does not elaborate on the reasons for Mark's departure in 13:13, though commentators have proposed various suggestions.¹³ The Greek term ἀποχωρέω, rendered “left” in most modern translations, sometimes carries a stronger connotation of desertion (3 Macc 2:33) or falling back in fear (Jer 26:5 LXX).¹⁴ Evidently Paul counted on Mark continuing with them in this work (Acts 15:38), and ancient writers expected disciples to remain faithful to their teachers and true friends to be loyal even through hardship.¹⁵

Barnabas may have desired to bring along Mark because they were relatives—Colossians 4:10 refers to “Mark the cousin [ἀνεψιός] of Barnabas.” This intention may have reflected Barnabas's generous disposition “to give those who failed a second chance.”¹⁶ Alternatively, some interpreters have suggested theological and missiological differences underlying the conflict between Paul and Barnabas, based on Paul's assessment in Galatians 2:13 that “even Barnabas was led astray” by the Jews in Antioch.¹⁷ This

¹¹ Some commentators (e.g., Schnabel, *Acts*, 661) view Acts 15:35 as the start of a new literary unit; more likely, the conjunction δέ and the fronted prepositional phrase Μετὰ τινὰς ἡμέρας (“after some days”) in 15:36 introduce a scene change and supply a temporal frame of reference for what follows. Cf. Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 216–20. Luke elsewhere uses similar constructions to introduce new sections in Acts 21:15 (Μετὰ δὲ τὰς ἡμέρας), 24:1 (Μετὰ δὲ πέντε ἡμέρας), 24:24 (Μετὰ δὲ ἡμέρας τινάς), 28:11 (Μετὰ δὲ τρεῖς μῆνας), and 28:17 (Ἐγένετο δὲ μετὰ ἡμέρας τρεῖς).

¹² Codex Bezae (D) expands on Paul's rationale in 15:38: “But Paul was not willing, saying that one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work for which they had been sent, should not be with them,” as noted by Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 388.

¹³ See the survey of interpretations summarized by Barrett, *Acts*, 626–27.

¹⁴ “Deserted’ (*apostanta*) is strong language, but clearly the meaning here,” according to Carl R. Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 312.

¹⁵ For primary sources, see Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012–2015), 2:2030–31.

¹⁶ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 447. “Barnabas was willing to take a chance on risky people—he saw potential when the proven track record was failure,” according to S. Jonathan Murphy, “The Role of Barnabas in the Book of Acts,” *BSac* 167 (2010): 340.

¹⁷ For an overview of scholarship and a proposal that the events of Galatians 2:13 follow the missionaries' separation in Acts 15:39, see Alexander J. M. Wedderburn, “Paul and Barnabas: The Anatomy and Chronology of a Parting of the Ways,” in *Fair Play Diversity and Conflicts in Early Christianity*, ed. I. Dunderberg, C. M. Tuckett,

latter view is implausible for several reasons, particularly Luke's presentation of Paul and Barnabas's united opposition to the teachers calling for Gentiles to be circumcised (Acts 15:1–2, 12) and their partnership in delivering the council's letter to the Gentile believers in Antioch (15:22–35). Further, as Fitzmyer notes, "What happened in Antioch is never related in Galatians 2 to a split between Paul and Barnabas."¹⁸

Does Paul's hardline stance towards Mark in Acts 15:38 reflect his "zeal for the mission" that lacks maturity and proper perspective, while "Barnabas was mature enough to see Mark through the eyes of hope"?¹⁹ There's little basis in the text for such assertions, as Luke immediately records that the believers commended Paul and Silas and they went about strengthening the churches, leading to their continued growth (15:40–41; 16:5).

The text does not skirt their substantial conflict over Mark's involvement in the ministry: "And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other" (Acts 15:39). The Greek noun *παροξυσμός*, typically rendered "a sharp disagreement," conveys "a state of irritation expressed in argument" (BDAG) or "irritation, exasperation" (LSJ).²⁰ The cognate verb *παροξύνω* occurs in Acts 17:16 as Paul is "provoked" (ESV) or "greatly distressed" (NIV) by the idols of Athens. Evidently, Barnabas felt very strongly about welcoming back his cousin as a traveling companion, while Paul felt at least as strongly that they should not bring along Mark because he had deserted them earlier. This impassioned, principled disagreement reached an impasse, and the missionaries ended their long, fruitful partnership and went their own ways.

The book of Acts does not mention Barnabas again after he took Mark and set sail for Cyprus (15:39), focusing instead on Paul's journeys with other coworkers such as Silas (15:40), Timothy (16:3), and presumably Luke as well beginning in 16:10 ("we"). Yet Paul's letters mention both Barnabas and Mark. First Corinthians 9:6 references Paul and Barnabas's pattern of working to support themselves in ministry. This may suggest that the two were once again ministry colleagues,²¹ though "there are no other indications that Paul and Barnabas were working together at the time Paul wrote this letter."²² Regardless, Paul commends Barnabas's integrity and ministry practices to the church. He also lists Mark among his "fellow workers" who send greetings in Philemon 24 and instructed the church to welcome Barnabas's cousin in Colossians 4:10. Most remarkably, at the close of his final letter Paul, he instructs Timothy, "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry [*εὐχρηστος εἰς διακονίαν*]" (2 Tim 4:11). Mark's usefulness to Paul closely parallels the apostle's description of Onesimus: "Formerly he was useless [*ἄχρηστος*] to you, but now he is indeed useful [*εὐχρηστος*] to you and to me" (Philem

and K. Syreeni, *NovTSup* 103 (Leiden Brill, 2002). Cf. Richard N. Longenecker, "Acts," in *Luke–Acts*, ed. David E. Garland, EBC 10, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 956.

¹⁸ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, reprint ed., AB 31 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 572. For further rationale, see Schnabel, *Acts*, 662.

¹⁹ As argued by Justin R. Craun and Joshua D. Henson, "How Servant Leaders Navigate Conflict: An Analysis of Acts 15:36–41," *HTS Theologiese Studies* 78 (2022): 5–6.

²⁰ The two occurrences of *παροξυσμός* in the LXX refer to the Lord's "great irritation" (*παροξυσμῷ μεγάλῳ*) against Israel (Deut 29:27 LXX [29:28 ET]; Jer 39:37 LXX [32:37 ET]). Hebrews 10:24, the other NT use of *παροξυσμός*, positively conveys provoking others to love and good works.

²¹ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 448.

²² Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 402.

11). That Paul came to regard Mark, the unreliable deserter, as useful for gospel work “amounts to a restoration of Mark to service.”²³

Thus, Paul and Barnabas’s lengthy and fruitful partnership ended abruptly over a sharp disagreement over Mark’s involvement in their ministry. They agreed on the strategic priority of visiting the believers in each city where they had preached the gospel, but they reached an impasse over what to do with Barnabas’s cousin who had previously deserted them in Pamphylia. “Luke does not hide their sharp disagreement or the sadness of their parting company. At the same time, however, he shows that good actually came out of this situation, with two mission teams being formed, and both teams being ‘commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord’” (Acts 15:39–40).²⁴

3. Lessons about Partnerships and Disagreements

What lessons might readers today glean from the famous conflict between Paul and Barnabas?

3.1. Ministry partnerships are vital for the advance of the gospel and the growth of the church.

The Lord Jesus called twelve apostles to be with him and sent out his disciples two by two (Mark 3:13–15; Luke 10:1). Barnabas and Paul enjoyed a long and fruitful partnership in ministry, and when it concluded they joined with coworkers. Barnabas set sail with Mark to Cyprus, while Paul partnered with Silas, then Timothy, Aquila and Priscilla, and many others (15:39–40; 16:3; 18:2–3; cf. Rom 16:1–15). Barnabas and Paul characteristically appointed multiple elders or overseers in each church they visited (κατ’ ἐκκλησίαν πρεσβυτέρους, Acts 14:23; cf. 20:17, 28).²⁵

The book of Acts presents ministry partnerships as normative in local church and mission contexts to promote the church’s health and the gospel’s spread. When “a great many people were added to the Lord” in Antioch, Barnabas recognized that he needed a trusted coworker to teach these new disciples, so he went searching for Saul to join him in teaching “a great many people” (Acts 11:24–26). The biblical account presents Barnabas’s decision to partner with Saul in a favorable light, highlighting Barnabas’s godly character and the longevity and fruitfulness of their ministry in Antioch. The Antiochian church sent multiple leaders to bring relief to the saints in Judea (11:29–30), and the apostles and elders in Jerusalem carefully selected a delegation to deliver an important letter to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia (15:22–29). The plan to send Judas and Silas from the Jerusalem church alongside Paul and Barnabas signaled the church’s consensus in the decision at the Jerusalem council (“having come to one accord,” 15:25) and promoted the church’s encouragement, strengthening, and peace (15:30–34). Later, Paul was willing to set sail for Athens while leaving behind Timothy and Silas

²³ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *1–2 Timothy and Titus*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 282. Peter Orr relates Mark, the second evangelist, to both Peter (his historical source) and Paul (his theological partner) in *The Beginning of the Gospel: A Theology of Mark*, New Testament Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 18.

²⁴ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 447.

²⁵ There is longstanding debate over how to relate the various descriptions of early church leadership in the NT. For arguments supporting congregational leadership by a plurality of elders or overseers, see Benjamin L. Merkle, “The Pattern of Leadership in Acts and Paul’s Letters to Churches,” in *Shepherding God’s Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle and Thomas R. Schreiner (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 59–87.

on urgent ministry business in Macedonia, with the expectation that his trusted colleagues would join him as soon as possible (Acts 17:14–15; 18:5; 1 Thess 3:1–10). Beyond these examples in Acts, Paul refers to Prisca and Aquila, Urbanus, Timothy, Titus, Epaphroditus, Clement, Justus, Philemon, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke as his “fellow workers” (συνεργοί).²⁶ The dozens of believers mentioned in Paul’s letters show that “Paul was living in a web of relationships with people he loved” and “was actively ministering within and from these friendships.”²⁷

Many pastors, missionaries, seminary professors, and other ministers would testify to the crucial importance of partnership with others involved in gospel work. Robust friendships are often forged as believers labor side by side in the fires of ministry, and such relationships regularly provide needed encouragement and promote greater effectiveness than solo ministry efforts.

Historical examples abound of deep friendships among fellow ministers. For example, the great fourth-century Cappadocian theologian Gregory of Nazianzus once wrote to his longtime friend, Basil the Great, “From the first I have taken you, and I take you still, for my guide of life and my teacher of the faith, and for every thing honourable that can be said.... And if I get any profit in life it is from your friendship and company.”²⁸ In 1549, John Calvin dedicated his commentary on Titus “to two eminent servants of Christ, William Farell and Peter Viret.” He wrote,

When you had made some progress in rearing this church with vast exertions, and at great risk, after some time had elapsed I came, first as your assistant, and afterwards was left as your successor, that I might endeavour to carry forward, to the best of my ability, that work which you had so well and so successfully begun.... I think that there has never been, in ordinary life, a circle of friends so sincerely bound to each other as we have been in our ministry.²⁹

3.2. Disagreements and disappointments are inevitable in ministry partnerships.

Paul and Barnabas parted ways after a sharp disagreement, and many other notable ministry partnerships throughout history have ended in similar fashion. There are various reasons that ministry partnerships end in separation. Disagreements about doctrinal convictions, theological vision, or ministry strategy may lead coworkers to part ways. Alternatively, a health crisis, personal crisis, moral failing, or changed sense of calling may prompt someone to resign from a ministry role. And ministry partnerships are by no means immune to the various challenges affecting relationships between family, friends, coworkers, or neighbors—personality conflicts, unmet expectations, hurt feelings, differences of opinion on a range of matters, and so on.

It needs to be stated clearly that Christian workers are sometimes morally obligated to separate when matters of essential biblical doctrine and practice are at stake. Some separations and divisions

²⁶ See Rom 16:3, 9, 21; 2 Cor 8:23; Phil 2:25; 4:3; Col 4:10–11; 1 Thess 3:2; Philem 1, 24; cf. 3 John 8.

²⁷ Stephen Witmer, “Loneliness Limits Ministry: Why Pastors Need Good Friends,” *Desiring God*, 15 July 2021, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/loneliness-limits-ministry>.

²⁸ Gregory, *Epistle 58 to Basil* (NPNF² 7:454–55). On the challenges in the friendship between Basil and Gregory, see Carolinne White, *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 65–70.

²⁹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. William Pringle, reprint ed. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 275–76.

between professing believers are necessary to distinguish true faith and morality from counterfeit Christianity. For example, Paul exhorts, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers” (2 Cor 6:14), and he explains that “there *must* [δεῖ] be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized” (1 Cor 11:19). Likewise, John asserts, “They went out from us, but they were not of us” (1 John 2:19), and he warns against partnering with or receiving any teacher who “does not abide in the teaching of Christ ... for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works” (2 John 9–11). It takes biblical wisdom, humility, and courage to practice “theological triage” and discern between those hills that are worth dying on, on the one hand, and matters where fellow believers may agree to disagree, on the other.³⁰

Some theologians have helpfully distinguished between “straight-line” issues and “jagged-line” issues of ethical decision making. In “straight-line” judgments, individuals and churches directly apply clear theological or ethical principles from Scripture to a particular situation, while “jagged-line” judgments are matters of Christian freedom and conscience in which one cannot directly apply a clear theological or ethical principle from Scripture.³¹ Of course, individuals or groups may disagree about whether a particular situation is a straight-line matter of clear biblical teaching—“What fellowship has light with darkness? (2 Cor 6:14)—or a jagged-line matter of Christian freedom requiring prudential wisdom—“Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom 14:5).

According to Luke’s account, the dispute between Paul and Barnabas was not over first-order doctrinal or ethical matters or even over their ministry aims or strategies. Rather, they clashed over Mark’s fitness as a traveling companion for their mission given his past conduct (Acts 15:37–39; cf. 13:13). Like Paul and Barnabas, ministry coworkers today may disagree over decisions about what people or organizations to partner with. For example:

- Should our church continue participating in this denomination given recent leadership challenges or doctrinal disputes?
- Should we host this controversial outside speaker at our organization’s event?
- Should we sponsor this group that is doing good work in our community but does not fully align with our organization’s beliefs and values?
- Should our church continue to support this long-term missionary whose ministry strategies raise questions among some in our community?

Christian ministers should not be surprised by conflicts and disappointments, painful though they may be. Disagreements are inevitable in this life and provide opportunities to trust God and apply biblical exhortations to trust God, love one another earnestly from the heart, and pursue peace and wisdom from above.³² Certainly with fellow believers our goal is to “agree in the Lord,” in keeping with our common salvation in Christ, our common cause in the gospel, and our common hope of eternal life (Phil 4:2–3). Yet the apostle’s summons to “live peaceably with all” is qualified—“if possible, so far as it depends on you”—recognizing that there are the limits to our ability to secure such peace in times of

³⁰ See Gavin Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On: The Case for Theological Triage* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

³¹ See, for example, Jonathan Leeman and Andrew David Naselli, “Politics, Conscience, and the Church: Why Christians Passionately Disagree with One Another over Politics, Why They Must Agree to Disagree over Jagged-Line Political Issues, and How,” *Themelios* 45.1 (2020): 13–31.

³² See, for example, Robert D. Jones, “Resolving Conflict Christ’s Way,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 19.1 (2000): 13–17.

conflict with fellow believers and even gospel coworkers (Rom 12:18). James 3:13–18 offers profound yet practical guidance for those needing timely wisdom when facing disagreements and disappointments in ministry partnerships (and other relationships):

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.... But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

3.3. As ministry partnerships come and go, Christ's commission to make disciples and his commitment to build his church endure.

All ministry partnerships will eventually end due to retirement, death, or separation. Some ministers enjoy decades of service alongside trusted co-workers. For example, two of my mentors and former pastors, John Piper and Tom Steller, met at Bethel College in the 1970s and labored together faithfully for nearly four decades at Bethlehem Baptist Church and Bethlehem College and Seminary.³³ The shorter yet remarkable partnership between the famed missionaries Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Peter Fleming, and Roger Youderian ended on January 8, 1956 when they were speared by tribal warriors in an Ecuadorian jungle.³⁴

There are various commendable and lamentable reasons that ministry partners choose to separate. Positively, an associate minister may sense a call to serve in a lead pastor position at another congregation or to plant or revitalize a church in a different community. Likewise, a longtime lead pastor may decide, for one reason or another, that it is time to resign to pursue another venue of service—teaching at a seminary, encouraging other pastors, engaging in itinerant ministry, etc.³⁵ I can think of various examples like this that have honored the Lord, strengthened the church, and preserved deep Christian relationships. In such situations, believers should commend each other to God and say, “Let the will of the Lord be done” (Acts 20:32; 21:14).

There are also separations such as those of Paul and Barnabas, Whitefield and Wesley,³⁶ or Lloyd-Jones and Stott, in which ministry coworkers part ways due to their deep divides over matters of doctrine, ministry strategies and priorities, or personal convictions. When colleagues recognize that they have reached an impasse and that it is time to part ways, they must speak to and about one another with candor and grace as fellow believers in Christ, guard against all bitterness and divisiveness to preserve the church's health and unity, and seek to separate in a way that honors one another and reflects confidence in the Lord's promise to build his church (Matt 16:18). As Bengel comments, the painful separation of Paul and Barnabas “was also directed (overruled) by the Lord for good. For so out

³³ Tom Steller, “The Vision and History of The Bethlehem Institute,” in *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper*, ed. C. Samuel Storms and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 508–15.

³⁴ See Elisabeth Elliot, *Through the Gates of Splendor* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956).

³⁵ See D. A. Carson, “On Knowing When to Resign,” *Themelios* 42.2 (2017): 255–58.

³⁶ Thomas Kidd explains that their doctrinal differences over “free grace” led to a rift between George Whitefield and the Wesley brothers. Nevertheless, at the evangelist's funeral John Wesley “identified Whitefield's generous friendship as ‘the distinguishing part of his character’” and urged Christians who share foundational convictions about justification and the new birth to “love one another and promote the common cause of the gospel.” Thomas S. Kidd, *George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 34, 251–52.

of one pair, two were made.”³⁷ Stott rightly cautions that “this example of God’s providence may not be used as an excuse for Christian quarrelling.”³⁸

Nevertheless, Luke’s narrative recounts the continued progress of the word of the Lord and the strengthening of the churches as a mighty missionary partnership abruptly ended and new partnerships were formed. Christ’s promise in Acts 1:8, “You will be my witnesses ... to the end of the earth,” preceded Saul’s miraculous conversion and has endured for generations long after the ministries of the apostles and their associates. The book of Acts does not record what happened with Barnabas and Mark after they set sail for Cyprus (15:39) or even what became of Paul after his two years in Rome (28:30–31) because the focus of the biblical text is not on these individuals but on their Lord and his mission that continues until the end of this age (Matt 28:20).

Throughout the highest joys of laboring alongside fellow believers in gospel work and the deepest pains of relational strain and conflict, the Lord preserves his people and accomplishes his sovereign purposes. The Lord may bring resolution to disagreements and restored relationships in this life—as with Paul and Mark—or he may wait until the life to come to right every wrong, dry every tear, heal every pain, and mend every heart, when we will be forever with the Lord who makes all things new (Rev 21:3–5). Until then we pursue “partnership in the gospel” with those who share in the grace of Christ (Phil 1:5, 7) and seek to “agree in the Lord” (4:2) and carry out his work in the world.

³⁷ John Albert Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament*, ed. Andrew R. Fausset, revised ed. (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1858), 2:654

³⁸ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church, and the World*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 253.

STRANGE TIMES

It's Not Rocket Science ... Even If It Is

— Daniel Strange —

Daniel Strange is director of Crosslands Forum, a centre for cultural engagement and missional innovation, and contributing editor of Themelios. He is a fellow of The Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics.

In my teaching of all things cultural apologetical in the key of 'subversive fulfilment', I've developed a little pattern or framework based on Paul's Athenian encounter in Acts 17:

- *Entering*: stepping into the world and listening to the story;
- *Exploring*: searching for elements of grace and the idols attached to them;
- *Exposing*: showing up the idols as destructive frauds;
- *Evangelizing*: showing off the gospel of Jesus Christ as subversive fulfilment.¹

I recently had the opportunity to both utilize and promote this framework to a group of Christians who inhabit the 'world'² of the academy, a world I'm somewhat familiar with albeit tangentially these days. Most but not all were postgraduates and postdocs at the start of their careers, who represented a range of academic disciplines. My stated aim was to cover how we introduce matters of ultimate concern in a world whose horizons appear to be stubbornly limited and inflexible, far removed and perhaps even vehemently opposed to any consideration of the gospel? How do we share the gospel of Jesus Christ with our colleagues in an authentic and organic way without attempting the excruciating 'crunch' of conversational gear-changes that is both superficial and artificial? Might it not be better to keep our heads down, quietly get on with our work, and leave evangelism to the experts? I attempted to articulate a conceptual framework showing how academics in all disciplines can introduce the gospel in a winsome way, drawing naturally on their own academic expertise demonstrating the way Christ both subverts and fulfils the deeper longings expressed through the cultures of our various faculties. After I presented my paper, three more senior academics from a range of fields—sociology, English literature and biology—responded to the proposed framework and considered how it can be applied.

¹ As set out in Daniel Strange, *Plugged In: Connecting Your Faith to What You Watch, Read and Play* (London: Good Book, 2019).

² By 'world' I use Christopher Watkin's definition of 'a set of particular figures that give a rhythm to the space, time, ideas, reality, behavior, and relationships in a particular sphere of life, among a particular community, or in a particular artist's work, giving them a distinctive style.' *Biblical Critical Theory* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 11. For Watkin 'figures' are the both the patterns and rhythms that shape our lives, a way of understanding how we live in the world, 'and the sorts of truth that can be produced in a given culture, the shapes and rhythms that must be followed if an idea is to be counted as truth' (p. 7). He gives six broad categories of 'figures' what make up a 'world': (1) Language, ideas, and stories; (2) time and space; (3) the structure of reality; (4) behaviour; (5) relationships; and (6) objects.

There is one particular issue I mentioned in my paper which was confirmed for me in some of my respondents' comments, and worth dwelling on for our *Themelios* readership, whether those in university and academic settings ('secular' or Christian) or church leaders who have pastoral oversight over those who have been called by God to work in the academy.

In our entering and exploring we must ask the specific shape of the 'world' of the late modern university in which we live, move, have our being, and give a reason for hope? Understanding this context is important as it affects how we hear and how we are heard, what 'defeaters' we have to deal with,³ and plausibility, or in our case maybe implausibility, structures.⁴ Of course, attempting to characterise the world of the late modern university will always be generalised with the danger of caricature and superficiality. We know that each university is its own world, each department and subject its own world, indeed, each academic is living in their own world! That notwithstanding, some have attempted such descriptions particularly when it comes to the place and acceptability of religious faith within the university. George Marsden famously describes the 'soul' of the American university as 'established unbelief'.⁵ Gavin D'Costa surveys the scene as follows:

The foundation of the universities took place in a universe with a sacred canopy, where people understood their practices to relate to a cosmic and organic pattern participating in the nature of the reality. This reality was divinely created for the good of men and women, for the flourishing of human society, and for participation in truth and love. The modern university, with some exceptions, in contrast, develops its programs and practices without any reference to a sacred canopy. Often finance is the chief criterion, without any organic vision of the relation of the different disciplines, without any shared value regarding the good of men and women, or concerning what truth might possibly be.⁶

I have found this statement very helpful. On the one hand we can, indeed we must, talk about the 'isms' (philosophical underpinnings), 'ities' (social conditions), and 'isations' (transitions from one condition to another) that have shaped the late modern university. We can and must talk about the fatal move from divine revelation to autonomous reason in the Enlightenment, of the divorce between 'fact' and 'value' of key figures, for example, a Max Weber. When it comes to the late (or post) modern

³ By 'defeaters' I mean those culturally specific beliefs that 'defeat' other beliefs, i.e., 'I could never become a Christian because...'

⁴ James Sire defines a plausibility structure as 'a web of beliefs that are so embedded in the hearts and minds of the bulk of a society that people hold them either unconsciously or so firmly that they never think to ask if they are true. In short, a plausibility structure is a worldview of a society, the heart of a community.... One of the main functions of a plausibility structure is to provide the background of beliefs that makes arguments easy or hard to accept.' Sire, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 112.

⁵ Note the subtitle of George Marsden's book: *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Unbelief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁶ Gavin D'Costa, *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy and Nation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 2–3.

university we see a complex mixture of intensification, inversion, and unmasking from the 'modern';⁷ the rise of social construction and the language of 'theory', and key figures, for example, a Michel Foucault.⁸

It may be anecdotal, but over the years I've come across some universities, disciplines, and academics that seem to remain unapologetically 'modern', and others thoroughly 'late modern' with, of course, a range in-between. It is vital to understand our own academic world in which we are situated, which includes a number of recent apologetics to accept 'religious faith' in the University, for example Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Religion in the University*⁹ and the work of the aforementioned Gavin D'Costa.

On the other hand, however, D'Costa's statement above recognises that there are other 'isms' 'ities' and 'isations' at work in the late modern university that are perhaps overlooked but which for Christian apologetics *and* Christian discipleship are hugely influential in shaping of the academy and their academics. We need to understand these commitments and the pressures they exert as well. *And often they are hidden in plain sight.* What about the commercialization of the university? What about the commodification of knowledge? In this brave new world, one of my respondents noted the tendency of the academy to think of knowledge as radically atomised, disconnected with a larger totality and telos:

There are two obvious ways in which this attitude to knowledge shapes the culture of the modern university. The first, is that knowledge becomes a product. Ideas become commodities. The academy becomes a Knowledge Exchange in which our primary activities are buying and selling—and, perhaps, theft—rather than conversations that bring mutual enrichment. Ideas become something to be bartered for position (is it REfable?)¹⁰ or something to be sold (if you can write a book that actually makes money). Second, our collective life becomes contentious. If every bit of research is an argument for yet another competing totality, then even the least controversial claim is, in some sense, an act of aggression, an assault on the coherence of our colleagues' realities.

We're in a very different world from John Milton's definition of education: 'the end of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him.'¹¹

Let's continue. What about trends towards juridification and bureaucratisation?¹² Yes, we can talk in quite rarefied terms about the philosophical and ideological influences that shape our disciplines and in which we as Christian academics engage in apologetically, but what about a rampant and seemingly more 'worldly' *careerism* and *materialism* that we see around us. What about the phenomena

⁷ To use Peter Leithart's summary of postmodernism in *Solomon Among the Postmoderns* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008).

⁸ Christopher Watkin states in his study of Foucault, 'By one measure, Michel Foucault is the all-time most cited author across every academic discipline from fine arts to hard science, with over a quarter more citations than his nearest rival.' *Michel Foucault, Great Thinkers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), xxi.

⁹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the University* (New Haven: Yale University, 2019).

¹⁰ The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the national assessment of the quality of UK higher education research.

¹¹ John Milton, 'Of Education', in *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 631. Cited in Jeffrey C. Davis and Philip G. Ryken, ed., *Liberal Arts for the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 16.

¹² For a stimulating article on this, see Aaron Edwards, 'The Violence of Bureaucracy and the Gospel of Peace: A Theological Response to an Academic Problem', *International Journal of Public Theology* 12 (2018): 195–217.

of employment absenteeism or presenteeism? These seem to be equally powerful commitments and idolatries to which we subscribe both consciously and unconsciously and which must be exposed and evangelised by the gospel. Furthermore, I would contend these forces are present not only in what we might call mainstream 'secular' higher education setting, but within higher education settings of 'established belief'.

I realise this might be somewhat of a disappointment, but it seems that within your average university department, made up of messy human beings, the chat over the lunch break or at coffee time is rarely about some deep, intense and abstruse aspect of one's discipline, but is about pay, working conditions, sick leave, plans for the weekend, annoying colleagues, frustration, anger, or resignation to the tech not working, promotions, and the latest equality and diversity missive that's been doing the rounds. That familiar trinity of money, sex and power is alive and well within the modern university.

Disappointed, maybe, but when it comes to sharing our faith, *these things are no less points of apologetic contact and opportunities for Christian witness*. Once again I was struck by one of my respondents, a recently retired biology professor, Chris Willmott. Having very helpfully identified three dimensions to science (its context, conduct and content) which might be fruitful in using the subversive fulfilment model of apologetics, he ended by reflecting the challenge of being disciples at work in a full rich way:

There is no doubt that in many ways the late modern university ... has taken significant wrong turns. What is an appropriate response? On the surface there are legitimate grounds to be bitter and jaundiced, but our right to win a hearing for the gospel may be strongest if we resist these, if we resist the allure of moaning or of gossip. I am reminded of an honorary degree speech in which author Bill Bryson shared his seven tips for a successful life. Number two, after 'Be happy', was 'Don't whinge'. Bryson said: *'Don't whinge; it's awful and it doesn't become you. Indeed it doesn't get you anywhere. No-one will ever thank you or admire you more deeply or say "Oh, let's invite Simon and Emma to the party, they're fantastic whingers." So stop moaning, it's a waste of oxygen.'* I do look back on recent years and regret the extent to which verbalising my dismay at the state of higher education may have had a detrimental effect on my witness, so I'd encourage you to make a conscious decision to avoid falling into the same trap.

Our evangelism flows from our discipleship. If my whole life is connected to the gospel, then it will be natural to connect the gospel to the lives of our-Christian friends and colleagues, because we face the same common struggles and pressures in our world(s). Of course one consequence of this is that everything I have said about the modern university and its devices and desires are relevant to our Christian lives as well as those who do not know Christ.

And this means that if you have been given the responsibility of pastoral oversight, while you may not be in the academic world, you do have the task of discipling those in your church who are. I'm passionate that such discipleship cannot be blandly generic and superficial but must be contextual to the 'world(s)' of our people. This involves careful and contextual listening and collaborative thoughtful theological application of the Lordship of Christ to all of life in equipping the saints for works of service. But let's not prioritise the particular and specific over the universal and mundane in a way that might threaten and intimidate church leaders from ever stepping (both metaphorically and literally), into those hallowed halls. In the last year, I have convened a couple of informal round-table discussions people who are interested in and working within films, and those working in the music industry. While

it was illuminating and encouraging to chat through together some of the distinctive pressures for these Christians within these vocations, it was probably the similarity between the groups that surprised me most, and this surprise *wasn't* that in the arts they had often felt misunderstood and lonely in their fields. Rather, the surprise was the similarity of mundane issues they were facing and struggling with, issues not unique to them as artists, but to every Christian, and certainly issues present within the world of the university. As we return to this world let's seek to disciple and let's seek to evangelise wholistically in all this world's profundity and mundanity. It's not rocket science ... even if it is.

Reading Psalm Superscriptions through the Centuries

— Ian J. Vaillancourt —

Ian J. Vaillancourt is associate professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at Heritage Theological Seminary in Cambridge, Ontario and the author of several books including Treasuring the Psalms: How to Read the Songs That Shape the Soul of the Church.

Abstract: This article seeks to retrieve from the past in order to gain perspective for the present. It begins by surveying the manuscripts of the MT Psalter, the LXX Psalter, and 11QPs^a from the DSS, reporting on the unique aspects of the psalm superscriptions in each of these text traditions. The heart of the article then surveys the way five key questions about superscriptions have been answered by prominent interpreters in the patristic, medieval, reformation, higher critical, and more recent periods. It concludes with some lessons drawn from its survey of history as a vehicle for suggesting a way forward for the present day.

The interpretation and even the value of the Psalm superscriptions are subjects of debate in current scholarship.¹ Of the many questions that are commonly asked, this article focuses on five:

1. When were the psalm superscriptions added?
2. Which manuscript tradition should be followed?
3. What do the obscure words in the psalm superscriptions mean?
4. Do the psalm superscriptions report actual history?
5. What does the *lamedh* preposition + proper name refer to in the various psalm superscriptions?

The burden of this study is to retrieve from the past in order to gain perspective for the present. We begin by briefly describing three key Psalms manuscripts, move to survey the interpretation of the superscriptions through the past two thousand years, and conclude by summing up our findings, before offering some suggestions about a way forward.

¹ For initial help in brainstorming my approach to this article, I am indebted to the following work: John Lee Thompson, *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis That You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

1. The Superscriptions in Three Key Manuscripts

We begin with the key manuscripts. Of course, space restrictions limit us to focusing on only the most salient and sometimes representative details.

1.1. The Masoretic Text (MT)

One hundred and one psalms in the Masoretic Text refer to an author, with David taking pride of place with seventy-three.² Of these, thirteen are so-called historical superscriptions, in which an event from David's life is listed as the occasion for the psalm's composition. Apart from Psalm 142, the other twelve occur in books 1 and 2. Finally, the superscriptions also contain musical, liturgical, and type-of-psalm terms, including *Mizmor*, *Miktam*, *Maskil*, *Tephillah*, and so forth. The heading לְמַנְצֵחַ ("for the choir director") also occurs fifty-five times.

1.2. The Septuagint (LXX)

The LXX superscriptions are derived from the MT as a base text, but they also exhibit numerous peculiarities. The additional Psalm 151 bears the following superscription: "This psalm was written for David and is outside the number; when he engaged Goliath in combat."³ The MT has thirty-four psalms that lack a superscription, while the LXX has only seventeen.⁴ VanGemeren summarizes that the LXX "adds 'of David' to psalms that do not contain this phrase in the MT (33; 43; 71; 91; 93–99; 104; 137) but deletes 'of David' in the superscription of Psalms 122 and 124."⁵

Also significant, the LXX rendering of musical terms is sometimes curious. At times the terms are transliterated, and at times they are reinterpreted.⁶ For example, all fifty-five occurrences of לְמַנְצֵחַ ("for the choir director") appear as Εἰς τὸ τέλος ("for the end") in the LXX. In addition, "on the Gittith" is translated as "on the winepresses" in the LXX (e.g., Ps 8). I agree with Gillingham that features like this bespeak a translator who "was living at a time when Jewish hopes for a cataclysmic redemption were high," and so this seems to have influenced his work, "giving it a more future-oriented, eschatological bias."⁷ In short, the "Davidizing" of the LXX Psalms was witnessed in its extra Davidic psalm, and its

² Next are the Sons of Korah (eleven times, all in books 2 and 3), followed by Asaph (twelve times; once in book 2, and the rest in book 3), Solomon (twice), Heman the Ezrahite (once), Ethan the Ezrahite (once), Moses (once), and anonymous (about forty-nine times). Psalm 88 lists two different authors in its superscription; this is why 102 different authorial notices occur in the book of Psalms, but only 101 psalms have reported authors.

³ Also unique to the LXX, the Masoretic postscript יה הללו in Psalms 113–118 (112–117 LXX) is shifted to the superscription of the following psalm in each occurrence.

⁴ See Willem VanGemeren, *Psalms*, rev. ed., EBC 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 36.

⁵ VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 45.

⁶ Wilson represents a common conclusion: "As many have noted before, the ancient translators of LXX and the targumim must have found many of these technical terms exceedingly obscure, as evidenced by the variety of their renderings. While modern scholarship has brought greater precision to our understanding of these terms, in the final analysis, many still resist all attempts to drag them into the light of day." Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 142. Gillingham agrees: "many of the Hebrew terms, not least in the superscriptions, do not seem to have been known in the second-century Alexandria." Susan E. Gillingham, *Psalms through the Centuries* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 1:8.

⁷ Gillingham, *Psalms through the Centuries*, 8. J. Glen Taylor adds, "Since this notation is very often followed by the words 'of David,' readers of the psalms in Greek would read 'of David' in conjunction with 'concerning fulfill-

extra Davidic superscriptions. Also, the eschatological character of the LXX seems to be apparent from its translation choices for some of its musical and liturgical terms.

1.3. The Great Psalms Scroll from Qumran (11QPs^a)

Among the thirty-nine Psalms scrolls discovered at Qumran, 11QPs^a is unique. It is the longest Psalms scroll, contains roughly the last fifty Psalms of the MT, but reorders them significantly, and also adds nine psalms not found in the MT.⁸ As with the LXX, there seems to have been an attempt to highlight David in this scroll by scattering Davidic psalms throughout, where they had been more clustered together in the MT. Further evidence for “Davidization” is found in the nine compositions not found in the MT. For example, “David’s Compositions” in column twenty-seven of 11QPs^a speaks of David’s wisdom, light, literacy, discernment, and his composition of 4,050 psalms, songs, and other poems.⁹ However, other than a few very minor alterations, the psalms that appear in both the MT and 11QPs^a have remarkably similar superscriptions.¹⁰ In other words, the peculiarities of 11QPs^a reside more in its reordering of material and its addition of non-MT psalms, and has less to do with unique superscriptions on psalms that appear in the MT Psalter.

1.4. Summary of Findings

The superscriptions were added prior to the translation of the LXX and transmission of the DSS. Further, the obscure words are indeed obscure, and it is possible that even the LXX translators did not

ment. I think it very likely that this influenced readers of the psalms to understand the psalms of David to be read no longer simply as hymns but as prophecies. Prophecies about what? Most likely: ‘of [the] David’ who is yet to come, God’s messiah, the one to resurrect David’s dynasty (Am. 9, Jer. 31, and Zech. 6).” J. Glen Taylor, “Psalms 1 and 2: A Gateway into the Psalter and Messianic Images for the Restoration of David’s Dynasty,” in *Interpreting the Psalms for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman and D. Brent Sandy (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2010), 58.

⁸ “11QPs^a Psalter contains nine additional psalms, four of which were already known to scholars (Pss 151A and 151B, 154, 155, David’s Last Words [= 2 Sam 23:1–7], and Sirach 51:1330), whereas the other four were unknown (Plea of Deliverance [col. xix], Apostrophe of Zion [col. xxii], Hymn to the Creator [col. xxvi], David’s Compositions). Four of these additional psalms are Davidic: David’s Last Words, David’s Compositions, Ps 151A, and Ps 151B.” Hulisani Ramantswana, “David of the Psalters: MT Psalter, LXX Psalter and 11QPs^a Psalter,” *OTE* 24.2 (2011): 447.

⁹ The composition in full is as follows: “2 And David, the son of Jesse, was wise, and a light like the light of the sun, and literate, / 3 and discerning and perfect in all his ways before God and men. And the Lord gave / 4 him a discerning and enlightened spirit. And he wrote / 5 3,600 psalms; and songs to sing before the altar over the whole-burnt / 6 perpetual offering every day, for all the days of the year, 364; / 7 and for the offering of the Sabbaths, 52 songs; and for the offering of the New / 8 Moons and for all the Solemn Assemblies and for the Day of Atonement, 30 songs. / 9 And all the songs that he spoke were 446, and songs / 10 for making music over the stricken, 4. And the total was 4,050. / 11 All these he composed through prophecy which was given him from before the Most High.” Cited from Ramantswana, “David of the Psalters,” 448.

¹⁰ For example, in addition to changes in full vs. defective spellings, Ps 93:1 MT has no superscription, but 11QPs^a has “Hallelujah.” Further, in Ps 123:1 11QPs^a adds “of David” to the middle of the superscription and changes a definite article for a *lamedh* in the third word. In Ps 144:1 the MT has “of David” and 11QPs^a has no superscription. In Ps 145:1 11QPs^a exchanges a ׀ in the MT for a 𐤇.

understand some of them.¹¹ It is also possible that these translators deliberately altered some of them in order to speak eschatologically to the community of which they were a part. Finally, regarding the *lamedh* + proper name in the superscriptions, the LXX translates the noun in the dative, and the dative of means (i.e., “authorship by ___”) is an interpretive probability in this regard. Further, the “Davidic” nature of 11QPs^a also points to this denoting authorship; in an effort to “Davidize” the scrolls, the Psalms were re-ordered.

2. Reading Psalm Superscriptions through the Centuries

We now turn to overview the past two thousand years of church history.

2.1. The Patristic Period

During the patristic period, it is important to remember that the majority of the early church fathers worked from the LXX Psalter as a base text, and this had great impact on their interpretation of Psalm superscriptions. In light of the translation of לְמִנְצָה as Εἰς τὸ τέλος in fifty-five of the LXX Psalm titles, mixed with the New Testament use of Psalms to point to Christ, these interpreters were understandably led to an eschatological reading of the Psalms.¹² For example, “Asterius the Sophist in comment on Psalm 9:1 exclaimed: What is τὸ τέλος? The beginning of the proclamation of the Gospel, which is the τέλος of the Law and the Prophets.”¹³

Gregory of Nyssa (335–395 AD) believed that the theological essence and purpose of the psalms were indicated by their superscriptions.¹⁴ It is not surprising, then, that he wrote an entire book on them during the early portion of his scholarly life, around 376–378 AD.¹⁵ In line with the dominant view of his time, this work followed the LXX, and the alterations of titles present in that work.¹⁶

¹¹ Terrien notes, “These musical rubrics were already obscure for the LXX translators, who seemed to have groped hesitantly for the Greek equivalent.” Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 28.

¹² “That the Fathers of the Church, who read the entire Septuagint as a *praeparatio euangelica* would read Εἰς τὸ τέλος and in fact τέλος generally from an eschatological perspective is of course true.” Albert Pietersma, “LXX Exegesis and the Superscriptions of the Greek Psalter,” in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, ed. Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 470.

¹³ Pietersma, “LXX Exegesis and the Superscriptions of the Greek Psalter,” 470.

¹⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, ed. Casimir McCambley (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1990).

¹⁵ See David L. Balás, “Review of Gregory of Nyssa’s Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms: Introduction, Translation and Notes,” *Church History* 66:3 (1997): 544–45. Ronald E. Heine notes that “the inscription of the Psalms has been neglected in modern studies of his work. It has never been translated into a modern language, nor been the subject of a monograph” (Ronald E. Heine, *Gregory of Nyssa’s Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms: Introduction, Translation and Notes*, Oxford Early Christian Studies [Oxford: Clarendon, 1995], 1, as cited in Balás, “Review of Gregory of Nyssa’s Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms,” 544–45. Balás adds, “Thus Heine’s book fills a real gap in the otherwise rich scholarship on Gregory of Nyssa.” Balás, “Review of Gregory of Nyssa’s Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms,” 545.

¹⁶ See Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 3 vols., KDCOT, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 1:49.

Most scholars of this period assumed Davidic authorship of the seventy-three psalms that bear his name and assumed that the **ל** of the superscription (or more often, the dative article in the LXX superscription) denotes authorship. This view is found, for example, in Jerome (347–420 AD), who made the following comment on Psalm 51: “King David progressed from the serious sin of adultery to the even greater sin of murder, and the greater the sin the greater the measure of divine mercy that is needed for forgiveness.”¹⁷ In fact, with the exception of Theodore of Mopsuestia (350–428 AD), the major interpreters from this period read the superscriptions historically.¹⁸

Finally, not only did Augustine accept the LXX as authoritative, but Bray notes, “He was *opposed* to Jerome’s use of the Hebrew text instead of the Septuagint, because he regarded this as a form of Judaizing,”¹⁹ and this view, “triumphed in the western church, and it was not until the Reformation that Jerome’s position was vindicated.”²⁰ In commenting on Psalm 51, Augustine first listed 2 Samuel 11 and then Psalm 51 as his dual reference, showing he believed the superscription’s claim that the psalm was occasioned by David’s sin with Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan’s rebuke of him.

In line with many others of his time, Augustine’s reading of the LXX superscriptions also tended in an eschatological direction. For example, on Psalm 4—the first **Εἰς τὸ τέλος**—Augustine comments, “‘Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.’ For this ‘end’ signifies perfection, not consumption.”²¹ On Psalm 22:1, he adds, “‘To the end,’ for His own resurrection, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself speaketh.”²² Similarly, on Psalm 8, the LXX superscription of which reads, “for the end, for the wine-presses, a psalm of David,” Augustine writes, “We may then take wine-presses to be Churches, on the same principle by which we understand also by a threshing floor the Church.”²³ Alternatively, he also suggests that winepresses could refer to the Divine Word as the grape, and “this grape comes into the ears, as into the pressing machines of the wine-pressers.”²⁴ As a third alternative, Augustine asserts, “‘Wine-presses’ are usually taken for martyrdoms, as if when they who have confessed the name of Christ have been trodden down by the blows of persecution, their mortal remains are husks remained on earth, but their souls flowed forth into the rest of a heavenly habitation.”²⁵

Finally, with the more obscure terms in the Psalms, Augustine could sometimes get creative. For example, he interprets the phrase “on the eighth” to refer to the day of judgment or the eternal age, “for that after the time present, which is a cycle of seven days, it shall be given to the Saints.”²⁶

¹⁷ Quentin F. Wessenschmidt, ed., *Psalms 51–150*, ACCOT 8 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 1.

¹⁸ See William Yarchin, *History of Biblical Interpretation: A Reader* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 77.

¹⁹ Gerald Lewis Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996), 92, emphasis added.

²⁰ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 92.

²¹ Augustine, *Expositions on The Book of Psalms: Translated, With Notes and Indices*, VIII, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 8.

²² Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, 58.

²³ Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, 27.

²⁴ Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, 28.

²⁵ Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, 28.

²⁶ Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, 44.

2.2. The Medieval Period

Although most prominent scholars of the medieval period used the LXX Psalter as a base text, and although Delitzsch notes that because of this, “The mediaeval church exposition [of the Psalms] did not make any essential advance upon the patristic,”²⁷ the period is still worthy of note. The giant of this period, of course, was Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), and he wrote a commentary on the Psalms based on the priority of the LXX over the MT. Commenting on Psalm 51 (LXX Ps 50), Aquinas links the psalm with 2 Samuel 11–12 and summarized that narrative as a lens through which the psalm was to be read. Further, with regard to the expression “for the winepresses,” Aquinas comments,

What should be considered is that which is said in Deut. 16: You shall keep the feast of booths seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your wine press. One should know that David had a special role of devotion of celebration during the feast; and he would do something special for the praise of God. For, the Feast of Booths was a major feast.²⁸

2.3. The Reformation Period

The Reformation period witnessed a shift, as Luther, Calvin, and their followers worked from the MT Psalter. In line with the fifteen-hundred-year history of the church before them, both also assumed Davidic authorship of the seventy-three **דָּוִד** psalms, along with the authenticity of the historical notices. For example, on Psalm 51 Martin Luther (1483–1546 AD) comments, “David prayeth for remission of sins whereof he maketh a deep confession—He prayeth for sanctification—God delighteth not in sacrifice but in sincerity—He prayeth for the church.”²⁹ He continues, “This, among all the psalms, is a signal and golden one. It contains experiences and feelings truly Davidical; and teaches us what sin is, what the origin of sin is, and how great and awful and evil the fall of Adam was.”³⁰

Next, Wenham reports that Calvin “entirely accept[ed] the validity of the psalm titles and exploit[ed] them to the full to understand the message of each psalm.”³¹ On Psalm 51, for example, Calvin clearly assumes the historical incident of David’s adultery with Bathsheba as the occasion for its composition.³² Regarding Davidic authorship, “Calvin attributed a large number of Psalms to David even though not

²⁷ Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 1:54.

²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, “Commentary on Psalm 8,” n.p., http://www4.desales.edu/~philtheo/loughlin/ATP/Psalm_8.html.

²⁹ Martin Luther, *A Manual of the Book of Psalms: or, The Subject-Contents of All the Psalms*, trans. Henry P. Cole (London: Bohn, 1847), 140.

³⁰ Luther, *A Manual of the Book of Psalms*, 142. Luther also suggested a unique translation in the titles of the songs of ascents: “A song for the higher choir.” See Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 100.

³¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 28.

³² He comments, “For a long period after his melancholy fall, David would seem to have sunk into a spiritual lethargy; but when roused from it by the expostulation of Nathan, he was filled with self-loathing and humiliation in the sight of God, and was anxious both to testify his repentance to all around him, and leave some lasting proof of it to posterity.” John Calvin, *Psalms 36–92*, trans. Rev. James Anderson, *Calvin’s Commentaries* 5 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 281.

all of these Psalms have the inscription ‘of David.’ He favored this interpretation of authorship and setting because the situation described in the Psalms often fit David best.”³³ Finally, with respect to more obscure terms in the Psalm superscriptions, Calvin was characteristically well studied. For example, he wrote the following about the term *Shiggaion* in Psalm 7:1:

The Jewish interpreters are not agreed. Some understand it to mean a musical instrument. To others it seems to be a tune to which a song is set. Others suppose it to have been the beginning of a common song, to the tune of which David wished this psalm to be sung. Others translate the Hebrew word, *delight*, or *rejoicing*. The second opinion appears to me the most probable, namely, that it was some kind of melody or song, as if one should term it Sapphic or Phaleucian verse.³⁴

From this quotation we notice that Calvin took the superscriptions seriously and so read broadly on them, but he still took a stand on his own interpretation out of those available. He didn’t even consider the LXX in his exploration of what the term could mean. Instead, and in line with his prioritizing of the Hebrew text, he appealed to Jewish interpreters in this instance.

2.4. The Higher Critical Period

Moving on to what we may call “the higher critical period,” Childs observes,

By the middle of the nineteenth century the Psalm titles, which had been thought to provide the key to psalm interpretation, had been almost universally abandoned as late, inauthentic, and insignificant. The last major scholarly commentary to defend completely the traditional stance was that of Hengstenberg in 1842, and it already appeared anachronistic to the new world of biblical criticism.³⁵

Waltke lists some scholars who took this position, and identifies the roots of their beliefs:

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, under the impact of historical criticism, many academics discarded the superscriptions and reconstructed the historical context.... Scholars such as Bernhard Duhm, T. K. Cheyne, Paul Haupt, and the later Charles A. Briggs came to the mistaken conclusion that the Psalter was principally the hymnbook of the second temple, and they interpreted many psalms with reference to Maccabees. For example, they attributed Psalm 3 “to a leader caught in the partisan battles and struggles of that time.”³⁶

Wenham notes further,

S. R. Driver ... claimed on the one hand that some of the Davidic psalms were not fresh or original enough “for the founder of the Hebrew Psalmody,” and on the other hand

³³ H. J. Selderhuis, *Calvin’s Theology of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 31.

³⁴ Calvin, *Psalms* 36–92, 75.

³⁵ Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 509. See also Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 35.

³⁶ Bruce K. Waltke, with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 871.

that others “express an intensity of devotion, a depth of spiritual insight, and a maturity of theological reflection, beyond what we should expect from David or David’s age.”³⁷

In 1886 C. H. Toy went so far as to claim, “The statements of the titles are worthless; that is, though they may in some cases be right, they may always be wrong, and are therefore of no use as critical guides.”³⁸ With regard to the ל in the superscription, many interpretive options were set forth, including “of,” “for,” “for use on,” “for use of,” or “belonging to” (but without connotations of authorship).³⁹ The tendency was clearly to move away from ל as a marker of authorship.

It should also be noted, though, that during this period there was a conservative contingent in both the academy and in influential pastorates. Hengstenberg has already been mentioned, and to that conservative German scholar we could add the name of his fellow countryman Franz Delitzsch, who, writing in Germany in 1867, suggests that a rejection of the superscriptions had been made too hastily, for

Instances like Hab. 3.1 and 2 Sam. 1.18, comp. Ps. 60.1, shew that David and other psalm-writers might have appended their names to their psalms and the definition of their purport. And the great antiquity of these and similar inscriptions also follows from the fact that the LXX found them already in existence and did not understand them.⁴⁰

3. Psalm Titles in Recent Discussion: Three Key Contributors

Finally, our survey of the superscriptions through the centuries has brought us to the recent past, with three key contributors from the last few decades.

3.1. Brevard S. Childs

First, although Brevard Childs embraced historical criticism during his seminary days and although he never left it behind, his canonical approach to the study of the Old Testament shifted the focus of his exegesis. In the context of the university, his key contribution lay in his acknowledgement that the redactional process on the Old Testament was done intentionally and theologically—older texts that had functioned in a former context were introduced into new non-historical contexts in order to make the Bible accessible to a new context. Since the final form of the Scriptures was chief in a culminating way, a historical-critical reading could offer a great depth-dimension for Childs, as layers of redaction revealed theological shaping by the editors. However, the redaction was intentional and theological and was done by the religious community and for the religious community, even under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Further, though layers of redaction were clearly present in the text for Childs, not all of them

³⁷ Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 28.

³⁸ James H. Fraser, “The Authenticity of the Psalm Titles” (ThM thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1984), 17.

³⁹ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, WBC 19 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 34.

⁴⁰ Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 1:22–23. The conservative views of the popular preacher and interpreter of Scripture from this period Alexander MacLaren were also apparent in his assumption of both the Davidic authorship and the historical correctness of the superscription of Ps 51: “A whole year had elapsed between David’s crime and David’s penitence. It had been a year of guilty satisfaction not worth the having; of sullen hardening of heart against God and all His appeals.” Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, vol. 4, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1932), 1.

were viewed as being discernible. For these reasons, the final form of the Old and New Testaments is the primary witness to Jesus Christ. Therefore, for Childs, the task of exegesis was not primarily to uncover the so-called “more pure earlier form” of the witness and then exegete it, but to interpret primarily the final form for the church.

Childs then applied this approach to the Psalm superscriptions. In Childs’s view, “although the titles [were] a relatively late addition, they represent[ed] an important reflection of how the psalms as a collection of sacred literature were understood and how this secondary setting became authoritative for the canonical tradition.”⁴¹ For Childs, this resulted in two primary angles of reflection: David as everyman, and the Psalm titles as midrashic.

First, in Childs’s view, the addition of historical superscriptions set David forth as a sort of “everyman”:

The psalms are transmitted as the sacred psalms of David, but they testify to all the common troubles and joys of ordinary human life in which all persons participate. These psalms do not need to be cultically actualized to serve later generations. They are made immediately accessible to the faithful. Through the mouth of David, the man, they become a personal word from God in each individual situation.... Far from tying these hymns to the ancient past, they have been contemporized and individualized for every generation of suffering and persecuted Israel.⁴²

Second, for Childs the Psalm titles were also midrashic, providing insight into the inner lives their authors. While 1 and 2 Samuel narrated events, psalms with thematic and linguistic parallels to those events were tied to them, and they are set forth as David’s reflections during those seasons:

By placing a Psalm within the setting of a particular historical incident in the life of David, the reader suddenly was given access to previously unknown information. David’s inner life was now unlocked to the reader, who was allowed to hear his intimate thoughts and reflections. It therefore seems most probable that the formation of the titles stemmed from a pietistic circle of Jews whose interest was particularly focused on the nurture of the spiritual life.⁴³

Finally, Childs correctly judged, “whatever the expression לְדָוִד may once have meant, the claim of authorship now seems most probable.” This, he notes, is especially clear in those psalm titles (e.g., Ps 18) “which specify a particular historical incident in David’s life as providing the occasion for composition.”⁴⁴

3.2. Gerald H. Wilson

Next, as a student of Childs at Yale, Gerald H. Wilson’s impact on Psalms scholarship was vast. Specifically with regard to superscriptions, Wilson suggests three layers of accretion: the liturgical elements were added first while the psalms were still being used in temple worship; authorship notices were added second; and the historical notices were added in a third stage.⁴⁵ In his view, “the retention

⁴¹ Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 520.

⁴² Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 521.

⁴³ Brevard S. Childs, “Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis,” *JSS* 16.2 (1971): 149.

⁴⁴ Childs, “Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis,” 138.

⁴⁵ See Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms, Volume 1*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 80.

of the colophonic material as a ‘frozen’ part of a literary composition, even after subsequent additions and editing had skewed the function of the work from that of the original”⁴⁶ was in parallel with the way the Sumerian inscriptions also functioned. Finally, and in complement to Childs before him, Wilson suggests that the additions of historical superscriptions had

the effect of obscuring the original cultic matrix of that psalm and loosing it to function on a more personal level. The implication is: If David responded to such events by expressing himself in a psalm, then what better way for me to respond to similar conflicts in my own life than to appropriate the words of his classical utterance? Such a movement toward personalization would quickly extend to the remaining psalms, regardless of their original function in the cult. This process of extension can be observed at work in the expansive psalms-headings of LXX and the targumim.⁴⁷

With regard to the genre distinctions in the Psalter (e.g., שִׁנּוּן), Wilson notes that they never occur together in the same superscription,⁴⁸ and “genre does not constitute a primary editorial principle for the organization of the Psalter.”⁴⁹ He then concludes that in books 1–3 the primary organizational concern is authorship—David in book 1, the sons of Korah or David in book 2, and Asaph and others in book 3. However, beyond Psalm 89 this changes, as only nineteen of the sixty-one remaining psalms bear superscriptions. But Wilson still notes attributions of authorship in books four and five, along with clusters of Davidic psalms at the beginning and end of book five.⁵⁰ Even still, he concludes, “authorship cannot be considered the primary organizational concern of the final Hebrew Psalter. While there are a number of large groupings, in no case are all the pss of a particular author brought together into a single collection.”⁵¹

3.3. Bruce K. Waltke

A final more recent scholar who has contributed significantly to the study of Psalm superscriptions is Bruce K. Waltke, who correctly observes, “Whether or not the superscriptions are reliable affects the interpretation and theology of the Psalter.”⁵² In contrast to interpreters from the higher critical period onwards, Waltke explicitly argues, “The historical context of a psalm’s composition must be gleaned from its superscription, which often looks back to the book of Samuel, and/or from its content.”⁵³ This is said to be supported by the antiquity of employing superscriptions—in Sumerian and Akkadian ritual texts as old as the third century BC.⁵⁴

⁴⁶ Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 23.

⁴⁷ Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 143.

⁴⁸ See Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 158.

⁴⁹ Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 161.

⁵⁰ See Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 155.

⁵¹ Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 155.

⁵² Waltke, with Yu, *An Old Testament Theology*, 871.

⁵³ Waltke, with Yu, *An Old Testament Theology*, 871.

⁵⁴ Waltke, with Yu, *An Old Testament Theology*, 872.

Waltke also believes that the ל prefixed to דוד in the superscriptions denotes authorship, citing Isaiah 38:9 and Habakkuk 3:1 as evidence from elsewhere in Scripture.⁵⁵ He adds the ancient Near Eastern evidence that poets in general were not anonymous (unlike narrators).⁵⁶ Further, he points out the Chronicler's claim: "David assigned the Levites to various musical guilds in order to beautify the Mosaic ritual with music and associates David with Israel's psalmody (1 Chron. 16:1–43)."⁵⁷

Finally, Waltke interacts with the work of both Wilson and Gevaryahu and ultimately brings a new hypothesis to bear: the לְמִנְצָח plus "optional prepositional phrases originally served as postscripts to the psalms preceding them."⁵⁸ Therefore, although he takes a very conservative position regarding the superscriptions, he is also not averse to setting forth unique theories that would lead to a radical rethinking of the interpretation of the book of Psalms. He concludes, "the text was ripe for the textual confusion envisioned here and that ample time was available for the corruption and harmonizing editorial activity to have taken place before the extant witnesses to the text."⁵⁹ Although he concedes that there is no manuscript evidence for this shift, he posits that since the LXX and Qumran scrolls are close to the Masoretic text in their superscriptions, the corruption took place early.⁶⁰ This "corruption" was for Waltke both the unintentional work of scribes and the deliberate work of editors: "The prose of these editorial notices butting up against one another versus the poetry of the psalms themselves contributed to their textual conflation."⁶¹ Waltke suggests that Habakkuk 3 lends further support to his theory.⁶²

4. Concluding Thoughts

To conclude, we have sought with C. S. Lewis "to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries" blowing through our minds,⁶³ and this has resulted in a fresh perspective in our study of the Psalm superscriptions.

4.1. Summarizing Our Findings

We now return to the five questions that govern this article:

4.1.1. When were the psalm superscriptions added?

These were added prior to the translation of the LXX and the transmission of the DSS. Even where these manuscripts differ from the MT, they seem to be differing from a base text. The patristic,

⁵⁵ See Waltke, with Yu, *An Old Testament Theology*, 872.

⁵⁶ See Waltke, with Yu, *An Old Testament Theology*, 872.

⁵⁷ Bruce K. Waltke, "A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms," in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 11. This is also said to be supported by Amos 6:5, which cites David as one who played the harp. See Waltke, "A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms," 11.

⁵⁸ Bruce K. Waltke, "Superscripts, Postscripts, or Both," *JBL* 110.4 (1991): 588–89.

⁵⁹ Waltke, "Superscripts, Postscripts, or Both," 588–89.

⁶⁰ See Waltke, "Superscripts, Postscripts, or Both," 596.

⁶¹ Waltke, "Superscripts, Postscripts, or Both," 594.

⁶² See Waltke, "Superscripts, Postscripts, or Both," 595.

⁶³ See C. S. Lewis, "Introduction to Athanasius on the Incarnation," in *On the Incarnation: The Treatise De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, ed. Penelope Lawson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 5.

medieval, and Reformation periods all witnessed the dominant view that the superscriptions were integral parts of the original composition of the psalms. Despite some conservative holdouts, this view shifted during the higher-critical period. While Childs and Wilson also cast doubt on the authenticity of the superscriptions, Waltke has more recently affirmed them as original, authentic, and important.

4.1.2. Which manuscript tradition should be followed?

Prior to the Reformation, the LXX Psalter was preeminent, and this greatly impacted the interpretation of the individual psalms up until Luther and Calvin. However, the Reformation's return to the sources also resulted in a recovery of the Hebrew language and so the MT superscriptions, and this has prevailed in conservative and critical schools of thought for the past 500 years.

4.1.3. What do the obscure words in the psalm superscriptions mean?

In the patristic and medieval periods, there was often creative and novel allegorizing of the obscure terms in the superscriptions. For the Reformers, the obscure terms needed to be studied, especially in light of all the sources available, including (or especially) Jewish sources. Finally, for Gerald Wilson, the obscure terms of the Psalter denoted genre, and although there may not be certainty with regard to their meaning, one can notice from them that genre is not a primary factor in the organization of the Psalter.

4.1.4. Do the psalm superscriptions report actual history?

With few exceptions, the so-called pre-critical period answered this question with a resounding "yes," and the higher-critical period witnessed a clear shift. Other than Hengstenberg and Delitzsch, and more recently, Bruce Waltke, the general assumption for the past few hundred years has been that the superscriptions do not report actual history.

4.1.5. What does the *lamedh* preposition + proper name refer to in the various psalm superscriptions?

Once again, with few exceptions, the so-called pre-critical period most often *assumed* that this formula denoted authorship, and the critical period witnessed a clear shift, with a variety of interpretive options available. However, although Childs thought the historical superscriptions were late additions, he did assert that the editors intended them to denote authorship, and the New Testament bears this out in its reading of the various psalms. Waltke takes this a step further, essentially returning to the pre-critical position, but also offering biblical evidence for his position.

4.2. Where Do We Go from Here?

Now that our broad overview is complete, where do we go from here? Let's consider five lessons to be drawn from our study.

4.2.1. Interpret Psalm superscriptions.

In light of the versification in our contemporary English Bibles and in light of the higher-critical bias against superscriptions, many contemporary readers ignore the Psalm superscriptions. But the sweep of history has taught us that these are valuable for the interpretation of the Psalms. Whether this is done in the manner of the majority of interpreters from the past two thousand years or that of Childs and his followers, these portions of Holy Scripture are worthy of attention. It should sober us that comparatively few interpreters in history have ignored them or called them useless.

4.2.2. Consider the manuscripts.

Each age has had its own outlook. With regard to manuscript traditions, some ages have prioritized the LXX, and others the MT, but what we glean from this is that a consideration of all the manuscript evidence is worthy of attention. The way the scribes and redactors from over two thousand years ago interpreted the superscriptions has valuable insights for the modern interpreter.

4.2.3. Wrestle with the question of the historical notices.

Some ages have assumed too much, and others have adopted a hermeneutic of suspicion with regard to the superscriptions. In light of the sweep of history, though, Childs's, Wilson's, and Waltke's modeling of wrestling with historical notices is worthy of attention.

4.2.4. The enigmatic לְ may not be so enigmatic after all.

Whether it is a consideration of the LXX or the New Testament, or a survey of interpretations through the past few thousand years, history has taught us that the *lamedh* + proper name in the superscriptions was meant to denote authorship in the majority of cases.⁶⁴

4.2.5. A new generation of interpreters of the superscriptions is welcome.

If the history of interpretation has taught us abundantly about the superscriptions, the rigorous scholarship of Childs, Wilson, and Waltke has modeled that newer is not always novel and faulty. In fact, some of the most helpful insights in our study have come from interpreters of the past forty years. If these scholars have offered the interpretive community much to consider, a new generation could certainly build on their work and provide even more fresh insights for the next generation.

⁶⁴ A notable exception may be Ps 72 and its לְשִׁלֹמֹה superscription. While the LXX most often translates *lamedh* + proper name as “τῷ + proper name” in Greek (most likely referring to the authorship “Of __”), in light of the note about the prayers of David in Ps 72:20, the superscription is translated as Εἰς Σαλωμων (“for Solomon”). For a helpful overview of this issue, along with a convincing argument in favor of reading Ps 72 as a prayer of the aged David for his son and successor, see Adam D. Hensley, “David, Once and Future King? A Closer Look at the Postscript of Psalm 72.20,” *JSOT* 46.1 (2020): 24–43. Another notable exception may be the superscription of Ps 88, which includes two instances of *lamedh* plus proper name. Are these meant to be thought of as two authors of the same psalm, or is there another explanation worth considering?

Ecclesiastes in Context: Reclaiming Qoheleth's Canonical Authority

— T. F. Leong —

T. F. Leong used to teach Hebrew and Old Testament studies at the East Asia School of Theology in Singapore and is the author of Our Reason for Being: An Exposition of Ecclesiastes on the Meaning of Life.

Abstract: The book of Ecclesiastes is essentially a speech. Its profound message is needed today more than ever. Yet much recent Evangelical scholarship has accepted and assumed critical views of Qoheleth the speaker and his speech. This renders almost the entire book practically useless to Bible teachers and preachers. This article presents the teaching of Ecclesiastes on the meaning of life in the contexts of its ancient and the modern world. Its uncanny superiority over its ancient and modern counterparts corroborates the book's own claim that Qoheleth's speech is inspired by God and thus canonically authoritative for teaching and preaching.

Ecclesiastes has a meaningful message that speaks to even non-believers today and points them to Christ. For it addresses the question of the meaning of life in a way most satisfying to the human heart. Given the current state of unbelief and perceived meaninglessness of life in the modern world, Ecclesiastes is needed now more than ever. Its message is so contemporary that it seems as though it was written specifically for modern times!

Ecclesiastes is essentially a (written) speech. The speaker is introduced (in the third person) as the persona “Qoheleth,” usually translated “Preacher” or “Teacher” (1:1). The theme of the speech is “All is vanity” (1:2; 12:8) and the conclusion is that, because “all is vanity,” therefore “fear God and keep his commandments” (12:13).¹ Properly understood, “all is vanity (profitless)” simply means everything we

¹ It is beyond the scope of this article to defend this reading of Ecclesiastes; for our purpose here, there is no need to do so. It cannot be disputed that the theme is “All is vanity”; what is disputed is whether the Hebrew word should be translated “vanity.” And there is general agreement that the conclusion is “Fear God and keep his commandments”; the basic disagreement is whether these are the words of Qoheleth himself or that of an editor. So this reading of Ecclesiastes should not be controversial. And our purpose here is to compare and contrast the teaching of Ecclesiastes on the meaning of life based on this reading of the book with what we find in two relevant pieces of Mesopotamian literature. We shall see that in so doing, this reading of Ecclesiastes makes very good sense. For the teaching of Ecclesiastes on the meaning of life based on this reading matches and surpasses those of the Mesopotamian counterparts in a rather meaningful way—it speaks convincingly about and persuasively to the human condition. It is unlikely this teaching is the outcome of a misreading of a canonical book.

gain in this temporal world is ultimately profitless because we have to die and when we die, we cannot take anything with us—just as we came empty-handed, we will go empty-handed (5:15–16). So the theme of Ecclesiastes is realistic and not pessimistic as is often assumed.²

After Qoheleth has shown that “All is vanity” (1:2–12:8), and before he presents the conclusion (12:13–14), there is a third-person elaboration on him as the speaker (12:9–12). This elaboration, together with the third-person introduction of Qoheleth (1:1) and the three “says Qoheleth” (1:2; 7:27; 12:8), is either written by the author of Qoheleth’s speech himself or an editor often referred to as the “frame narrator.”³ Qoheleth is said to have (just) spoken “the most honest words of truth,”⁴ which are actually “given” by God the “one Shepherd,”⁵ which means Qoheleth’s words are inspired by God. Hence, “beyond these [words] my son beware,” that is, the words of Qoheleth are claimed to be canonical.⁶

However, mainstream biblical scholarship has taken for granted that Qoheleth’s speech is full of unorthodox and contradictory perspectives. In order to uphold this entrenched assumption, it has to disregard, dismiss, or distort the author’s (or editor’s) explicit claim that Qoheleth has spoken “the most honest words of truth.”⁷ Orthodox teaching is then said to be found only in the last two verses (12:13–14), which are assumed to have been appended by an orthodox editor as part of the “epilogue” (12:9–14) to counter and correct an unorthodox and inconsistent speaker—Qoheleth. This is clearly reflected in most of the commentaries on Ecclesiastes, which have rendered almost the entire book useless in terms of authoritative teaching.

This view of Ecclesiastes is not limited to critical biblical scholarship. A significant number of Evangelical scholars have adopted this view in their writings. Most prominent is Tremper Longman, who himself asks, “if Qoheleth’s lengthy speech is pessimistic and out of sorts with the rest of the OT, why is it included in the canon?”⁸ His own answer: “Qoheleth’s speech is a foil, a teaching device used by the second wise man [the orthodox ‘frame narrator’] in order to instruct his son (12:12) concerning

² Therefore it is unnecessary, as is often done by evangelicals, to tamper with the plain meaning of “under the sun” in order to limit the supposed pessimism of “all is vanity” to non-believers only. This changes the meaning of the book as well as robs believers of a meaningful message—since the realism of “all is vanity” is true of even believers, it makes so much sense for them to obey the command of Jesus to lay up for themselves treasures in heaven rather than on earth. The meaning of “under the sun”—this temporal world as opposed to the hereafter—is plain from Ecclesiastes itself: one who is not yet born is one “who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun” (4:3); the living are those “who walk under the sun” (4:15); and the dead are those “who no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun” (9:6).

³ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 262–64.

⁴ Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 349; cf. James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 191.

⁵ Jason S. DeRouchie, “Shepherding Wind and One Wise Shepherd: Grasping for Breath in Ecclesiastes,” *SBJT* 15.3 (2011): 12–15; cf. R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 172.

⁶ Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 388; cf. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 191.

⁷ For an elaborate exegetical defense that 12:9–12 explicitly affirms the inspiration and canonicity of Qoheleth’s speech (1:2–12:8), see T. F. Leong, *Our Reason for Being: An Exposition of Ecclesiastes on the Meaning of Life* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022), 159–67.

⁸ Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 38.

the dangers of speculative, doubting wisdom in Israel [represented by Qoheleth].”⁹ Thus the book of Ecclesiastes taken as a whole is considered orthodox and canonical like other books in the canon though the speech of Qoheleth in itself is regarded as neither orthodox nor canonical.¹⁰ An Evangelical scholar would not deny that the *book* is canonical; the issue before us is the canonicity of the *speech*, which makes up almost the entire book. Needless to add, this has serious implications for the teaching and preaching of Ecclesiastes.

Jerry Shepherd adopts “Longman’s main thesis”¹¹ that “Qohelet’s speech is a foil”¹² in his commentary for Bible expositors. He himself asks, “Does it mean that it is wrong to preach a series of sermons from Ecclesiastes, since the only real word from God comes in the last few verses?”¹³ His own answer is “yes.”¹⁴ He then qualifies, the answer “perhaps ... can also be ‘no’” only if the preacher bears in mind that “the speech of Qohelet in Ecclesiastes is not the word of God but is contained in a book that is God’s Word.... So, can individual passages from Ecclesiastes be preached without always being qualified by the epilogue and the larger canon of Scripture? Perhaps, but I believe the warrant for such preaching is fairly thin.”¹⁵

In other words, if one preaches through Ecclesiastes, one will have to preach against the words of Qoheleth! This renders Ecclesiastes practically useless to preachers as it makes no sense to preach against virtually an entire book of Scripture. Yet, Richard Belcher, who like Longman considers what we read in Qoheleth’s speech as “speculative wisdom,”¹⁶ seeks to guide preachers preach through Ecclesiastes by providing “Homiletical implications” throughout his commentary on Ecclesiastes. Meredith M. Kline, in his review of this commentary says, if one accepts the view that Qoheleth presents “deviant ‘speculative wisdom,’ which is corrected in the epilogue (12:9–14), Belcher’s commentary is an excellent resource.”¹⁷ Otherwise, “Belcher’s perspective on Ecclesiastes so pervades his commentary that it is counterproductive to wade through all his details in order to arrive at an appropriate expository sermon.”¹⁸

All this means, even without reviewing the works of other Evangelical scholars who have accepted and assumed that there are unorthodox and contradictory perspectives in Qoheleth’s speech, we can see that Evangelical scholarship itself has undermined Qoheleth’s canonical authority. Insofar as the message of Ecclesiastes is needed today more than ever, there is an urgent need to reclaim Qoheleth’s

⁹ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 38.

¹⁰ Longman uses the unorthodox speeches in the canonical book of Job as an analogy to justify the inclusion of the supposedly unorthodox speech of Qoheleth in the canon (Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 37, 38). However, the unorthodox speeches of Job’s three friends are in *an ongoing dialogue addressing Job* and vice-versa *like in a debate* whereas the speech of Qoheleth is *a standalone monologue addressing the reader like in a sermon*.

¹¹ Jerry E. Shepherd, “Ecclesiastes,” in *Proverbs–Isaiah*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, revised ed., EBC 6 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 258.

¹² Shepherd, “Ecclesiastes,” 257.

¹³ Shepherd, “Ecclesiastes,” 269.

¹⁴ Shepherd, “Ecclesiastes,” 269.

¹⁵ Shepherd, “Ecclesiastes,” 269–70.

¹⁶ Richard P. Belcher Jr., *Ecclesiastes: A Mentor Commentary* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2017), 63–67.

¹⁷ Meredith M. Kline, “Ecclesiastes: Musings of an Unfaithful Solomon? A Review Article,” 2019, https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=767&cur_iss=F.

¹⁸ Kline, “Ecclesiastes.”

canonical authority. How then do we regain the confidence that Qoheleth's speech is indeed what the book itself claims it to be: a piece of wisdom literature "given by one Shepherd"—God—and is therefore canonically authoritative for preaching and teaching?

Understood on its terms, Ecclesiastes is about making sense of life in light of the certainty of death and the uncertainties of life (3:1–15). It is the product of an investigation into human life based on Qoheleth's personal experiences and observations. The investigation itself is "to inquire and to explore by wisdom everything that has been done under the heavens" (1:12). It is thus a comprehensive philosophical investigation to understand what human life everywhere in this world is all about. In other words, it is a quest for the meaning of life. This quest, which is so prominent in the modern world, is also evident in the ancient biblical world.

In view of the entrenched bias against the orthodoxy and consistency of Qoheleth's speech, we will evaluate the book's own claim to Qoheleth's canonical authority by comparing and contrasting Ecclesiastes with two pieces of literature in the ancient biblical world with respect to their teachings on the meaning of life. The purpose is to consider the best wisdom on this issue that the ancient world of the Old Testament has to offer and then compare and contrast it with that of Qoheleth—does the outcome corroborate the book's own claim that Qoheleth's wisdom is "given" by God? If it does, we regain confidence in the claim and thus reclaim Qoheleth's canonical authority.¹⁹ In view of this purpose, and also to do justice to the wisdom we find in the two pieces of non-biblical literature, we will not just summarize what each has to offer. For we need an adequately detailed survey of them so as to see how each grapples with the question of the meaning of life. This properly sets Ecclesiastes in the context of its intellectual milieu, which will then help us not only interpret but also appreciate and apply this marvellous wisdom book of the Bible.

1. Epic of Gilgamesh and the Meaning of Life

The most famous piece of literature from the ancient world of the Old Testament is the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*.²⁰ This mythological tale recounts the deeds and adventures of the hero-king Gilgamesh. At the very peak of his power and popularity, his best friend Enkidu died. The reality of death haunted him. It sent him on a frantic chase after immortality. He was trying to escape the inevitable. Through the dramatic twists and turns of the story, the epic warns us that such an effort is futile.

The only humans known to have attained immortality were Utanapishtim and his wife, who survived the Flood and lived in a corner of the world. Gilgamesh was determined to find the secret from him. When he finally found this man, he was told that their immortality was obtained from the gods under unique and non-repeatable circumstances. So every other human is destined for death. "To see

¹⁹ The goal of the comparative study we are about to undertake is not to prove, but to corroborate the claim, that the words of Qoheleth are inspired by God and hence canonical. Our confidence in the canonicity of Qoheleth's speech lies ultimately in the book's own claim. If we reject this claim, we reject the book of Ecclesiastes itself as canonical, and not just the speech of Qoheleth. Why then is the book canonized? Evangelical scholars like Longman, who accepts the book but not the speech as canonical, will have to read 12:9–12 against its grain to deny that it affirms the inspiration and canonicity of the words of Qoheleth (cf. footnote 7).

²⁰ David Damrosch, *The Buried Book: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007).

whether the gods might make an exception also in Gilgamesh's case, Utanapishtim tests his 'immortality potential,' his ability to do without sleep."²¹ He was to stay awake for six days and seven nights, and he failed. This was to help Gilgamesh accept his destiny.

Then as a consolation, he was told of the divine secret that at the bottom of the sea there was a plant that could rejuvenate anyone who ate of it. There is no indication that the plant would rejuvenate him to eternal youth, it could only "allow Gilgamesh to regain his lost youth";²² it was just "a finite resource for rejuvenation."²³ Gilgamesh attached heavy stones to his feet so that he could sink down to get the plant. He got it! He said he would take it home to test it on an old man first before eating it himself. On his way back he found a cool inviting pool. He went in to bathe and left the plant with his clothes. A snake sneaked up to the plant and ate it. Then the snake shed its old skin to reveal a new one; the plant had given the snake the power to rejuvenate itself!

So Gilgamesh lost even the opportunity to become young again "to live life over with the advantage of his new wisdom."²⁴ Why did the ancient sage who composed the epic not let Gilgamesh go home with the plant? Certainly it is not because he needed to explain why snakes shed their skin. The obvious answer is that good literature, even fantastic literature, must interpret reality correctly. And the reality is that, as Qoheleth makes clear, we have one life to live and one chance to live it, wisely or foolishly (9:10). "The story of Gilgamesh's quest then ends suddenly where it began, echoing the words [at the beginning] in homage to his achievement—the wall of Uruk."²⁵ This ending is open to different interpretations. A sensible one is that "a return to ... the walls of Uruk which stand for all time as Gilgamesh's lasting achievement" means that "Man may have to die, but what he does lives after him. There is a measure of immortality in achievement, the only immortality man can seek."²⁶

Throughout history people do seek this form of "immortality." However, having recognized that the wise has an advantage over the fool in terms of temporal achievement, Qoheleth warns, "this also is vanity." For "the wise dies just like the fool," and "there is no lasting remembrance of the wise, just as with the fool, seeing that in the days to come both will have already been forgotten" (2:15–16). The fact that the *Epic* itself was once buried and then re-discovered by modern archeology—forgotten for 2500 years—proves the point.²⁷ Ironically, Gilgamesh himself once admonished Enkidu, "Only the gods [live] forever under the sun. As for mankind, numbered are their days; whatever they achieve is but the wind."²⁸

²¹ Maureen Gallery Kovacs, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 96.

²² Kovacs, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 96.

²³ A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*, Volume I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 523.

²⁴ Kovacs, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 96.

²⁵ Kovacs, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 96.

²⁶ Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 208.

²⁷ Cf. Damrosch, *The Buried Book*, 194.

²⁸ James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 79.

How then should one come to terms with the reality of the vanity of life? In the Old Babylonian version of this story the answer was given to Gilgamesh by the tavern-keeper when he was searching for Utanapishtim:

Gilgamesh, where do you roam?
 You will not find the eternal life you seek.
 When the gods created mankind
 They appointed death for mankind,
 Kept eternal life in their own hands.
 So, Gilgamesh, let your stomach be full,
 Day and night enjoy yourself in every way,...
 Appreciate the child who holds your hand,
 Let your wife enjoy herself in your lap.
 This is the work [of mankind].²⁹

The admonition that one is to have enjoyment of life because “numbered are their days” (the certainty of death) and thus “whatever they achieve is but the wind” (All is vanity) is a sub-theme and key teaching of Ecclesiastes (2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–9; 11:7–10). Qoheleth says that enjoyment of life “is what I have seen to be good and appropriate (or fitting)” (5:18)—it is the sensible and realistic response to the certainty of death. It has been argued that since Qoheleth’s admonition to enjoy life with one’s spouse (9:7–9) is so similar to that of the tavern-keeper not only in terms of content, but even “the sequence of details is, in fact, identical in the two texts..., [it] cannot be a coincidence.”³⁰ Thus, it is supposed, the author of Ecclesiastes must have borrowed it from this Mesopotamian source.³¹

For our purpose it does not matter whether this is true. Actually, in a world prior to modern consumerism, such a realistic response to the vanity of life would be widely considered “common sense.” For if we all have to die and leave everything behind, the sensible thing to do is to enjoy what we have and enjoy life with those we love. In fact, the Egyptian *Harper’s Song* gives a similar answer on how to come to terms with the certainty of death:

One generation passes, another stays behind—
 such has it been since the men of ancient times....
 There is no return for them
 to explain their present state of being,
 To say how it is with them,
 to gentle our hearts
 until we hasten to the place where they have gone....
 So spend your days joyfully
 and do not be weary with living!

²⁹ Stephanie Dalley, ed., trans., *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*, Revised Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 150, 153.

³⁰ Nili Samet, “The Gilgamesh Epic and the Book of Qohelet: A New Look,” *Bib* 96 (2015): 378–79.

³¹ Samet, “The Gilgamesh Epic,” 379.

No man takes his things with him,
and none who go can come back again.³²

Hence the realistic response to the vanity of life as taught in Ecclesiastes is well represented in the ancient biblical world. This should temper the tendency today to read Ecclesiastes as a pessimistic book. And unlike the Mesopotamian and Egyptian counterparts, Qoheleth's admonition to enjoy life is much more nuanced. Qoheleth qualifies that the enjoyment of life he is talking about is a by-product of fearing God. It comes "from the hand God" to those who "please him" (2:25–26) by doing "what is (morally) good in their lifetime" (3:12), that is, "fear him (and keep his commandments)" (3:14b; 12:13b). Without the fear of God, the Mesopotamian and Egyptian admonitions to have enjoyment can easily turn into Greek hedonism—the pursuit of pleasure as a goal in life.

It is one thing to have pleasure but another to have enjoyment—pleasure that satisfies the whole person. The reason the fear of God is needed to have the kind of enjoyment that Qoheleth has in mind is that it requires one to have a carefree disposition (5:19–20; 11:9–10). For how can one have enjoyment when one is full of cares? And to have a carefree disposition one must not be covetous, never satisfied with what one already has but always wanting more (6:7–9). A covetous heart, which by definition cannot be satisfied, in and of itself already robs one of the carefreeness needed to have enjoyment. For it is a restless heart, what more when it leads to telling lies, committing theft, adultery or even murder? How then can there be true enjoyment—pleasure that satisfies the whole person? And the only way to overcome covetousness is through fearing God, who alone watches what is in the heart.

2. *Dialogue of Pessimism and the Meaning of Life*

A different response to the certainty of death is found in the Mesopotamian *Dialogue of Pessimism*. As its name given by modern scholars indicates, it seems to present a pessimistic response to the vanity of life. It is an imaginary dialogue between a master and his slave. The master says to his slave that he plans to do something, and the slave promptly supports him by pointing out the merits of doing it. Then the master changes his mind and says he will not do such a thing, and the slave equally promptly supports him by pointing out the demerits of doing it. This goes on for ten rounds with different things that the master says he plans to do, only to change his mind as soon as his slave replies.³³ Overall, it is humorous.

In the first round, the master says he wants to pay a visit to the palace. In agreement, the slave highlights a possible positive outcome: being shown favor by the king. When the master changes his mind, the slave then highlights a possible negative outcome: being given an assignment that brings suffering. In the ninth round, in response to the master's plan to make loans as a creditor, the slave replies, "The man who makes loans—his grain [principal] remains his grain and the interest is in addition." What then could be the negative outcome of doing that? "Making loans is as [*easy*] as making

³² John L Foster, trans., *Ancient Egyptian Literature: An Anthology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 179–80.

³³ Cf. Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods*, trans. Zainab Bahrani and Marc Van De Mieroop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 253–56.

love, but repaying them is as hard as bearing a child. They will use up your loan and keep complaining about you without stopping and will make you lose your interest as well.”³⁴

This juxtaposition of positive and negative outcomes parallels the juxtaposition of positive and negative events, or outcomes in life, in Qoheleth’s second poem: “There is ... a time to be born, and a time to die; / ... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; / ... a time for war, and a time for peace” (3:1–8). In both cases, no one knows ahead of time whether it will be a positive or a negative outcome or event that awaits him (8:17–9:1). Thus both Qoheleth and the author of the *Dialogue* reflect on the meaning of life in light of the uncertainties of life.

And like Qoheleth, the Mesopotamian author also reflects on the meaning of life in light of the certainty of death. For in the tenth round the master says he plans to perform a public benefit for his country. The slave supports him, effectively saying, “Marduk [the supreme deity of the Babylonian pantheon] keeps account of good works and he will compensate them.”³⁵ So there is reward for good works, if not in this life, then in the next life. When the master changes his mind, the slave replies:

“Do not perform, sir, do not perform.

Go up on to the ancient ruin heaps and walk about;

See the skulls of high and low.

Which is the malefactor, and which is the benefactor?”³⁶

He is not contradicting what he has just said about Marduk as a rewarder of good works. As in the other rounds, he is simply highlighting a parallel point of view, one that now supports the master’s change of mind. In this case, the observation is that we all die regardless of whether we have done good works or not. The skulls on the ruin heaps belong to both malefactors and benefactors and we cannot distinguish them. So *as far as we can observe*, in the long run it makes no difference whether we do good works or not, which implies a pessimistic view of life *if* what he says about Marduk as a rewarder of good works is not taken into consideration. With this, the master runs out of ideas as to what else he plans to do. Nothing seems good to do. So finally, he says,

“Slave, listen to me.” “Here I am, sir, here I am.”

“What, then, is good?”

“To have my neck and your neck broken

And to be thrown into the river is good.

‘Who is so tall as to ascend to the heavens?

Who is so broad as to compass the underworld?’”

“No, slave, I will kill you and send you first.”

“And my master would certainly not outlive me by even three days.”³⁷

What are we to make of this piece of Babylonian literature? The author treats a serious subject in a non-serious way. Assyriologist Jean Bottéro has presented a sensible interpretation of this intriguing piece of literature. Recognizing that this dialogue serves “a critical and humorous purpose,” Bottéro says, “it is also clear that the general direction impressed upon the dialogue has been deliberately oriented

³⁴ Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 601.

³⁵ Bottéro, *Mesopotamia*, 256.

³⁶ W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, reprint ed. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 149.

³⁷ Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 149.

towards concerns that are very serious and of great importance: those of the value of human activity and of the meaning of life itself.”³⁸ And since it presents the very serious subject with humor, “those who stress the ‘pessimism’ of our *Dialogue* are mistaken to take it, I would not say seriously, because it is serious, but literally, at least by interpreting its conclusions as a call for voluntary death as the only refuge from the universal absurdity and absence of all meaning in the world and in life.”³⁹

As for the slave’s reply to the master’s question “What, then, is good?” the reference to the heavens and the underworld (the entire universe) is to say that “the universe is larger than him, indeed too large for him. That is an indirect way of saying that no one in this world can answer the question of the meaning of human life, because man, as he is, is unable to comprehend ... the universe and its functioning.”⁴⁰ We need to read this in light of the author’s own reference to the god Marduk as a rewarder of good works and the religious tradition of ancient Mesopotamia: “only the gods, masters of the universe ... are able to answer the innumerable and unsolvable questions that we ask about the universe.”⁴¹ Thus by pointing out so poignantly that no human can answer that question, the author points his audience to “a religious feeling of transcendence as the only way to escape the universal confusion.”⁴²

Therefore, “By doing this and by giving divine transcendence as the only answer to the problem raised by his work—in a very original way, moreover—our author stays in a tradition of essential religious thought in ancient Mesopotamia.”⁴³ Thus the author was not a pessimist. So when the slave says what is good is to have both his and his master’s necks broken and be thrown into the river—indeed a pessimistic response—we need to read it in light of his own explanation: no one, except the gods, knows what is good. Hence he is only presenting the logical conclusion based on human experience and reason alone, with the qualification that only the gods really have the answer.

This means, in all seriousness, he is saying what is “good” is suicide—it is the sensible option—if *and only if* the reality of divine transcendence is taken out of the picture. As indicated above in the slave’s two parallel replies to doing good works, a pessimistic view of life is already hinted at if what is said about Marduk (divine transcendence) is not taken into consideration. The response of the master that he will kill his slave first and then himself (within three days, his slave assures him) then drives home this point. So the message is very serious though presented in a non-serious way.

We need to understand Ecclesiastes in its ancient context before we apply it to our modern context. The above survey on the quest of the meaning of life in the ancient biblical world reveals that there were two basic human responses to the certainty of death and thus the vanity of life. In view of the reality that one will leave this world empty-handed, one should enjoy one’s life. And since no human could answer the question “What, then, is good?” no one could answer the question, “What is the meaning of life?” except the gods or God. Hence the need for the sense of divine transcendence. We already saw that Qoheleth’s admonition to have enjoyment of life as a realistic response to vanity is much more nuanced than that of his non-biblical counterparts. We now turn to Qoheleth’s response to the question, “What, then, is good?”

³⁸ Bottéro, *Mesopotamia*, 260.

³⁹ Bottéro, *Mesopotamia*, 260.

⁴⁰ Bottéro, *Mesopotamia*, 263.

⁴¹ Bottéro, *Mesopotamia*, 263.

⁴² Bottéro, *Mesopotamia*, 265.

⁴³ Bottéro, *Mesopotamia*, 267.

Qoheleth actually undertook an elaborate experiment to find out “what is good ... to do” (2:3). And his conclusion is that there is nothing good except to have enjoyment (2:24; 3:12, 22; 8:15). This is because to know what is really good to do, we must be able to look into the future, even beyond our lifetime, in order to see the long-term outcome of what we now do. And no one knows what will happen in this world after he is gone (3:22) and so no one knows what is good to do in one’s lifetime (6:12). For even within our lifetime, we have witnessed the truth that an event or outcome considered “bad” may turn out to be a blessing in disguise; likewise, something considered “good” may turn out to be a curse in disguise. Thus, because of the uncertainties of life, we do not know what is good to do; only God, who holds the uncertain future, knows that.

This means the only thing we can know is good to do is something considered good that is not affected by what happens in the future; there is nothing like this except to have enjoyment. And it is considered “good” because in view of the inevitability of death, it is the sensible or meaningful thing to do and it gives us a good time. This is not to say that enjoyment is the ultimate good. We have already seen that Qoheleth teaches that there can be no true enjoyment of life without a carefree disposition. And there can be no carefree disposition without the fear of God, which involves a sense of divine transcendence. So what is “good”—to have enjoyment—is ultimately to fear God as enjoyment is only a by-product of fearing God. Hence Qoheleth integrates the two natural human responses to the vanity of life represented in the ancient biblical world into fearing God.

He also spells out that the certainty of death and the uncertainties of life, which result in “all is vanity,” are in fact intended by God to goad humanity to fear him and keep his commandments (3:14b; 12:11, 13). This means they are intended by God to help humanity not only to cultivate the sense of divine transcendence but also to respond appropriately to the transcendent Divine: fear him. And the by-product is the carefree disposition needed to enjoy life, the only good allotted humanity with regard to the things they work for in this temporal world (3:22; 5:18; 9:9). Hence Qoheleth shows how even the unpleasant reality we have to face—the certainty of death and the uncertainties of life—is designed to serve a good and meaningful purpose.

In other words, Qoheleth provides the answer to the quest for the meaning of life in a way that builds on two basic ideas that would strike a responsive chord in the human heart. This answer is so much more nuanced and insightful than the corresponding wisdom in the Mesopotamian counterparts, and is so God-centered that it gives the impression that the answer could not have been purely the work of the natural human mind. At the least, this casts serious doubts on Longman’s claim that Qoheleth’s speech presents “speculative, doubting wisdom.” Now Longman himself recognizes that the speech is about the meaning of life.⁴⁴ Does such a nuanced and insightful God-centered teaching on the meaning of life look like “speculative, doubting wisdom”? And we have so far not presented fully Qoheleth’s wisdom on the meaning of life.

3. Camus on the Meaning of Life

To better appreciate the relevance of the *Dialogue of Pessimism* for today, and how this relates to the canonicity of Qoheleth’s speech in Ecclesiastes, we now compare and contrast it with its modern counterpart: *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Nobel Prize-winning existentialist Albert Camus. Like the *Dialogue*, Camus’s essay addresses the issue of suicide and the meaning of life; unlike the *Dialogue*,

⁴⁴ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 77, 111, 176.

divine transcendence is taken out of the picture. In this essay, “The certainty of our death becomes part of a larger theme: life has no meaning.”⁴⁵

This is how Camus begins his essay: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.... I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions.”⁴⁶ He claims that life is “absurd” because it is meaningless and goes so far as to affirm that for “[a]ll healthy men having thought of their own suicide, it can be seen ... that there is a direct connection between this feeling [of absurdity] and the longing for death.”⁴⁷ However Camus qualifies, “One kills oneself because life is not worth living, that is certainly a truth But does that insult to existence [suicide] ... come from the fact that it has no meaning? Does its absurdity require one to escape it through hope or suicide?”⁴⁸

To appreciate Camus’s answer to this question, we first take a closer look at why he says life is absurd. “The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”⁴⁹ It is impossible to even know that “this world has a meaning that transcends it.” Thus life is absurd because the world is unresponsive (silent) to the human need for *meaning*, the need to have “a purpose to his life”⁵⁰ and to perceive coherence (“unity” and “rational” order) in this world.⁵¹ In other words, “I know what man wants [meaning]” and “I know what the world offers him [meaninglessness]”⁵²—it is absurd to be offered the exact opposite of what we need or want.

According to Camus, in recognizing that life is absurd, the consequence should neither be hope, especially hope in God,⁵³ nor suicide. What then should it be? What is the point of living? “Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it.”⁵⁴ In keeping the absurd alive by contemplating it, “Thus I draw from the absurd three consequences which are my revolt, my freedom and my passion. By the mere activity of consciousness I transform into a rule of life what was an invitation to death—and I refuse suicide.”⁵⁵ This is a profound statement with far-reaching implications. What does it mean?

This “rule of life,” in refusing suicide while rejecting divine transcendence, involves “revolt,” “freedom,” and “passion.”⁵⁶ It is a “revolt” because it refuses the invitation to death even though this means having to constantly face the conflict between what we need (meaning) and what we get (meaninglessness). And yet living a meaningless life spells “freedom” because to the extent to which we “imagined a purpose”

⁴⁵ Ronald Aronson, “Camus the Unbeliever: Living Without God,” in *Situating Existentialism: Key Texts in Context*, ed. Jonathan Judaken and Robert Bernascon (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 266.

⁴⁶ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’ Brien (Hannondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 11–12.

⁴⁷ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 13.

⁴⁸ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 15–16.

⁴⁹ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 31–32.

⁵⁰ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 57.

⁵¹ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 51.

⁵² Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 34.

⁵³ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 41.

⁵⁴ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 53.

⁵⁵ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 62.

⁵⁶ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 32–50.

to our life (given by God), we adapted ourselves to the demands of a purpose and became a slave.⁵⁷ “But what does life mean in such a universe? Nothing else for the moment but indifference to the future and a desire to use up everything that is given,” that is, live in the present moment to the fullest measure (quantity) with “passion” though it “is tantamount to substituting the quantity of experiences for the quality.”⁵⁸ This sounds like a form of Greek hedonism.⁵⁹

Camus’s reflection on suicide and the absurdity of life led him to conclude, “It was previously a question of finding out whether or not life had to have a meaning to be lived. It now becomes clear on the contrary that it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning.”⁶⁰ In fact he says the “revolt [refusing suicide and keeping the absurd alive] gives life its value.”⁶¹ Hence he considers such an absurd life as having “value” and thus worth living! This is the outcome of Camus reflecting on the meaning of life, just like in the *Dialogue*, but with divine transcendence taken out of the picture. Such a reflection is precisely what the *Dialogue* warns against!

4. *Qoheleth on the Meaning of Life*

We have seen Camus claim that life is absurd because the world is unresponsive to the human need for meaning—that is, the need to have “a purpose to his life” and to perceive “unity” and “rational” order in this world. Thus, even an atheist recognizes that to experience the meaning of life, one needs to have a worthwhile purpose to live for as well as to be able to perceive coherence in life—that is, to see how every aspect of life, especially the unpleasant ones, cohere with the purpose of life. As can already be surmised from what is presented above, Qoheleth teaches that to experience the meaning of life we need to fear God and keep his commandments, for it is *the* worthwhile purpose to live for because it is God’s purpose for humanity (12:13b). Since Camus says to have a purpose to life is to become a slave, he could not have imagined how liberating and meaningful it can be to fear God and keep his commandments.

And as already noted, the unpleasant reality that death is certain while life is uncertain is designed to goad us to fear God and keep his commandments—that is, to live out the worthwhile purpose (12:11, 13b). For “God so works [even through this unpleasant reality] that men (people) should fear him” (3:14b). Thus, even the unpleasant reality coheres with the worthwhile purpose. This helps us perceive coherence in this world and in human life despite the unpleasant reality. Qoheleth highlights the most enigmatic aspect of the uncertainties of life (3:1–8): the reality of “innocent” or undeserved suffering in this world (7:15–8:15). How then can undeserved suffering cohere with the, or any, worthwhile purpose of life?

As Job’s debate with his three friends shows, human wisdom is totally at a loss when it comes to resolving the enigma of undeserved suffering. This is why we have ignored non-biblical literature from

⁵⁷ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 57.

⁵⁸ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 59.

⁵⁹ In fact, the first example Camus presents as an “absurd man”—one who lives successfully with the absurd—is Don Juan (Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 66–73). “Don Juan is a character that appears in numerous works of literature and art (e.g. opera) and is best known for his unrivalled powers of seduction. He moves from woman to woman without hesitation, living a ‘quantitative’ life that Camus sees as befitting someone who is aware of the absurd” (<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-myth-of-sisyphus/characters/don-juan>).

⁶⁰ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 53.

⁶¹ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 54.

the ancient (and the modern) world that addresses this enigma.⁶² The book of Job spells out that such wisdom has to come from God and is to be humbly received by a God-fearing heart (Job 28:20–24, 28). Ecclesiastes with the help of Job has provided an answer to this enigma that is satisfying to a God-fearing heart. Ecclesiastes teaches that God so works, including through undeserved suffering, that people should and would fear him. Job clarifies that to fear God is to “fear God for nothing” (Job 1:9). This means God so works that people should fear him for nothing in return, whether health or wealth, or both. This is what it means to truly fear God.

Given fallen human nature, if God were to guarantee that those who “fear” him would be spared adversities, there would hardly be any who would truly fear God. To “fear” God for something amounts to “fearing” God out of a covetous heart, which cannot be carefree and thus cannot have true enjoyment of life. So God has to allow, as in the case of Job, undeserved suffering so that people would truly fear God. Job, who did indeed fear God for nothing, has been such an encouragement and comfort to believers.

No human wisdom could or would come up with this answer. Yet Ecclesiastes with the help of Job has given this very answer to meet the human need for meaning, which is, to have a worthwhile purpose to live for and to be able to perceive coherence in life, including how even undeserved suffering coheres with the worthwhile purpose. Camus correctly claims that this answer cannot be found in this world. It has to be “given” by God, whose existence he has ruled out. And Camus’s “wisdom” in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is found to be inferior to even its ancient Mesopotamian counterpart in terms of helping us make sense of life in such a way that our conscience accepts that such a life is worth living. The inferiority of Camus’s reflection is precisely due to what is presupposed in modern thought: the ruling out of divine transcendence or the existence of God.

Certainly not every thinker or philosopher who has ruled out God would accept that life has to be meaningless or absurd in view of the reality of death and the vanity of life. For instance, philosopher Paul Edwards in his classic essay on the meaning and value of human life valiantly sought to defend that life can still be meaningful without God.⁶³ However even this classic attempt to find meaning in life without God fails at even the theoretical level, let alone at the practical level. For Edwards claims that one’s life “had meaning if we knew that he devoted himself to a cause [he considered worthwhile]” even if his life only “*seemed* worthwhile to him” but actually “*was not* worthwhile.”⁶⁴ When one’s life is actually not worth living measured by standards acceptable to human conscience, whatever “meaning” one can find in such a life is superficial if not illusive. It is inconceivable that the human heart could be satisfied with such a “meaning.” Edwards’s theory is more like a desperate philosophical attempt to circumvent the implications of Camus’s reflection on the meaning of life, which is consistent with the presupposition that God does not exist.

This is not to say that if one does not believe in God, one can find no meaning in life at all. There is still room for a meaning in life for such a person provided that his life is considered “worth living” measured by standards acceptable to human conscience.⁶⁵ But Edwards’s philosophical solution to

⁶² It is well-known that ancient Greek, followed by modern, philosophy (“wisdom”) goes so far as to use suffering in general, let alone undeserved suffering, to argue that God does not exist.

⁶³ Paul Edwards, “Life, Meaning and Value of,” in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Donald M. Borchert, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan, 2005) 5:345–58.

⁶⁴ Edwards, “Meaning of Life,” 351, 353 (italics original).

⁶⁵ Cf. Edwards, “Meaning of Life,” 353.

meaning in life apart from God involves a scheme that requires the postulation that one's life can still be meaningful even if it is not worth living (as long as it "*seemed* worthwhile to him"). In any case, as philosopher Keith Ward puts it, "A human life can have meaning without an objective purpose, value, or pattern. We can construct our own values and purposes in a [supposedly] morally patternless world.... But if a set of religious beliefs is true, those who do not accept it, however meaningful their lives may seem to be, will indeed have missed the meaning of life."⁶⁶

5. Conclusion

Even in this brief exposition on a complex issue, we can already see that the answer to the quest for the meaning of life provided by Qoheleth in the book of Ecclesiastes is uncannily superior to what we find in both its ancient and modern counterparts. It is safe to say Qoheleth's wisdom is on a different paradigm altogether. And Job testifies that such wisdom has to come from God. Hence it makes so much sense to conclude, unless we have already ruled out the existence of God, that the teaching of Ecclesiastes on the meaning of life corroborates its own claim that the words of Qoheleth are "given by one Shepherd"—inspired by God and thus canonical. So even if the author of Ecclesiastes did indeed borrow materials from non-biblical sources, monotheistic revelation would have informed and shaped his choice and use of the materials, as well as supplemented them in his writing of Qoheleth's speech. There is no better explanation. As to whether there are actually unorthodox and contradictory perspectives in the speech, it is a matter of how we read it.⁶⁷ There is no basis to question the biblical claim that Qoheleth's profound speech is in itself canonical.⁶⁸

This, together with the corresponding claim that Qoheleth has spoken "the most honest words of truth," should anchor our interpretation of Ecclesiastes. The overall argument—because "All is vanity," therefore "Fear God"—should guide our reading of the speech. In other words, in reading through the speech we are to look out for clues as to how Qoheleth develops his argument from the theme "All is vanity" to the conclusion "Fear God and keep his commandments."⁶⁹ And since the theme and sub-

⁶⁶ Keith Ward, "Religion and the Question of Meaning," in *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions*, eds. Joseph Runzo and Nancy M. Martin, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 29–30.

⁶⁷ For a substantial discussion on reading Ecclesiastes on its own terms, see Leong, *Our Reason for Being*, 6–14, 231–41. What follows is a concise summary.

⁶⁸ Like Longman, Peter Enns accepts and assumes there are unorthodox and contradictory perspectives in Qoheleth's speech (Peter Enns, *Ecclesiastes* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011], 2, 16). Unlike Longman, Enns affirms that according to 12:10, "the written words of Qohelet are 'words of truth' and have an 'upright' quality to them. And ... we can conclude only that the frame narrator is making a very positive evaluation of Qohelet's wisdom" (Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 112; cf. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 278). This means even though there are unorthodox and contradictory perspectives in Qoheleth's speech, the (inspired) frame narrator still considers it inspired by God and thus canonical! If Enns's interpretation of Ecclesiastes is correct, we will need to rethink the very nature of Scripture inspired by God—both Old and New Testaments (Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 194–201). For it then provides the "biblical" basis to claim that inspired Scripture can accommodate (not in the sense that it merely records as in the book of Job) unorthodox and contradictory perspectives. So the question of whether there are indeed unorthodox and contradictory perspectives in Qoheleth's speech has far-reaching implications for not only Ecclesiastes but also the Bible as a whole.

⁶⁹ It matters then which Bible translation one uses. A translation that renders the theme as "Everything is meaningless," though it strikes a responsive chord in the heart of many people today, changes the meaning of not only the Hebrew word but also the entire book. "All is vanity," in the sense that everything is ultimately profit-

themes are repeated throughout the speech, we need to pay attention to how in each repetition the argument develops and moves forward. We need to recognize that the argument moves forward in a cyclical and not linear manner. Otherwise, we will not likely follow Qoheleth's (cyclical) flow of thought, let alone see coherence and consistency in his speech.

All this means that when reading a text in Ecclesiastes, if we come to the conclusion that what it says is unorthodox or contradictory to what we read in other biblical texts, whether outside of or within Ecclesiastes, we have not understood it. For the author (or editor) of Ecclesiastes has explicitly asserted that Qoheleth's speech is truthful and canonical, implicitly warning us not to read it as though it were otherwise. Why should we assume that we have understood Qoheleth's speech better than the author (or editor) of Ecclesiastes himself? Iain Provan has wisely cautioned that Ecclesiastes "is a book that grapples with reality, and reality is complex. Should the words of a wise man about reality not be difficult to simplify? ... Yet commentator after commentator has agonized over the book as if *it*, rather than *they*, had a problem, because it is resistant to linear, systematic treatment."⁷⁰

less because we have to die and leave everything behind, need not be "meaningless." It is "meaningless" to people whose life is given to laying up treasures on earth because in light of this reality, what they are doing is indeed meaningless; so "All is vanity" still gets the message across to them. In contrast, to those who are committed to follow Jesus, "All is vanity" is very meaningful because it helps set their heart free to obey Jesus to lay up treasures in heaven!

⁷⁰ Iain W. Provan, *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 33–34 (italics added).

The Characterization of Peter and the Message of Acts

— Charles Cleworth —

Charles Cleworth is a pastor at Grace City Church in Waterloo, Australia.

Abstract: The growing trend of utilizing narrative criticism to interpret the New Testament, including the tools of character studies, has led to an increased focus upon the on the way Luke *develops* Peter’s character in the book of Acts. Less attention, however, has been given to understanding how different accounts of the characterization of Peter in Acts impinge upon and contribute to the overall message of the book. This more recent focus on Peter’s development has led to a skewed analysis of his presentation in Acts, and, as a corollary, has obscured the way in which Peter’s characterization contributes to the message of Acts, which is ultimately about the movement of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

There has been a growing trend over the last three decades to utilize narrative criticism to interpret the New Testament,¹ including the tools of character studies.² Within the area of character studies, it has typically been assumed that characterization in the New Testament was largely influenced by ancient Greek literature and the Aristotelian understanding of characters as *static types* who embody certain traits.³ More recently, however, there has been a trend away from seeing characters in the New Testament as *static types* and towards a more modern understanding of characters

¹ Cornelis Bennema, *A Theory of Character in New Testament Narrative* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 2; David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 39–40. A good example of a narratological approach to New Testament interpretation is Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988–1990).

² Bennema, however, notes, “character appears to be the neglected child of literary theory.” Bennema, *A Theory of Character*, 2; cf. Fred W. Burnett, “Characterization and Reader Construction of Characters in the Gospels,” *Semeia* 63 (1993): 3; Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 19.

³ E.g., John A. Darr, *On Character Building: The Reader and the Rhetoric of Characterization in Luke-Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 48; S. John Roth, *The Blind, the Lame, and the Poor: Character Types in Luke-Acts*, JSNTS 144 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 76–79; R. Scholes and R. Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 164; cf. Burnett, “Characterization,” 3–28. For Aristotle’s understanding of character, see Aristotle, *Poetics* 6.7–24.

as *dynamic individuals* who develop and surprise the reader.⁴ Of those who argue for such an understanding, many appeal to Luke's portrayal of Peter in Acts as evidence of such dynamic characterization within the New Testament. Accordingly, recent studies of the characterization of Peter in Acts have tended to focus on the way Luke *develops* Peter's character, especially by highlighting his development from Luke's Gospel to Acts.⁵

Less attention, however, has been given to understanding how different accounts of the characterization of Peter in Acts impinge upon and contribute to the overall message of the book. In this article, I argue that the more recent focus on Peter's *development* has led to a skewed analysis of his presentation in Acts, and, as a corollary, that this has obscured the way in which Peter's characterization contributes to the message of Acts. Although the character of Peter does significantly develop from Luke's Gospel to Acts, thereby highlighting the transformative power of the gospel, Peter remains a largely static character within the book of Acts itself. With this correction in place, the theme of the development of the "word of God/the Lord" is placed in sharper relief as the central message of the book. At the same time, however, Peter does undergo significant development in one area—his understanding of Gentile salvation. Nevertheless, this too serves Luke's purpose of recounting the movement of the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Thus, Luke's interest in Peter as a character is subordinated to, and ultimately serves, his broader purpose of highlighting the movement of the gospel to the ends of the earth, which constitutes the central message of the book.

1. Methodology

Several methodological considerations underpin this study. Since we are engaging in a narratological reading of Acts, it is appropriate to read the book according to its final form as a *narrative*—as "an interactive whole."⁶ Accordingly, although historical and textual issues are not unimportant, they are largely beyond the scope of this article.⁷ Moreover, the opening verse of the book indicates that Luke⁸ did not intend Acts to be read as an isolated work, but as the sequel to his Gospel (cf. *πρῶτον*, Acts 1:1). Although Parsons and Pervo have helpfully demonstrated that the discontinuities between the two

⁴ E.g., Bennema, *A Theory of Character*, 26–28; David B. Gowler, *Host, Guest, Enemy and Friend: Portraits of the Pharisees in Luke and Acts*, ESEC 2 (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 173; William H. Shepherd, *The Narrative Function of the Holy Spirit as a Character in Luke-Acts*, SBLDS 147 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 43–66; cf. Burnett, "Characterization," 3–28.

⁵ E.g., Bennema, *A Theory of Character*, 166–72; Jack J. Gibson, *Peter Between Jerusalem and Antioch: Peter, James and the Gentiles*, WUNT 2/345 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 82–140; PHEME Perkins, *Peter: Apostle for the Whole Church* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1994), 88–95.

⁶ R. C. Tannehill, "Narrative Criticism," in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden (London: SCM, 1990), 488; cf. Peterson, *Acts*, 40.

⁷ Pace F. S. Spencer, "Acts and Modern Literary Approaches," in *The Books of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting*, ed. B. W. Winter and A. D. Clark, BAFCS 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 381–414. For an introduction to the historical and textual issues in Acts, see Peterson, *Acts*, 23–25, 39–42, 49–52.

⁸ We will assume Lukan authorship for Luke-Acts. Nevertheless, our arguments do not greatly depend on this conclusion. For an introduction to the issue of authorship, see Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 15–19; Peterson, *Acts*, 1–4.

books caution us against collapsing Luke-Acts into a single work,⁹ they perhaps overstate their case and overlook the continuity of “story, themes, and theology” between the two works.¹⁰ Thus, we are led both to differentiate between Luke and Acts as distinct works, and, also, to recognize how the unity of Luke-Acts leads us to read them together.¹¹

In order to allow categories and concepts to arise organically out of the text, I begin by performing an inductive study of the characterization of Peter in Acts, focusing on larger narrative units within the broader literary divisions established by Luke’s use of editorial markers.¹² In seeking to analyse Peter’s characterization, I adopt Bennema’s definition of *character*: “a human actor, individual or collective, imaginary or real, who plays a role in the story of a literary narrative.”¹³ Moreover, Resseguie rightly notes the importance of character development, which “often provides a clue to the direction and meaning of the plot and theme.”¹⁴ Furthermore, it is necessary to read Acts with a sensitivity to how Luke both *shows* and *tells* the reader who Peter is.¹⁵ Altar notes that while *telling* is more certain, *showing*—through actions and speech—is more ambiguous and requires the reader to make inferences and fill “gaps.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, this process of “gap-filling” is not arbitrary when governed by Luke’s authorial purpose—to offer certainty (Luke 1:4), especially concerning the movement of the gospel from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).¹⁷ After analyzing Peter’s characterization in Acts, I turn to consider how Peter’s characterization contributes to the message of Acts.

⁹ M. C. Parsons and R. I. Pervo, *Rethinking the Unity of Luke and Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1993). They conclude, “the two works are independent narratives with distinct narration, that is, they each tell the story *differently*” (82, emphasis original).

¹⁰ Peterson, *Acts*, 7; cf. M. F. Bird, “The Unity of Luke-Acts in Recent Discussion,” *JSNT* 29 (2007): 425–48; Tannehill, *Luke-Acts*, 2 vols.

¹¹ So I. H. Marshall, “Acts and the ‘Former Treatise,’” in Winter and Clark, *Ancient Literary Setting*, 163–82; Peterson, *Acts*, 6–8; cf. C. K. Barrett, “The Third Gospel as a Preface to Acts? Some Reflections,” in *The Four Gospels 1992: Festschrift Frans Neirynck*, ed. F. Van Segbroeck, 3 vols., BETL 100 (Leuven: Leuven University, 1992), 1451–66.

¹² Peterson, *Acts*, 34–36. These broader literary divisions are Acts 1:1–6:7, 6:8–9:31, 9:32–12:25, 13:1–15:35, 15:36–16:5, 16:6–19:20, and 19:21–28:31. We will combine the latter four sections together since Peter is last mentioned in ch. 15.

¹³ Bennema, *A Theory of Character*, 29; cf. Uri Margolin, “Character,” in *Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. D. Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 66–79. We would, however, modify Bennema’s definition to include *human* and *human-like* characters, thus allowing the possibility for the Holy Spirit to be identified as a character in Acts; cf. J. Hur, *A Dynamic Reading of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts*, JSNTSS 211 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001); Shepherd, *The Narrative Function of the Holy Spirit*.

¹⁴ James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 126; cf. Thomas R. Arp, *Perrine’s Story and Structure*, 9th ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 80.

¹⁵ Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 126–28.

¹⁶ Robert Altar, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 116–17; cf. Darr, *On Character Building*, 11–59; Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 130–32.

¹⁷ Resseguie provides a negative example of this by not using John’s authorial purpose—belief (John 20:31)—as a control in his analysis of John’s characters. Instead, he analyses the characters through the lens of sociology without justifying his methodology; Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 137–65; cf. Bennema, *A Theory of Character*, 14.

2. *The Characterization of Peter in Acts*

Having outlined the methodological considerations underpinning this study, we now turn to an inductive study of Peter's characterization in Acts.

2.1. Acts 1:1–6:7: Peter in Jerusalem

Luke begins Acts by recounting how the resurrected Jesus taught his apostles about the kingdom of God before being taken up into heaven (1:1–11).¹⁸ Having witnessed this, the apostles gather along with the other disciples to await the promised Holy Spirit (1:12–14; cf. 1:4–5). Peter is mentioned first in the list of apostles, which suggests that he will be established as their leader and representative (1:13; cf. Luke 6:12–16).¹⁹

This is reinforced in the subsequent narrative unit (καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ταύταις, 1:15),²⁰ when Peter stands to address the disciples. It is not unusual for Peter to take initiative and act as a spokesperson (see Luke 5:5; 8:45; 9:33; 12:41; 18:28; 22:33); however, “[c]ompared to his Synoptic portrayal, Peter seems to have changed—from being outspoken to well spoken.”²¹ He is characterized as a faithful and persuasive interpreter of Scripture who “follows the lead of Jesus” (1:16, 20; cf. Pss 69:25; 109:8).²² Moreover, Luke's use of δεῖ and πληρώω (1:16) recalls Jesus' own words (Luke 24:44), thus closely identifying Peter with Jesus.²³ Having witnessed the empty tomb (Luke 24:12) and the risen and ascended Jesus (Luke 24:34, 36–51; Acts 1:1–9), Peter has become a bold leader and faithful interpreter of Scripture.

After receiving the Holy Spirit (2:1–4), Peter is again marked out as the representative of the twelve when he stands “with the eleven” to address the crowd (2:14).²⁴ Peter's boldness in addressing the crowd is brought into sharper relief by recalling that Jesus was crucified in the same city less than eight weeks earlier (cf. 2:23).²⁵ Moreover, although “his prior boldness, depicted in the Gospels, remains; the brashness which often accompanied this boldness does not.”²⁶ Peter's brashness has been replaced by eloquence, persuasiveness, and insight as he interprets the Scriptures and proclaims the gospel (2:14–36; cf. Pss 16:8–11; 110:1; Joel 2:28–32).²⁷ Furthermore, although Luke likely saw an adumbration of the Gentile mission in the references to “all flesh” (2:17; cf. Joel 2:28) and “all who are far off” (2:39), Peter likely “did

¹⁸ Interestingly, Gibson begins his analysis of Peter's characterization with these verses, noting that Peter does not interject in 1:6–7 where the reader might expect him to (cf. Luke 5:1–11; 8:40–56; 9:28–36); Gibson, *Peter*, 84.

¹⁹ Adams notes the importance of order in lists of names, observing how James and John are prioritized over Andrew in Acts 1:13 when compared to Luke 6:14–15; Sean A. Adams, *The Genre of Acts and Collected Biography*, SNTSMS 156 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 184–85.

²⁰ BDF §291.3; cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 108; Peterson, *Acts*, 121.

²¹ Bennema, *A Theory of Character*, 166.

²² Peterson, *Acts*, 120; cf. Gibson, *Peter*, 85; Tannehill, *Luke-Acts*, 2:21.

²³ Tannehill, *Luke-Acts*, 2:20; cf. Gibson, *Peter*, 85. These are the only two occurrences of δεῖ and πληρώω together in Luke-Acts.

²⁴ Adams, *The Genre of Acts*, 212.

²⁵ Gibson, *Peter*, 91.

²⁶ Gibson, *Peter*, 96.

²⁷ Bennema, *A Theory of Character*, 166.

not realize their full import when he quoted them on Pentecost.”²⁸ As we will see, Peter’s vision in Acts 10 was unanticipated.²⁹ Finally, Gibson is correct in observing, “Peter was greatly and positively affected by being filled with the Spirit.”³⁰ Nevertheless, Peter’s consistent characterization and lack of radical change between Acts 1 and 2 suggests the Spirit was not the *only* catalyst for change.³¹ We consider this further below.

Turning to Acts 3, we meet Peter and John going up to the temple (3:1). Once again, Peter’s name appears first, and he acts as the spokesperson who takes initiative. Luke records Peter’s healing of a man lame from birth in a way that is reminiscent of Jesus’ healing of the paralytic (Luke 5:17–26),³² thus demonstrating, “while Peter is still Jesus’ servant, he has now taken over many of Jesus’ roles in the community.”³³ Peter, however, remains cognizant of his dependence upon Jesus and demonstrates humility in deflecting attention from himself (3:6, 12, 16).³⁴ Having healed the man, he proceeds to preach boldly the gospel from the Scriptures (3:12–26; cf. Gen 22:18; Lev 23:29; Deut 18:15, 19). Nevertheless, Peter’s substitution of πατριά (3:25) for ἔθνη (Gen 22:18, LXX) suggests that he still remains somewhat ignorant of a Gentile mission.³⁵

These events greatly annoy the Jewish authorities (4:1–2), who arrest Peter and John (4:3–4) before questioning them (4:5–22). Peter’s boldness is highlighted in the face of this persecution by recalling that Peter had denied Jesus to a servant girl less than eight weeks prior (Luke 22:54–62);³⁶ yet now he proclaims the gospel with “boldness” (4:13; cf. 4:29, 31)³⁷ before an impressive list of listeners (4:5–6).³⁸ Gaventa notes that Peter’s act of witnessing boldly and faithfully typifies the proper response to

²⁸ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 68; cf. Gibson, *Peter*, 91–94; Peterson, *Acts*, 140. For an introduction to the ambiguity of the phrase ἕως ἑσχάτου τῆς γῆς in 1:8, see Thomas S. Moore, “‘To the End of the Earth’: The Geographical and Ethnic Universalism of Acts 1:8 in Light of Isaianic Influence on Luke,” *JETS* 40 (1997): 389–99; David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*, BSL (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 93–95.

²⁹ Gibson, *Peter*, 93.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

³¹ At a more detailed level, we note that in both Acts 1 and 2, Peter takes the initiative to “stand” (ἀναστάς, 1:15; σταθεῖς, 2:14) among the disciples (ἐν μέσῳ τῶν ἀδελφῶν, 1:15; σὺν τοῖς ἑνδεκά, 2:14) and to address a crowd by drawing attention to the fulfillment of Scripture (1:16, 20; 2:16–21, 25–28, 34–35). Both speeches are persuasive in their effect (1:23–26; 2:37).

³² For example, in both narratives, a lame man is brought (Luke 5:18; Acts 3:2) and told to “rise and walk” (ἔγειρε καὶ περιπάτει, Luke 5:23; Acts 3:6). Having been healed, each of the men praise God (Luke 5:25; Acts 3:8) and the crowds are filled with amazement (ἐκστασις, Luke 5:26; ἐκστάσεως, Acts 3:10); cf. Gibson, *Peter*, 105.

³³ Gibson, *Peter*, 107.

³⁴ Gibson, *Peter*, 97; Peterson, *Acts*, 173.

³⁵ Bock, *Acts*, 181; Gibson, *Peter*, 97–99.

³⁶ Gibson, *Peter*, 97. Schnabel also notes the risk involved in preaching for so long in the temple—from “the ninth hour” (3:1) to “evening” (4:3); Eckhard Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 233–34; cf. Gibson, *Peter*, 99.

³⁷ The unusual forward placement of the genitive τοῦ Πέτρου in the phrase τὴν τοῦ Πέτρου παρρησίαν καὶ Ἰωάννου places the emphasis on Peter.

³⁸ Peter’s listeners include “rulers and elders and scribes ... Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family.”

persecution in Acts (cf. 4:23–31).³⁹ Despite being “uneducated” (ἀγράμματοί) and “common” (ἰδιώται, 4:13),⁴⁰ Peter is “filled with the Holy Spirit” (4:8; cf. 4:31) and faithfully proclaims salvation from the Scriptures (4:8–12; cf. Ps 118:22), thus associating him with Jesus (4:13).⁴¹

Acts 5 provides us with three vignettes of Peter that serve to reinforce his characterization thus far. In 5:1–11, Peter is presented as the wise leader of the Jerusalem church, who acts not as a “judge and executioner,” but as a prophet with insight like Moses (Num 15:32–36), Joshua (Josh 7:16–26), and Jesus (Luke 5:22; 6:8; 9:47; 11:17).⁴² In 5:12–16, his reputation for being a miracle-worker like Jesus is reinforced (cf. Luke 8:42–48). Finally, Peter is reinforced in 5:27–32 as the representative of the apostles (Πέτρος καὶ οἱ ἀπόστολοι, 5:29) who speaks with boldness (5:29).⁴³

2.2. Acts 6:8–9:31: Peter in Samaria

Although Peter was present for the events of 6:1–6 (οἱ δώδεκα, 6:2) and likely aware of Stephen’s stoning (6:8–7:60), Peter’s only appearance in this section is to confirm that the Samaritans had received the gospel and to pray that they might receive the Holy Spirit (8:14–17). In this way, Peter is characterized as a leader who bridges the movement of the gospel from Jerusalem to Samaria (cf. 1:8). Moreover, the way Peter engages with Simon the magician demonstrates that he has integrity (8:18–20) and is insightful (8:20–23).⁴⁴

2.3. Acts 9:32–12:25: Peter and the Gentiles

Following Luke’s editorial summary statement in 9:31, Peter’s ministry at Lydda and Joppa in 9:32–43 serves to introduce his broader ministry beyond Jerusalem and Samaria,⁴⁵ which may suggest a broadening of his pastoral concern.⁴⁶ Bayer notes that from this point onwards, “Peter functions much more as an individual ... albeit still amidst other believers.”⁴⁷ Peter’s decision to stay with Simon the tanner also demonstrates some concern for social outcasts, since a tanner would have been considered

³⁹ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “To Speak Thy Word with All Boldness: Acts 4:23–31,” *Faith and Mission* 3/2 (1986): 80.

⁴⁰ The words ἀγράμματος and ἰδιώτης particularly highlight Peter’s lack of formal training in the Scriptures; BDAG, s.v. “ἀγράμματος”; “ἰδιώτης.”

⁴¹ Bruce, *Acts*, 99–100; Peterson, *Acts*, 191–93.

⁴² Gibson, *Peter*, 102, n. 88; cf. Bruce, *Acts*, 111–12; Gibson, *Peter*, 101–4.

⁴³ Interestingly, this is the fourth time Peter has utilized a phrase to the effect of “you killed Jesus, but God raised him up” (2:23–24; 3:15; 4:10; 5:30).

⁴⁴ Bennis, *A Theory of Character*, 167; Gibson, *Peter*, 112.

⁴⁵ Peterson, *Acts*, 319.

⁴⁶ Gibson, *Peter*, 110–11.

⁴⁷ Hans F. Bayer, “The Preaching of Peter in Acts,” in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 261; cf. Adams, *The Genre of Acts*, 214.

an outcast and potentially unclean (9:43).⁴⁸ Once more, we note that he is characterized as a miracle-worker like Jesus (Luke 7:11–17; cf. Luke 7:1–10).⁴⁹

Bennema rightly notes, “Peter’s most momentous encounter is with Cornelius.”⁵⁰ Luke emphasizes Peter’s role in initiating the Gentile mission by placing the narrative of Cornelius’ conversion (10:1–11:18) *before* the mention of what were likely the first Gentile converts chronologically (11:19–21; cf. 8:1; 9:32).⁵¹ At first, Peter is characterized as epitomizing a typical Jewish response to the command to “kill and eat” (10:13).⁵² His emphatic rejection (μηδαμῶς ... οὐδέποτε, 10:14; cf. 11:8)⁵³ echoes his former impulsiveness (cf. Luke 5:5; 8:45; 9:33) and is reminiscent of the piety demonstrated by Daniel (Dan 1:8–16)⁵⁴ and Ezekiel (Ezek 4:14).⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Peter progressively undergoes a radical transformation. Initially, he is “perplexed” (ἐν ἑαυτῷ διηπόρει, 10:17), and begins to “ponder” the vision (διενθυμουμένου, 10:19). He takes the next step by inviting inside the men sent by Cornelius (10:23)—although, “he is not yet going beyond what a law-abiding Jew might do in entertaining Gentiles.”⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Luke emphasizes that Peter enters the house of Cornelius the following day (εἰσελθεῖν ... εἰσῆλθεν, 10:24–25), where he demonstrates clear development in his convictions (ἐπὶ ἀληθείας καταλαμβάνομαι, 10:34; cf. 10:28; 11:17).⁵⁷ Having witnessed the Spirit fall on Gentiles (10:44–48), “the final element of Peter’s transformation has taken place.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, Witherup observes that Luke almost immediately

⁴⁸ Gibson, *Peter*, 111; Peterson, *Acts*, 328. Interestingly, Peter is always referred to as Πέτρος throughout Acts except for several references in chs. 9–11 where Simon the tanner is also mentioned—presumably to avoid confusion (9:43; 10:5–6, 17–18, 32; 11:13).

⁴⁹ Bennema, *A Theory of Character*, 167–68.

⁵⁰ Bennema, *A Theory of Character*, 168.

⁵¹ “Chronologically, the first Gentile conversions happen at Antioch (and in substantial numbers) because the phrase ‘those who were scattered’ in 11:19 goes back directly to 8:1. Narratologically, however, Cornelius and his household are the first Gentile converts”; Bennema, *A Theory of Character*, 168; cf. Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 368; *pace* Carsten Peter Thiede, *Simon Peter: From Galilee to Rome* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1986), 150.

⁵² Gibson notes that Luke’s repetition of διακρίνω contrasts Peter’s response with that of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (10:20; 11:2, 12; 15:9); Gibson, *Peter*, 127.

⁵³ Bock, *Acts*, 389.

⁵⁴ Gibson, *Peter*, 121–22.

⁵⁵ Interestingly, there are several verbal and conceptual links between Peter’s statement here and Ezekiel’s statement in Ezek 4:14 (LXX): καὶ εἶπα Μηδαμῶς, κύριε θεὲ τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ· ἰδοὺ ἡ ψυχὴ μου οὐ μεμιάνται ἐν ἀκαθαρσίᾳ, καὶ θνησιμαῖον καὶ θηριάλωτον οὐ βέβρωκα ἀπὸ γενέσεώς μου ἕως τοῦ νῦν, οὐδὲ εἰσελήλυθεν εἰς τὸ στόμα μου πᾶν κρέας ἔωλον (And I said, “In no way, O Lord, God of Israel, if my soul has not been defiled in uncleanness and from my birth until now I have not eaten a carcass or that which was killed by animals, and no day-old meat has come into my mouth,” NETS).

⁵⁶ Peterson, *Acts*, 332; cf. Bock, *Acts*, 392; Gibson, *Peter*, 123; I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 5 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1980), 198–99.

⁵⁷ The present tense of καταλαμβάνομαι suggests that Peter is in an ongoing process of “coming to realize.”

⁵⁸ Gibson, *Peter*, 124. Peter almost certainly shared in table fellowship with these Gentile converts while he remained with them for several days (10:48); cf. Gibson, *Peter*, 125; Peterson, *Acts*, 341.

repeats the content of 10:9–48 in 11:5–18 (cf. 15:7–11), suggesting that this “functional redundancy” highlights Peter’s character development as being crucial to the plot and meaning of Acts.⁵⁹

Turning to Peter’s imprisonment in 12:1–19, several features of Peter’s characterization are reinforced once more. Peterson notes that despite Peter’s imprisonment, Luke “highlights the fact that Peter *was sleeping* (κοιμώμενος as a present participle emphasising a continuing state of sleep). This suggests that he had some confidence about his future.”⁶⁰ Furthermore, Luke mentions that this occurred “during the days of Unleavened Bread” (12:3) and the “Passover” (12:4), which recalls Peter’s denial of Jesus at Passover (Luke 22:1), thus underlining the transformative effect upon Peter of the empty tomb and Pentecost.⁶¹ Additionally, Peter quickly moves from “bafflement to understanding” (12:8–11).⁶²

2.4. Acts 13:1–28:31: From Peter to Paul

Peter is last mentioned in Acts 15, where he persuasively defends Paul and the Gentile mission (15:7–11). Bennema notes, “Peter is the persuasive one and James bases his decision on Peter’s argument (Acts 15:14).”⁶³ This final mention of Peter marks the completion of the transition from Peter to Paul in Acts, who was first introduced in Acts 7:58 and converted in Acts 9. Luke reinforces the transition from Peter to Paul by characterizing them in similar ways. Clark notes, “Every individual miracle performed by Peter has its counterpart in one performed by Paul.”⁶⁴ For example, Peter’s healing of the lame man in 3:1–11 is clearly paralleled by Paul’s healing of the crippled man in 14:8–10.⁶⁵

3. *The Contribution of Peter’s Characterization to the Message of Acts*

Having performed an inductive study of Peter’s characterization in Acts, we now turn to consider how this contributes to the message of Acts.

⁵⁹ Ronald D. Witherup, “Cornelius Over and Over and Over Again: ‘Functional Redundancy’ in the Acts of the Apostles,” *JSNT* 49 (1993): 45–66.

⁶⁰ Peterson, *Acts*, 363. Emphasis original.

⁶¹ Gibson, *Peter*, 137.

⁶² Bennema, *A Theory of Character*, 169.

⁶³ Bennema, *A Theory of Character*, 170. Fowl proposes that James’ reference to Συμμεών is a “multivalent” reference to several characters in Luke-Acts. Although this is possible, it is more likely that Luke is faithfully representing James’ preference for Peter’s old name, thus providing support for the historical accuracy of Luke’s reporting in Acts; Stephen E. Fowl, “Simeon in Acts 15:14: Simon Peter and Echoes of Simeons Past,” in *Characters and Characterization in Luke-Acts*, ed. Frank E. Dicken and Julia A. Snyder, LNTS 548 (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 185–98.

⁶⁴ Andrew C. Clark, “The Role of the Apostles,” in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 186.

⁶⁵ For a more comprehensive list, see Acts 2:43; 5:1–11, 12, 15–16; 9:32–35; 12:3–17; 13:8–12; 14:3; 15:12; 16:25–34; 19:11–12; 20:9–12; 28:7–10; cf. Clark, “The Role of the Apostles,” 186–87. For further parallels, see Finn Damgaard, “Moving the People to Repentance: Peter in Luke-Acts,” in *Peter in Early Christianity*, ed. Helen K. Bond and Larry W. Hurtado (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 127–28.

3.1. The Transformation of Peter and the Power of the Gospel

First, Peter's characterization in Acts has been significantly developed in comparison to his characterization in Luke's Gospel. Whereas Peter was once brash and outspoken, offering ill-timed interjections, he has become an insightful, persuasive, and well-spoken interpreter of Scripture. Although he was once impetuous and self-confident in his ability to remain loyal to Jesus, he is now dependent and humble, deflecting attention from himself. His quarrelsomeness has been replaced with obedience to God's purposes. Peter has become the leader and representative of the apostles, a healer and a prophet. Perkins puts it well: "Any failures shown by the apostle during Jesus' lifetime have been eradicated by his post-Resurrection transformation."⁶⁶

The radical transformation of Peter's character contributes to the message of Acts by demonstrating the transformative power of the gospel. The significant development in his characterization between Luke's Gospel and Acts gives the reader "certainty" (Luke 1:4) that the promise of "power" (δύναμιν, Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8) has been realized in the lives of Jesus' followers for the purpose of being "witnesses" (Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8).⁶⁷ Principally, this is achieved through the indwelling presence of the Spirit ("when the Holy Spirit has come upon you", 1:8). Nevertheless, as we saw earlier, the consistent characterization of Peter in Acts 1 and 2, and the absence of character development between the two chapters suggests that it was not merely the reception of the Spirit that changed Peter, it was also the empty tomb (Luke 24:12) and witnessing the risen and ascended Lord Jesus (Luke 24:34, 36–51; Acts 1:1–9). Thus, we conclude that the development in Peter's characterization from Luke's Gospel to Acts demonstrates the transformative power of the gospel.

3.2. The Static Characterization of Peter and the Development of the Gospel

Nevertheless, Peter's characterization remains relatively static within the book of Acts. Apart from recognising God's purposes to save Gentiles through the gospel (see below),⁶⁸ Peter exhibits consistent actions, traits and speech throughout Acts.⁶⁹ Adams has shown that this "lack of interest in character development" is consistent with other Graeco-Roman biographies and histories of the time which principally focus on "the message that the characters espouse and their embodiment of that message."⁷⁰ Consequently, "events and deeds were selected for inclusion in Acts not because they were the most

⁶⁶ Perkins, *Peter*, 89; cf. Bennema, *A Theory of Character*, 170; Gibson, *Peter*, 140.

⁶⁷ Peterson observes, "The gospel is presented as a dynamic force at work in the world (6:7; 12:24; 19:20), transforming the lives of those who receive it (2:41; 8:14; 11:1; 17:11), as it spreads (13:49), and is praised or honoured by those who believe it (13:48)" (*Acts*, 33).

⁶⁸ One might argue that Peter's reception of the Spirit constitutes a dramatic change in Peter as a character in Acts; however, as we have just argued, Peter's characterization is consistent between Acts 1 and 2, suggesting against this.

⁶⁹ Accordingly, Adams concludes, "Although there is substantial development in Peter's character between Luke's Gospel and Acts, the same is not true within Acts. Peter's actions and words are consistent throughout the text: his character functions as the primary spokesperson for the church, the lead disciple of Jesus for the first half of Acts, a miracle worker, and the key-holder for access into the in-group." Sean A. Adams, "The Characterization of Disciples in Acts: Genre, Method, and Quality," in *Characters and Characterization in Luke-Acts*, ed. Frank E. Dicken and Julia A. Snyder, LNTS 548 (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 164.

⁷⁰ Adams, "The Characterization of Disciples in Acts," 155–63. Quotations from 167.

important aspects of individual's lives, but because they were appropriate to the focus of the work."⁷¹ Although Peter and Paul feature prominently in Acts, it is not primarily a book *about* Peter or Paul.

Acts is a book about the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth (1:8). Luke's use of summary statements to report the progress of the "word of God/the Lord" (6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30–31)⁷² serves as "unmistakeable evidence that [the gospel] is a central theme in the book."⁷³ Whereas Peter remains largely static as a character, the gospel "multiplies" (πληθύνω, 6:1; 9:31) and "grows" (αὐξάνω, 6:7; 12:24; 19:20).⁷⁴ Nevertheless, this is not some impersonal *logos*, but the word of the ascended Lord Jesus who works by his Spirit, and in this sense, Acts is about what Jesus *continued* to do and teach through his word (cf. 1:1).⁷⁵ The largely static characterization of Peter contributes to the message of Acts by highlighting the more central theme of the progress of the "word of God/the Lord."⁷⁶

This, however, is not to suggest that Peter's characterization is simplistic or unimportant within Acts.⁷⁷ Luke consistently characterizes Peter as the leader, representative and spokesperson of the apostles.⁷⁸ Peter's speeches are used to explain the meaning of events in light of Scripture, and to form a framework for the other themes developed throughout the unfolding narrative of Acts.⁷⁹ Moreover, Peter is presented as the "quintessential disciple" who is worthy of imitation in his imitation of Christ.⁸⁰ Clark notes that Peter is portrayed "as the witness *par excellence* to the fact of the resurrection of Jesus, the one whose testimony has persuasive power."⁸¹ Furthermore, while "[t]he close association between the Spirit, miracles, and preaching in the ministry of Jesus has been transferred to the apostles who

⁷¹ Adams, "The Characterization of Disciples in Acts," 159.

⁷² Interestingly, that which the disciples preach throughout Acts is not primarily the "gospel" (εὐαγγέλιον; cf. 15:7: τὸν λόγον τοῦ εὐαγγελίου; 20:24), but the "word" (λόγος), and, more specifically, "the word of God" (4:31; 6:2, 7; 8:14; 11:1; 12:24; 13:5, 7, 44, 46, 48; 16:32; 17:13; 18:11) or "word of the Lord" (8:25; 13:49; 15:35, 36; 19:10, 20); Peterson, *Acts*, 32–33.

⁷³ Brian S. Rosner, "The Progress of the Word," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 221. Likewise, Marshall concludes, "The main story-line in Acts is concerned with *the spread of this message*." Marshall, *Acts*, 26 (emphasis original).

⁷⁴ Peterson, *Acts*, 33.

⁷⁵ "Word and Spirit are presented as the primary agents of the reigning Lord in forming and growing his church"; Peterson, *Acts*, 48; *pace* Daniel Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the "Acts of the Apostles"*, trans. K. McKinney, G. J. Laughery, and R. Bauckham, SNTSMS 121 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 37.

⁷⁶ Cf. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 27.

⁷⁷ Rimmon-Kenan critiques Forster's classification by arguing that "round" characters can be static, while "flat" characters can be dynamic; Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1983), 40–41; cf. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927), 78; Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 126 n. 18.

⁷⁸ Adams, *The Genre of Acts*, 212–14; Bayer, "The Preaching of Peter," 261–62.

⁷⁹ Bayer, "The Preaching of Peter," 258–74.

⁸⁰ Adams, *The Genre of Acts*, 218.

⁸¹ Clark, "The Role of the Apostles," 172.

are his witnesses,”⁸² Peter’s dependence on God emphasizes the importance of divine causation. Thus, although Peter’s characterization is static, it is neither simplistic nor unimportant.

3.3. Peter’s Change of Mind and the Movement of the Gospel

Nonetheless, Peter does undergo significant character development in one particular way—his recognition of God’s purposes to save Gentiles “through the grace of the Lord Jesus” (15:11). Although his references to “all flesh” (2:17; cf. Joel 2:28), “all who are far off” (2:39) and “all the families of the earth” (3:25; cf. Gen 22:18) adumbrate the Gentile mission, it is unlikely that Peter was cognizant of this when he spoke them since he did not seem to anticipate the vision recounted in chs. 10–11. Having received the vision at Joppa, he progressively alters his convictions into alignment with God’s purposes. Therefore, recalling that character development “often provides a clue to the direction and meaning of the plot and theme,”⁸³ we conclude that this development in Peter’s characterization contributes to the message of Acts by highlighting the movement of the gospel to the ends of the earth as a central theme in the book (1:8). Luke reinforces this by repeating the narrative in 10:9–48 almost immediately in 11:4–17. Furthermore, the transition from Peter to Paul as the central character in the narrative coincides with an increased focus on the Gentile mission.

4. Conclusions

The recent trend towards understanding New Testament characters as dynamic individuals has led to a pronounced focus upon Peter and his development in Acts. In particular, Peter’s transformation from Luke’s Gospel to Acts has often been highlighted as an example of this kind of dynamic character development. In this study, we have sought to demonstrate that while the development in Peter’s characterization from Luke’s Gospel to Acts does demonstrate the transformative power of the gospel, the pronounced focus upon his *development* has led to a skewed analysis of his presentation within the book of Acts itself, thereby obscuring the way his characterization contributes to the message of the book as a whole. As we have seen, the book of Acts is not ultimately about Peter and his development; rather, Luke’s interest in Peter as a character is subordinated to, and ultimately serves, his broader purpose of highlighting the progress of the “word of God/the Lord,” which constitutes the central theme of the book. Even in the case of Peter’s recognition of God’s purposes in bringing salvation to the Gentiles, which does constitute significant character development, this too serves Luke’s purpose of providing certainty about the movement of the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Thus, any focus upon Peter and his characterization ought to account for the internal concerns and dynamics of the book itself; namely, its fundamental preoccupation with the message of the gospel.

⁸² Perkins, *Peter*, 89.

⁸³ Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 126.

Uprisings and Mob Violence in Acts and in the First Century

— William B. Bowes —

*William B. Bowes is a PhD candidate in New Testament and Christian Origins
at the University of Edinburgh.*

Abstract: Acts of the Apostles reports several uprisings and instances of mob violence that occur across Asia Minor, caused by or related to the evangelistic and missionary endeavors of Paul and his companions in the middle of the first century. While the historicity of the events recorded in Acts is an issue of perennial dispute, the disturbances associated with the expansion of the Christian message are presented by the author as historical events. Consequently, a closer and more detailed examination of the major uprisings throughout the text is in order. This article begins with an analysis of extrabiblical records of mob violence and uprisings in the first-century Roman Empire, and then moves to an analysis of five episodes of mob violence recorded in Acts for the purpose of comparing the way that uprisings during the early Imperial period were recorded. The discussion concludes by arguing that Acts reports these events in a manner consistent with the way that other uprisings during this time were reported, and the details in Acts match the social and cultural context of the areas described. As a result, readers should consider the accounts in Acts to have a higher degree of historical reliability.

“The problem with the Lucan Paul in its briefest form is that the Paul of the Epistles is a different Paul.”¹

“Is the Paul of Acts the real Paul? Yes; he is the real Paul.”²

¹ Robert Brawley, “Paul in Acts: Lucan Apology and Conciliation,” in *Luke-Acts: New Perspectives from the Society of Biblical Literature Seminar*, ed. Charles Talbert (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 129.

² F. F. Bruce, “Is the Paul of Acts the Real Paul?” *BJRL* 58.2 (1976): 305.

1. Introduction

It would be an understatement to say that the portrayal of Paul in Acts is a contested area of scholarly discourse. The perspectives encapsulated in the quotes above are two parts of a broad spectrum of viewpoints on the historical value of the material about Paul in Acts, which is no simple issue.³ As such, any approach to questions about the reliability of Luke's⁴ writing must be careful and qualified, noting that he writes a work that purports to be historical and that his identity as a historian and his compositional practices should be understood in light of his social and cultural context.⁵ Even so, it must be emphasized that the historical verisimilitude of Acts *matters*, and whether readers count its descriptions of figures like Paul to be realistic has myriad implications for how we understand both earliest Christianity as well as how we presume that early Christians understood and recorded their past, especially the past as shaped by the movement's key figures and recorded after their deaths.⁶

A peculiarity of the style of reportage in Acts is the space given to uprisings and acts of violence, particularly as perpetrated by groups or mobs.⁷ Before examining these in detail, defining our terms will be important in order to make proper distinctions. Mob violence is here understood as unorganized collective action in disturbance of peace and order, which utilizes violence for any reason. Uprisings

³ For recent research on Paul in Acts, see Daniel Marguerat, *Paul in Acts and Paul in His Letters*, WUNT 1/310 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), esp. 1–47; Christopher Mount, “Acts,” in *The T&T Clark Handbook of the Historical Paul*, ed. Ryan Schellenberg and Heidi Wendt (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 23–53.

⁴ The precise author of Acts is not ultimately important to the purpose of this article, but I retain the traditional moniker for convenience. At the very least, we can be reasonably sure that he was a first-century Christian who was very familiar with Mediterranean geography and portrays himself as a companion of Paul and an eyewitness of some of what he records.

⁵ The genre of Acts is itself an issue of perennial dispute, but there is agreement that Luke is intending to write a historiographical work (representing actual past events and memories) and not a purely fictional one (as though he were writing an epic fable or novel). The pressing issue concerns not necessarily whether Luke wrote history but what sort of history he wrote, since “Luke and his contemporaries exercised more liberty in details than we would grant modern historians” (Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 4 vols. [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012–2015], 1:26). Questions of reliability also do not deny that Luke as the author stands behind the text and does insert his own view and agenda into it (some apologetic undertones are undeniable), but this type of narratorial action does not necessitate that he is simply creating a fictional world with the appearance of realism and thus misrepresenting history. Rather, as Darrell Bock puts it, “the historian’s perceptions are very much a part of what history is and how it works itself out” (*Acts*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007], 5). For a discussion on Luke as a historian and the practice of ancient history-writing, see Daniel Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the ‘Acts of the Apostles’*, trans. Richard Bauckham, SNTSMS 121 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1–25.

⁶ For issues pertaining to the date of Acts, see Carl Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 4–7. While an early date for Acts (prior to 70 CE) is possible, it must be admitted that internal and external evidence hardly provide a precise answer to this question. It seems most plausible to me to simply date Acts sometime in the range of 70–100 CE. That is, I would assume that it is a first-century work, but that it was written after the death of many (but not necessarily all) of the early leaders.

⁷ Throughout Acts, not every uprising is mob violence, and not every instance of mob violence would be considered a riot. Hence, throughout this article I discuss civic disorder that falls under the categories of uprisings and mob violence rather than only one type of these. For example, below I do not discuss the disturbance at Iconium (14:1–7) because this was only a description of division and an “attempt” at mistreatment, and thus may be considered disorder but not an uprising or mob violence.

are similar in that they refer to organized collective action for a cause or in response to threat(s), but an uprising is not necessarily violent. Thirdly, a riot is something more than these. Aldrete's definition of "riot" is apt: "a type of urban collective action utilizing violence or the threat of violence in order to obtain a goal, express a grievance, or make known an opinion."⁸ In other words, a riot is a sustained action which is more organized and extreme than mob violence or uprisings, but is related to these and may be a consequence of either of them.

Especially with respect to his narratives about Paul, Luke frequently depicts violent and/or chaotic responses to the divisive activities of the early missionary movement, and both their frequency and intensity often serve to advance the plot of the narrative. Luke's record of these events is important for the questions of historicity and reliability that surround his work, but compared with other content in Acts, mob violence has received fairly little attention. In what follows I intend to examine how Luke narrates riots and uprisings in the context of early church expansion, noting the sociocultural tension of his first-century context as well as the ways that first-century Greco-Roman and Jewish writers described mob violence. The purpose of such comparison will be to show how Luke's writing can be understood as plausible and realistic, thereby bolstering the likelihood that Luke is considered a reliable reporter of historical information about mob violence and uprisings. Ultimately, I intend to emphasize that Luke's accounts suggest familiarity with actual realistic contexts and historical persons, and as a result this provides readers with greater confidence that the scenarios and characters that Luke describes are not simply narrative inventions. This exploration begins first with an analysis of uprisings and mob violence in general, in terms of its nature and prevalence in antiquity.

2. Uprisings and Mob Violence in the Early Imperial Period

In the context of ancient Rome, both the late republican and early imperial periods were characterized by frequent riots, uprisings, and social disorder.⁹ In the first century, the Empire emphasized the preservation of order to the extent that the threat of military force to diffuse mob activity was a regular feature, even while Rome preferred to leave such responsibilities to the local authorities.¹⁰ Rome was quick to punish sustained disorder, but despite heavy-handedness toward unrest, the first century was a consistently unstable period.¹¹ Uprisings and even riots could happen for any and every reason, but it

⁸ Gregory Aldrete, "Riots," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Rome*, ed. Paul Erdkamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 425.

⁹ See Wilfried Nippel, *Public Order in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), esp. 47–112. For a more recent treatment, see Gregory Aldrete, "Riots," 425–40. Aldrete notes that of the mob violence in Rome that should be considered full-scale riots, the vast majority involved physical violence and a quarter of them were serious enough that one or more people were killed. Interestingly, while descriptions of mob violence are frequent in the primary sources of the first century, accounts of such are sparse for the second century, which may be due to increased military presence, economic prosperity, or social and political reform.

¹⁰ Nippel, *Public Order in Ancient Rome*, 103. As Nippel notes, "it is, of course, almost impossible to make a general assessment of the efficacy of local magistrates and their various sorts of underlings in guaranteeing the safety of the streets and enforcing public order regulations" (105).

¹¹ For a helpful overview of social, cultural, and political realities of this period, see T. E. J. Widemann, "Tiberius to Nero" and "Nero to Vespasian," in *The Cambridge Ancient History, Vol. 10: The Augustan Empire, 43 BC–AD 69*, ed. Alan Bowman, Edward Champlin and Andrew Lintott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 198–255, 256–82.

appears that they most often happened in periods of economic turmoil or food insecurity.¹² Social strife and disenfranchisement were similarly volatile issues, and underlying tensions were often enflamed in public spaces such as theaters, where the populace would congregate.¹³ The famous Pantomime riots of 14, 15, and 23 CE are a notable example of tensions between groups reaching a fever pitch in a theater context and becoming mob violence.¹⁴ Tacitus notes that in the initial riots, several soldiers and a centurion were killed, and government officers were wounded. In response, Tiberius enacted laws limiting public events: he barred Roman senators from associating with theater actors, and he authorized local authorities to punish instigators with exile.¹⁵

Public events such as circuses could also breed disorder, and mob activity did not always need to have an identifiable cause.¹⁶ For example, there were several circus riots in the first century that seemed to find their spark in the noise and energy inherent in such an event, which would be characterized by rhythmic chants and eventually spontaneous airing of grievances.¹⁷ Josephus reports that during the reign of Caligula (37–41 CE) one circus riot began after crowd excitement shifted into rage over excessive taxes, and the Emperor was so incensed that he arrested and executed the instigators.¹⁸ Some writers in antiquity seemed to think mob violence so common that dealing with or enduring unruly mobs was simply considered part of the work of those dealing with the public, such as philosophers

¹² As noted by Paul Erdkamp, “A Starving Mob Has No Respect’: Urban Markets and Food Riots in the Roman World, 100 BC–400 AD,” in *The Transformation of Economic Life under the Roman Empire*, ed. Lukas de Blois and John Rich (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 93–115. See also Bruce Winter, “Acts and Food Shortages,” in *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting*, ed. David Gill and Conrad Gempf, BAFCS 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 59–78. For primary source examples, cf. Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 55.27 (noting how the masses openly spoke of and planned for revolution during a season of famine and high taxes); Suetonius, *Augustus* 25 (noting how public disturbances would be expected when there were “scarcity of provisions”); Tacitus *Annals* 12.43 (noting that mobs would often trample others to death and in 51 CE a mob surrounded and threatened Claudius).

¹³ Moyer Hubbard, “Urban Uprisings in the Roman World: The Social Setting of the Mobbing of Sosthenes,” *NTS* 51.3 [2005]: 416–28. Hubbard notes that in addition to issues of overcrowding, “the vast majority of people in the Roman world lived at or below subsistence level, with a high percentage of these lacking regular employment.” Such conditions (like desperate, unemployed, disenfranchised persons with time and frustration gathering in public spaces) could enflame popular anxiety.

¹⁴ See W. J. Slater, “Pantomime Riots,” *ClassAn* 13.1 (1994): 120–44. For primary sources cf. Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 56.47.2, 57.14.9–10; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 37.2

¹⁵ Tacitus, *Annals* 1.77; see also Suetonius, *Tiberius* 37.

¹⁶ Uprisings and mob violence could be instigated by something as small as giving a poor-quality speech. As Hubbard puts it, “mob violence was a common reaction—virtually a reflex—to situations of distress, threat, or frustration, be they significant or trivial, real or imaginary” (“Urban Uprisings in the Roman World,” 419). Regarding public places, Tacitus reports, “in the circus and theaters there was the greatest license for the masses” (*Histories* 1.72). Cicero notes that uprisings could happen for such small reasons that they might simply be considered “spontaneous expressions of popular indignation” (*Domo* 12).

¹⁷ Thomas Africa, “Urban Violence in Imperial Rome,” *JIH* 2 (1971): 3–22; Ramsay MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order: Treason, Unrest and Alienation in the Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 163–91. MacMullen notes that airing grievances was more effective when done at the hands of organized guilds (not unlike the silversmiths that Luke describes at Ephesus), which could more readily influence a crowd than an individual (*Enemies of the Roman Order*, 170).

¹⁸ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 19.24–26; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 59.28.11.

or politicians.¹⁹ Someone (usually a public official) typically had to reason with mobs, and since they themselves faced threat, this sometimes meant giving in to some of the mob's demands.²⁰ If local authorities could not appease unruly mobs, they had to appeal to the authority of Rome. Rome had to navigate a politically complex balance in such cases; military forces could crush disturbances, but it was also to Rome's advantage to maintain the favor of the masses. As Kelly puts it, "the numerous reports about riots contained in the sources often assume that riot control could be a bloody and dangerous affair for soldiers as much as for rioters, and that battles between rioters and soldiers could be enormously destructive to the physical fabric of the city."²¹ While historians like Tacitus report that Tiberius tried to curb riots without military force, by the time of Nero (54–68 CE) there was regular military presence at theaters (and would continue to be after Nero) because of the frequency of mob violence in these sorts of public forums.²²

Some more detailed examples of mob violence in the primary sources seem to have their impetus in animus between groups from different places or backgrounds. A notable example is an incident in Pompeii in 59 CE, which, according to Tacitus, started after an exchange of taunts at a gladiatorial match.²³ Tacitus called such escalating exchanges "characteristic of these disorderly country towns," and notes that words became stone-throwing, and then mass chaos with numerous deaths and serious injuries.²⁴ This incident was serious enough that it was reported to Nero, and his senate subsequently disallowed Pompeii from holding public gatherings for a decade, dissolved various guilds and associations, and exiled instigators of the violence.²⁵ Appian describes an instance of mob violence from the first century BCE that is particularly instructive, given his inclusion of an unusual amount of detail. Appian notes that a tax was imposed on slaveowners by local triumvirs (administrative officials) that was interpreted as an attempt to "deprive them of their property," and he relays,

They banded together, with loud cries, and stoned those who did not join them, and threatened to plunder and burn their houses, until the whole populace was aroused, and Octavian with his friends and a few attendants came into the forum intending to intercede with the people and to show the unreasonableness of their complaints. As soon as he made his appearance they stoned him unmercifully, and they were not ashamed when they saw him enduring this treatment patiently, and offering himself to it, and even bleeding from wounds. When Antony learned what was going on he came with haste to his assistance. When the people saw him coming down the Via Sacra they

¹⁹ Plutarch comments, "men engaged in public affairs (are) compelled to live at the caprice of a self-willed and licentious mob" (*Moralia* 580a). See also Dio Chrysostom, *Orations* 35.23, 33; Musonius Rufus, *Discourses* 10.

²⁰ MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order*, 172. Josephus describes a mob scene in *Jewish Antiquities* 19.24 where the crowd simply appears to assume that its requests will be granted "as usual."

²¹ Benjamin Kelly, "Riot Control and Imperial Ideology in the Roman Empire," *Phoenix* 61 (2007): 150. On several occasions, theater riots proved deadly for Roman soldiers, but both Josephus and Tacitus indicate that mobs feared the presence of military personnel, and their presence was typically enough to quell unrest; cf. Josephus *Jewish War* 2.226–7; Tacitus, *Histories* 4.3.

²² Tacitus *Annals* 13.25.

²³ Tacitus *Annals* 14.17. As Aldrete puts it, the riot "seems to have stemmed from nothing more than intra-city enmity between partisans of Pompeii and those of the rival town of Nuceria" ("Riots," 428).

²⁴ *Annals* 14.17.

²⁵ *Annals* 14.17.

did not throw stones at him, since he was in favor of a treaty with Pompeius, but they told him to go away. When he refused to do so they stoned him also. He called in a larger force of troops, who were outside the walls. As the people would not allow him even so to pass through, the soldiers divided right and left on either side of the street and the forum, and made their attack from the narrow lane, striking down those whom they met. The people could no longer find ready escape on account of the crowd, nor was there any way out of the forum. There was a scene of slaughter and wounds, while shrieks and groans sounded from the housetops. Antony made his way into the forum with difficulty, and snatched Octavian from the most manifest danger, in which he then was, and brought him safe to his house. The mob having been dispersed, the corpses were thrown into the river ... (the) insurrection was suppressed, but with terror and hatred for the triumvirs.²⁶

Appian's description vividly captures how quickly these events could become chaotic and violent, how sensitive the economic situation could be, how perceptions of unfairness influenced mob violence, and also how it was rather typical for persons to address and attempt to reason with mobs (whether successful or not).²⁷

Jews would have been particularly concerned about mob violence, as this period was characterized by steadily increasing tension between Jewish groups and Romans (which intensified most after the mid-30s CE).²⁸ Tensions ran high among Jewish groups and their neighbors partly because of Jewish disdain for the restrictions of Roman occupation, along with the Jewish tendency to flout Roman beliefs and customs.²⁹ Jewish nationalist feeling at the beginning of the first century did eventually harden into a movement of militant resistance, which, as Smallwood notes, "was the fundamental cause of the recurrent disturbances of the next sixty years and of the revolt which was their climax."³⁰ A high point of tension between Jews and their neighbors was certainly Claudius' expulsion of Jews from Rome in 49 CE, apparently due to frequent social unrest and even major disturbances, which was not the first time that Jews had been expelled from the city.³¹ Unfortunately there is little detailed information on Claudius' edict, but it appears that the various disturbances cited as the cause could have been due to inter-group Jewish conflict, which was common at the time.³²

²⁶ Appian, *Civil Wars*, 5.67–68.

²⁷ A similar instance of a failed attempt to give a speech and address a mobbing crowd in 48 BCE is provided in Caesar, *Civil Wars*, 3.21.

²⁸ For an examination of uprisings involving Jews in the first half of the first century, see Sandra Gabetti, *The Alexandrian Riots of 38 CE and the Persecution of the Jews: A Historical Reconstruction*, JSJSup 135 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 167–93. For an overview of the relationship between Jews and Romans more broadly, see E. Mary Smallwood, *The Jews Under Roman Rule from Pompey to Diocletian* (Leiden: Brill, 1981).

²⁹ Smallwood, *The Jews Under Roman Rule from Pompey to Diocletian*, 144–80.

³⁰ Smallwood, *The Jews Under Roman Rule from Pompey to Diocletian*, 155.

³¹ The famous reference from Suetonius states, "since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he (Claudius) expelled them from Rome" (*Divus Claudius* 25.2). Prior to this, Tiberius had expelled the Jews from Rome in 19 CE because they were converting Romans away from Roman tradition to their own customs (see Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 57.18.5).

³² See F. F. Bruce, "Christianity under Claudius," *BJRL* 44 (1962): 310–13. It seems likely that some of the disturbances under Claudius (as referenced by Suetonius) were because of inter-Jewish disputes over Jesus and

Jewish writers describing uprisings and mob violence involving Jews tend to assume that Roman authorities were obligated to interfere in civil disorder, and this assumption may reflect how frequently Jews were a target of mob violence in the Empire.³³ Non-Jewish historians such as Tacitus often tend to describe Jews with negative language, as though they were frequently viewed as disorderly; in one instance in 52 CE after a Galilean pilgrim was killed, Tacitus describes the Jews of the area as “showing symptoms of commotion in a seditious outbreak” that turned deadly, with Tacitus angrily observing that some Jews involved “had been daring enough to slay our soldiers.”³⁴ When it comes to mob violence involving Jews and Jewish-Roman tensions, Josephus provides the most information relevant to the geographical area as well as the particular time frame closest to the life of Paul and the earliest Christians. One notable instance described by Josephus in his *Jewish War* (written in the 70s CE) is the so-called “Standards” incident, which took place during the term of Pontius Pilate (26–37 CE). In *Jewish War* 2.175–203, Josephus relays that Pilate had transported images of Caesar into Jerusalem, which, due to the disrespect of Jewish religious sensitivities, led to the formation of a mob that (eventually) succeeded in protesting Pilate’s action, with their persistence leading to his removal of the images. Philo describes another similar instance under Pilate’s rule when the procurator had gilded shields set up in Jerusalem, and this caused enough unrest that Philo reports the crowd threatening revolt and war over the action. Philo also reports the crowd threatening to appeal to Tiberius on their behalf.³⁵ Other instances of Jewish uprising were not as successful, though. For example, in one unfortunate case, Josephus reports that Pilate had many Jews killed after an uprising following his use of Temple funds to build an aqueduct.³⁶ Many other instances could be explored, but it suffices to say that tensions ran high in Jewish areas just as in other areas, and as a disenfranchised group in the Empire, mob violence was often a method of making known the otherwise silenced Jewish voice, and of reacting against perceived disrespect of Jewish custom and belief.

By its very nature, mob violence is chaotic and even eyewitness reports may be prejudiced toward one party or perspective in such instances of conflict, since these sorts of events are ideologically charged. This does not mean that an accurate report is impossible, but more that the question of accuracy itself is made more complex. Most reports of mob violence come from writers with an elite perspective (such as Tacitus, Cassius Dio, and Herodian), friendly to the Empire or who were worked with the government, which can often hinder a clear picture of such episodes since mob violence often involves conflict between the elites and the masses.³⁷ Most accounts of mob violence are written long after the

his messianic identity, which the misspelling “Chrestus” seems to suggest. For interpreters who take this view, cf. James Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 141–43; Louis Feldman and Meyer Reinhold, eds., *Jewish Life and Thought among Greeks and Romans: Primary Readings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 332.

³³ As suggested by Kelly, “Riot Control and Imperial Ideology in the Roman Empire,” 159. Appian (*Roman History* 11.8.50) seems to think that Jews paid higher taxes than others because of how often they rebelled. P. Lond. 1912 likewise reflects the attitude that Jews were propagators of unrest.

³⁴ *Annals* 12.54.

³⁵ Philo, *Embassy* 38.299–305. This instance (written within a decade after its occurrence) would imply that Jews during this time felt that they would be protected by Rome, since they figured that appealing to Caesar would be useful for achieving their purpose. Another, more famous instance only a few years later (as recorded by Josephus in *Jewish War* 2.184–203) described Caligula attempting to place a statue of himself in Jerusalem which caused an uprising of tens of thousands of Jews and the threat of war.

³⁶ Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.175–77.

³⁷ Kelly, “Riot Control and Imperial Ideology in the Roman Empire,” 152.

fact, typically describe the behavior of the unruly crowd in negative language, and condemn the disorder involved more so than the actual issue that stirred the mob. In some of these respects, Acts is similar to other ancient sources that describe uprisings and mob violence, since as any other historiographer Luke does have a perspective and an agenda, is reporting events with which he has varying levels of personal familiarity, and does typically describe crowds negatively. In other ways, Acts is dissimilar to ancient sources since Luke is certainly not a cultural elite but writes as part of a minority group (known for divisiveness), is rather ambivalent toward Rome, and writes a comparatively short time after the events he describes. In considering how the reportage in Acts compares to other ancient records, we turn now to a closer examination of some of the instances of mob violence that Luke records.

3. *Luke's Descriptions of Uprisings and Mob Violence in Acts*

In what follows I explore five instances of uprisings or mob violence from Acts 14–21.³⁸ Each episode is different, in terms of the amount of detail Luke offers, the extent of the disturbance or the degree to which local authorities were involved, and whether or not the particular incident represents violence instigated toward Paul (and his companions) by Jews (as in Lystra and Jerusalem), by non-Jews (as in Philippi and Ephesus), or by both (as in Thessalonica).

3.1. The Incident at Lystra (Acts 14:8–23)

Luke describes Paul and Barnabas being forced to flee to Lystra after threats of violence from both Jews and non-Jews that followed an otherwise successful season of ministry at Iconium.³⁹ Luke notes that Paul spoke and acted powerfully, such that after a crippled man was healed the locals liken them to incarnations of divinities (14:12). In the chaos of this, Luke notes that the Jewish instigators who had threatened Paul at Iconium⁴⁰ convince the Lystran crowds (presumably gathered for Paul's preaching) that Paul should die, and (presumably only) Paul is stoned and taken out of the city. Incredibly, Paul survives (though this is not necessarily described as a supernatural event or a resurrection), and leaves the city.⁴¹ Luke's details here are sparse; perhaps the rapid turning of the crowd came from being

³⁸ There are other instances of mob violence in Acts (such as Stephen's stoning in Acts 7), but for the sake of space and precision, this analysis focuses only on violence that is directly or indirectly in reaction to Paul.

³⁹ For information on the city of Lystra and its background, see Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2 vols. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 2:1112–22. For a full-length study of the episode, see Marianne Fournier, *The Episode at Lystra: A Rhetorical and Semiotic Analysis of Acts 14:7–20a* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997).

⁴⁰ Commentators tend to divide over this detail and whether it is a Lukan hyperbole or invention, since the distance from Antioch to Lystra is roughly 100 miles, from Lystra to Derbe is about 60 miles, and from Lystra to Iconium is about 20 miles. It must be noted that the long distance cannot in itself invalidate this claim, but it does imply that these particular Jews exerted enormous effort to stop Paul. For those who dispute the historicity of this episode, cf. Dean Béchar, "Paul Among the Rustics: The Lystran Episode (Acts 14:8–20) and Lukan Apologetic," *CBQ* 63 (2001): 84–101; Richard Pervo, *Acts*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 360. For those who affirm the historicity of this episode, cf. I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 329; Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 427–28.

⁴¹ As Bock notes, "this is a mob action" (*Acts*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007], 479). The Pauline reference to stoning in 2 Cor. 11.25 makes this event at least plausible. That Paul's preaching warranted death probably

convinced that Paul and Barnabas were pretenders or were irreverent in some way. Almost everything about this episode seems to reflect miscommunication and confusion; Paul and Barnabas are already (presumably) preaching with a translator (14:11; the people speak in Lycaonian), and the escalation could have happened as a case of misunderstanding or mistranslation that simply deteriorated.⁴²

In his sparseness of detail, Luke is not unlike his contemporaries in recording such violence. While death by stoning seems rather harsh given the lack of detail, it would not be implausible if Jews believed Paul was disrespecting Jewish beliefs and customs.⁴³ In the first century BCE, Josephus reports that Onias the Just (Honi the Circle-Drawer), otherwise perceived to be godly man, was stoned to death by other Jews after refusing to curse their enemies.⁴⁴ Although Paul was able (at least temporarily) to quell the fervor of the crowd, Pervo probably overstates the case when he suggests that Luke is doing with Paul what fictional works (like Virgil's *Aeneid*) do in depicting important people who, by their oratorical prowess, can calm a mob.⁴⁵ Paul barely restrains the crowd here, and his rhetorical ability is not in focus in any of these incidents; he barely escapes death and is hardly pictured as a hero.⁴⁶ Rather than assuming Luke is trying to be entertaining by creating an instance of mob violence after a misunderstanding or a violation of custom, it seems more plausible that an event like this actually happened.⁴⁷ Josephus' record of the stoning of Jesus' brother James along with his companions because they were assumed to be "breakers of the law" would be one of many contemporaneous examples.⁴⁸

3.2. The Incident at Philippi (Acts 16:16–24)

In the one incident of mob violence involving the narratorial use of "we" (presumably indicating eyewitness information, a reasonable presumption given the greater attention to detail in this episode), Paul arouses the ire of local slaveowners after casting out a Python spirit from an enslaved fortune-teller. Paul and Silas are seized and taken into Philippi's public space to face local authorities, which Luke attributes to the slaveowners' perception that Paul and Silas had put them at financial risk. The instigators, however, presumably stir up a crowd and tell the local magistrates that Paul and Silas are

involved his view of Gentile inclusion and of the interpretation of Torah with regard to Gentiles. Josephus notes that stoning was still considered an appropriate punishment for blasphemy in the first century (*Jewish Antiquities* 4.202; see also Mishnah Sanhedrin 6.4).

⁴² Keener helpfully suggests that "the Jewish accusers could have persuaded the crowds that Paul not only rejected their gods but also did not serve the Jewish God; they likely argued ... that the apostles were magicians" (*Acts*, 2:2176).

⁴³ Even though the Roman legal system limited the extent of local punishment, both Jews and non-Jews executed people by stoning regularly. Keener observes, "even in this period Roman law could not prevent stoning from occurring altogether, since it was a common way for mobs to execute vengeance without regard for official laws" (*Acts*, 2:1453).

⁴⁴ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 14.22–26.

⁴⁵ Richard Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987), 35; Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.148–53.

⁴⁶ Paul does address a mob as an orator after the Jerusalem incident below (21:37–22:2), but he is hardly successful; on the contrary, he is nearly killed after speaking and has to be taken away.

⁴⁷ Contra Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, 36–39.

⁴⁸ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.200. For a comparable non-Jewish examples of mob stoning, see Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 8.59.1.

Jews⁴⁹ and are “disturbing our city” (16:20) and advocating customs unlawful for Romans. This testimony then leads to physical abuse by the surrounding mob and to imprisonment, for what appear to be both religious and political reasons.⁵⁰ Schnabel dates Paul’s time in Philippi to 49 CE, and if so, the Philippian people would have been freshly aware of Claudius’ edict expelling Jews from Rome for this sort of discord.⁵¹

The details of this episode (in terms of the reason for the uprising and the extent of the violence) appear consistent both with our understanding of the Philippian colony at the time, and also with first-century acts of mob violence.⁵² Luke identifies an underlying financial motivation (16:19), a typical impetus for unrest, as previously noted. In the accusation before the magistrates, they are identified with a people-group already suspect for the rejection of Roman customs; they are blamed for disturbing the city and accused of undermining custom; and thus their business becomes the business of the those congregating in a public marketplace (ἀγορά), an otherwise typical location for unrest.⁵³ The mention of violating customs could mean that Paul was disturbing the peace by proselytizing Judaism or possibly that he had been accused of using some sort of foreign magic, which would be illegal.⁵⁴ Traditional customs involved people’s livelihood, so the challenge of making Romans forego *mos maiorum* (ancestral practices) probably did have some economic sense to it, and Paul’s message of the lordship of Jesus may have undermined the relationship Philippi had with Rome and Caesar and thus could appear revolutionary.⁵⁵ Various disturbances during this time share the features of this episode, such as Gellius’ description of Marcus Marius, who was stripped and beaten with rods by a mob after disrespecting local customs about baths.⁵⁶ Rather than assuming that Luke is simply creating “a typical scene centered

⁴⁹ For Roman perspectives about Jews, cf. Tacitus, *Histories* 5.5; Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 28; Juvenal, *Satires* 14.96–106.

⁵⁰ I disagree with Craig De Vos, who thinks that the incident at Philippi “does not suggest a mob action, as at Thessalonica” (“Finding a Charge that Fits: The Accusation against Paul and Silas at Philippi [Acts 16.19–21],” *JSNT* 74 [1999]: 51). For more on the background and culture of Philippi at this time, see Craig De Vos, *Church and Community Conflicts: The Relationships of the Thessalonian, Corinthian, and Philippian Churches with their Wider Civic Communities*, SBLDS 168 (Atlanta: SBL, 1999), 233–87; Eduard Verhoef, *Philippi: How Christianity Began in Europe: The Epistle to the Philippians and the Excavations at Philippi* (London: T&T Clark, 2013). Being beaten in this way was considered acceptable for those who caused civil disturbances; cf. Callistratus, *Digest* 48.19.28.3; Tacitus, *Annals* 1.77; Suetonius, *Augustus* 45.3, and Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.269.

⁵¹ Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2:1151.

⁵² On Luke’s terminology and understanding of the local political structure, see David Gill, “Macedonia,” in *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting*, ed. David Gill and Conrad Gempf, BAFCS 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 412.

⁵³ See the discussion in C. K. Barrett, *Acts 15–28*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 788–89.

⁵⁴ Bock, *Acts*, 537; Brian Rapske, *The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody*, BAFCS 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 118; cf. Cicero, *De Legibus* 2.8.19. In the Julio-Claudian period, proselytization laws were not rigidly enforced except when a serious threat to the state was suspected.

⁵⁵ Bock, *Acts*, 538; Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2:1155. Paul was probably suspected of *tumultus* rather than *sedition*, but the limited information Luke provides seems to indicate that the people understood his message as undermining tradition or Rome itself. Tacitus (*Histories* 5.5) understands Jews as compelling converts to reject all of their traditions and even their nation and families. As De Vos notes, the imperial cult was the most important religious expression in Philippi (*Church and Community Conflicts*, 248–49), and thus this sort of proselytizing may be in view.

⁵⁶ Gellius, *Attic Nights* 10.3.3.

on the labile mob, swayed by unscrupulous manipulators, which can be conjured up as needed,”⁵⁷ it seems more plausible that this event actually happened this way, as it often did in this period.

3.3. The Incident at Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–9)

This appears to be the only incident where both Jews and non-Jews are clearly involved in mob violence toward Paul (and Silas), although here Luke identifies the initial instigators as Jewish.⁵⁸ Although Luke attributes the uprising to jealousy over Paul’s successes in preaching, there is little detail about why such a strong response ensues, which is described as the entire city being in uproar.⁵⁹ Evidently, frustration at Paul’s message led to enlisting what Luke pejoratively calls “some wicked men of the rabble” (perhaps unemployed, disenfranchised people frequenting public places) into a mob.⁶⁰ Paul and Silas are associated with a certain Jason (possibly because Jason may have been known to be Jewish), and they bring Jason and other contemporaries of Paul before the local authorities. The accusation here is something of a combination of the accusations in Lystra and Philippi, in that the instigators cite the former disturbances of the missionaries in other towns, and then again point to the act of flouting Roman customs or elements of Roman identity (here they associate Paul’s preaching with rejecting the authority of Caesar by asserting Jesus’ kingship). Evidently there is a continued reception of Paul’s message as being unavoidably political and hence potentially seditious. That Paul dealt with “much conflict” here after being “shamed” at Philippi is consistent with his own statements in 1 Thess 2:2 and 2:14–16.

In this case the local authorities (non-Roman magistrates, or πολιτάρχας) do not respond with violence but are “disturbed” by the seriousness of the charge (and its political or revolutionary implications), and want to avoid escalation, even taking a financial guarantee of this.⁶¹ The fact that this episode ends in such anticlimactic fashion suggests that Luke is not simply trying to craft entertaining, violent, but hagiographic depictions of Paul’s escapades, but is relating what was likely an embarrassing instance of Paul being banished from a city (perhaps for being considered an enemy of the empire, thus endangering the city’s relationship with Rome). Rather than assuming that “the events of Paul’s activity

⁵⁷ Pervo, *Acts*, 407.

⁵⁸ It is not clear whether non-Jews are involved in the mob violence at Lystra, although that is possible. For a detailed analysis of this episode and of the background on Thessalonica, see James Harrison, *Paul and the Imperial Authorities at Thessalonica and Rome: A Study in the Conflict of Ideology*, WUNT 1/273 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011); Todd Still, *Conflict at Thessalonica: A Pauline Church and Its Neighbors*, LNTS 183 (London: T&T Clark, 1999).

⁵⁹ Whether Luke is guilty of hyperbole here (and also with regard to the extent of the Ephesian chanting in 19:34) is beside the point. It is clear that hyperbole would probably help the pace of the narrative, but that does not necessitate that the details of these events are fabricated. Broad-scale hyperbole like this is a typical narratorial device; e.g., P. Lond. 1912, 96–100. The idea that Paul has “turned the world upside down” is more of a political statement about the nature of his message vis-a-vis Rome than it is about the extent of his activity.

⁶⁰ Here Luke reflects common attitudes among Romans about those who participate in mob violence; a similar example is found in Plutarch, *Aemilius Paullus* 38.

⁶¹ In my view the most likely issue here is that Paul’s proclamation of Christ is viewed as a violation of the laws enacted by Augustus and Tiberius about predicting the change of rulers, as detailed in Dio Chrysostom, *History* 57.15.8. Numismatic evidence from Thessalonica suggests that the Imperial cult was popular there by the first century BCE, and the city was dependent on imperial benefaction. Consequently, local leaders were committed to maintaining a good relationship with Rome, which entailed demonstrations of allegiance.

in the city (Thessalonica) are legendary,”⁶² it seems safer to see it as “fit(ting) very well into the general picture that can be built up of movements within the Judaism of the day ... which constituted a threat to public order.”⁶³

3.4 The Incident at Ephesus (Acts 19:23–41)

The riot at Ephesus is certainly the most discussed of the incidents of mob violence in Acts.⁶⁴ It is the longest and most detailed of Luke’s descriptions, the only one significant enough to merit a preface as to its importance (19:23), and the only event that progresses to the level of a riot. As in Philippi, Luke notes that the initial instigation of the uprising was financial, and as in Philippi the instigators cite the violation of custom.⁶⁵ Demetrius, identified as a silversmith, incites other craftsmen and businessmen (possibly members of a local guild) against Paul on the basis of his preaching, which is understood to be shaming the use of shrines, against Artemis, and therefore antithetical to Ephesian traditions and customs.⁶⁶ Luke associates the threat to Artemis with the formation of the mob, which moves to the theater (which would be a public space of congregation), bringing several of Paul’s companions. A Jew Luke identifies as Alexander attempts to “make a defense to the crowd” (19:33), but he is unsuccessful and drowned out by frenzied chanting.⁶⁷ Eventually a local leader is able to appease the crowd by pointing out that their riotous behavior was illegal, which could result in punishment from Rome.

Luke’s description of this event is generally consistent with similar events at the time, and his description of the crowd’s behavior is realistic.⁶⁸ Some have argued that the *realia* is outweighed by the entertainment value here, but as Keener argues in his analysis of the Lystran crowd’s response to Paul, such behavior “should not be deemed implausible simply because it is also entertaining.”⁶⁹ Luke twice attributes “confusion” to the emotionally charged crowd; people were simply shouting out different things, and most of the mob did not understand the reason for the uprising (19:32).⁷⁰ Since Paul is not particularly victorious (or even really present) here, the scene makes Paul’s message appear extremely divisive, and the whole event essentially represents a failure, Luke has little motive for inventing this episode. Ephesians were known in other contemporaneous writings to be prone to discord and

⁶² Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament, Vol. 2: History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000), 108.

⁶³ Bruce, “Christianity Under Claudius,” 322.

⁶⁴ For an overview of research on Ephesus and on this episode, see Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), esp. 104–96; Jerome Murphy O’Connor, *St. Paul’s Ephesus: Texts and Archaeology* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2008); Robert Stoops, “Riot and Assembly: The Social Context of Acts 19:23–41,” *JBL* 108.1 (1989): 73–91.

⁶⁵ That the expansion of Christianity caused financial losses for temples is seen in Pliny, *Epistles* 10.96.

⁶⁶ Guilds of silversmiths are attested in antiquity and would have had meeting places near marketplaces and theaters; see Holladay, *Acts*, 378; see also the first-century funerary monument mentioning Ephesian Silversmiths, IEph 2212. On typical attitudes toward foreigners critiquing a city’s customs, see Cicero, *Moral Duty* 1.34.

⁶⁷ This and any other quotations from Acts are taken from the ESV.

⁶⁸ A similar event of a crowd rushing to a theater after the flouting of custom can be found in Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.46–62.

⁶⁹ Keener, *Acts*, 2:2144.

⁷⁰ A similar instance is recorded in Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 7.15.4.

violence,⁷¹ and Luke's minor effects (like the clerk's silencing and reasoning with the crowd) are similar to other historical examples, like Dio Chrysostom's account of his speech addressing a crowd after a bread riot, where he reasoned with them so that they wouldn't be accused by the empire of lawlessness and lose their favor.⁷² While Luke undoubtedly dramatized the episode, it is certain that Paul's critique of Artemis would be taken seriously, since "Ephesus and Artemis were inseparable ... when Artemis is honored the prestige and prosperity of the city increases."⁷³ Paul's divisive message against the financial, religious, and political sentiments of Ephesus could certainly have produced this sort of effect, and so instead of assuming that "there is next to nothing of historical value in Luke's work here,"⁷⁴ Luke's report of this event should be considered feasible and understandable given the details and context.

3.5. The Incident at Jerusalem (Acts 21:27–36)

This final incident is instigated by "Jews from Asia," probably referring to some who remembered Paul's association with the riot at Ephesus.⁷⁵ In this instance Paul's previous disturbances are cited, but here he is accused of teaching against the Jewish people, against the Law, and against the Temple itself, and that he further violated custom by bringing a Greek into a restricted area of the Temple, disrespecting the space.⁷⁶ That is, the mob violence that ensues stems from a threat to or egregious undermining of Jewish beliefs and customs, and thus for similar reasons as the other sorts of uprisings in Jerusalem attested in primary source evidence. Paul is beaten by the crowd, which is characterized by a similar confusion and uproar as in Ephesus (21:34), and Luke indicates that Paul was not killed because of the Roman military presence in the city, who arrest him. The episode continues with Paul eventually (and unsuccessfully) addressing the crowd, but here we are concerned with elements of the initial uprising and mob violence.

The force of Paul's problem here is his suspected disrespect of the Temple. Disrespect to the Temple or open flouting of the Law were key components of the main examples of first-century unrest in Jerusalem. Josephus records two eminent examples; first he notes a massive riot with thousands being trampled after a Roman soldier exposed himself on the Temple grounds,⁷⁷ and second a certain Jesus ben Ananias who, after speaking against the Temple, was arrested, beaten, turned over to the Romans, and flogged in the early 60s CE.⁷⁸ Similar to the way that Artemis' temple was symbolic of Ephesian identity in the previous incident, the Jerusalem Temple was emblematic of Jewish identity

⁷¹ See Psuedo-Heraclitus, *Epistles* 7.9–10; though later, Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 1.16.4.

⁷² Dio Chrysostom, *Orations* 46.14.

⁷³ Rick Strelan, *Paul, Artemis, and the Jews in Ephesus*, BZNW 80 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1996), 46.

⁷⁴ Scatt Shauf, *Theology as History, History as Theology: Paul in Ephesus in Acts 19*, BZNW 133 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), 98.

⁷⁵ The uprisings in Ephesus and Jerusalem are intentionally connected; see Jeffrey Tripp, "A Tale of Two Riots: The Synkrisis of the Temple of Ephesus and Jerusalem in Acts 19–23," *JSNT* 37.1 (2014): 86–111.

⁷⁶ For background information on Jerusalem in this period, see Lee Levine, *Jerusalem: Portrait of the City in the Second Temple Period, 538 BCE–70 CE* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002). For the seriousness of bringing a non-Jew into restricted spaces, see Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 15.11.5; *Jewish War*. 5.5.2; 6.2.4.

⁷⁷ Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.224–27.

⁷⁸ Josephus *Jewish War*. 6.300–9.

and nationalism.⁷⁹ An attack on the Temple was an attack on Judaism and its tradition, and could be considered as warranting death.⁸⁰ Since Paul's preaching would have been understood as both a problematic interpretation of the Law and as involving the acceptance of Gentiles, the accusation about Trophimus is probably reflective of the mob's understanding of Paul's message and its relationship to Jewish tradition. Such chaos and the possibility of murder, along with the lack of concern for a Roman response fit the context of increasing violence that Josephus describes in the city from the late 50s CE, particularly given the increased tension between warring factions within Judaism itself.⁸¹ Rather than assuming that this embarrassing, unsuccessful, highly realistic portrayal to be a Lukan fiction, it seems more reasonable to assume that this event reflects the likely circumstances that Paul would have faced in Jerusalem at this volatile historical period.

4. Conclusion: The Elusive Question of Historical Correspondence

The frequent turmoil and unrest in Luke's narrative corresponds to his context and era. While this does not prove historical correspondence, it can suggest a higher possibility of historical correspondence and of a reader's trust in Luke as a historian. In each of the five episodes discussed above, there are no references to supernatural phenomena in the actual narration of the uprisings or mob violence, even when these elements are present in the narration before and afterward. That is, there is little in the episodes of violence that could be attributed to legendary emendation. Based on the initial overview of mob violence and civil disorder in the ancient world, the features of Luke's descriptions are hardly fanciful, but appear realistic and provide us with useful material for understanding both first-century society and the historical Paul. To assume that Luke's portrayals are inauthentic simply because they are typical of events of the time is unfairly skeptical; the appearance of authenticity should, at the very least, be a contributor to the acceptance of authenticity. Accurate local details do not make Luke's writing historical, but they should make readers less skeptical.

Luke clearly viewed Paul highly, but readers of Acts must ask whether he would include Paul's involvement in so much unrest and suspicion of sedition unless these were things that the historical Paul was actually known to have been involved in. Luke often comments on the cause or culprit behind such uprisings, and these comments may be colored by his agenda; but the events themselves seem to fit the historical persons and historical contexts depicted.

For contemporary readers, this matters for several reasons. First, a less skeptical approach to Acts can serve to show how its reportage complements (rather than contrasts) the picture of Paul found in his own letters, which can increase a reader's trust in the coherence of the New Testament message as a whole. Second, a favorable view of Luke's reportage can serve to show how the Jesus movement advanced in spite of constant and consistent resistance at the local and governmental levels, which could be encouraging to modern Christians ministering in difficult and even dangerous environments. Lastly, viewing Acts as relaying trustworthy information can serve to show that the message of Jesus can and should affect every strata of society, and by associating with this movement, contemporary Christians are themselves participating in the ongoing, unfinished story that started in Acts.

⁷⁹ Keener, *Acts*, 3:3147.

⁸⁰ One could also look to *Jewish War* 2.229–31 where Josephus describes a Roman soldier being executed for burning a Torah scroll.

⁸¹ Levine, *Jerusalem*, 307; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.8.8.

Holladay is right to note, “the interpreter must constantly negotiate between ‘the world of the text’ and ‘the world behind the text,’”⁸² but as I have argued here, with respect to episodes of mob violence in Acts, the gulf between these two worlds should be considered slight rather than vast. My contention is not that Luke gives pure facts without any interpretation, but that his accounts of uprisings and mob violence are consistent with the character of extant historical sources on uprisings and mob violence and should be considered as reliable sources of information. In light of this analysis, we are better prepared to address the question that confronts every interpreter of Acts: Is Luke’s narration of uprisings and mob violence in Acts simply an intentional (but false) example of vivid realism that serves only to glorify the legendary, embellished Paul of a later generation, or is it better explained as an accurate depiction of the upheavals that really took place within the historical circumstances of the birth of the early Christian movement?

⁸² Holladay, *Acts*, 13.

Modern Healing Cloths and Acts 19:11–12

— Scott MacDonald —

Scott D. MacDonald serves as associate professor of theology at the Canadian Baptist Theological Seminary and College in Cochrane, Alberta and is the author of *Demonology for the Global Church: A Biblical Approach in a Multicultural Age*.

Abstract: Christian groups and leaders around the world commission cloths to heal the sick, often claiming Acts 19:11–12 as a foundational text for the practice. After an overview of some examples, this paper analyzes the unusual events of Ephesus in Acts and reflects on the identity of the cloths. This investigation reveals the stark contrast between Paul’s ministry in Ephesus and the modern practice of healing cloths. Instead of inaugurating a normal healing device for Christianity, God uses the miracles and Paul’s public ministry to lead the Ephesians away from magical practices. While God can do as he sees fit, Christian groups and leaders should avoid seeking to manipulate and control the power of God like the sons of Sceva (Acts 19:13–20).

The pause provoked tension, as all eyes turned toward me. A group of fifteen older women had invited me to speak concerning spiritual warfare at their multi-denominational prayer meeting in southern Illinois. As I entered the room, the intercession had long since started, and they were focusing on some sick friends who were currently absent from the meeting. They were consecrating a piece of cloth, over which they had been praying for healing. A member of the group would deliver this cloth to a woman in need of physical restoration. After the prayer time finished, I gave my presentation, and a time of question and answer began. One of the ladies asked, “What did you think about the healing cloth?” I paused a moment to gather my thoughts, and the ladies awaited my response.

While many modern charismatic churches avoid the use of cloths (especially in the West), an advocate for healing cloths is not difficult to find. Writing from Mozambique, Gregory Kane laments that much of Pentecostalism’s initial marks have faded. He points to the faith-filled, history-supported healing system of handkerchiefs:

Anointed prayer handkerchiefs were once a distinctive in Pentecostal healing praxis. Their historical origins can be traced through the biblical use of tokens in healing, the Pauline paradigm of Acts 19:11–12, the Catholic reliquary system, and the renewal of interest in Divine healing in the nineteenth century. The use of prayer handkerchiefs

was popularized through the Azusa Street revival and later through the ministry of Healing Evangelists like William Branham and T. L. Osborn.¹

Kane acknowledges that the abuses of televangelists have left many Christians skeptical of the practice. Yet he asserts, “to disavow anointed handkerchiefs might well be to miss an opportunity to reconnect with our Pentecostal roots.”² He then cautiously guides us to consider “digging out those old cotton handkerchiefs and looking to see whether the God of ‘the less common miracles’ still responds creatively to confident, expectant faith (Heb. 11:6).”³ While Kane may be correct about some persistent skepticism surrounding the subject, it seems that many Christians are currently reaching for a handkerchief!⁴

1. The Modern Practice of Healing Cloths

Kane is concerned that the practice of healing cloths is in steep decline. But global Christianity displays a different trend. In the 1940s–1950s, Pentecostal leaders like William Branham emphasized the practice. Branham “provided anointed handkerchiefs to the masses who could not attend campaigns” and told the sick “to pin the handkerchief to [one’s] clothes at the spot of the disease and pray for healing.”⁵ But such episodes have not disappeared. Cloths are a current feature of many Christian leaders and groups as an integral tool for physical healing and deliverance from demonic powers.

One example in the West is David Taylor. Raised in Memphis, Tennessee, he reports that Jesus visited him face to face and commissioned him to miracle ministry.⁶ This ministry includes prayer cloths. After quoting Acts 19:11–12, Taylor says, “The Lord told me to send a prayer cloth to everyone ... so that they can come into total healing and complete freedom.... Take this cloth and lay it on yourself wherever your pain, sickness, or disease is and be healed!”⁷

Or consider Bethel Church and the expansive reach of its ministries across the globe. In 2017, they published a testimony from Brienne Peetz:⁸

¹ Gregory Kane, “Anointed Prayer Handkerchiefs: Are We Missing a Paradigm for Healing?” *JEPTA* 1 (2012): 75.

² Kane, “Anointed Prayer Handkerchiefs,” 86.

³ Kane, “Anointed Prayer Handkerchiefs,” 86.

⁴ Kane, “Anointed Prayer Handkerchiefs,” 86. He marvels, “not even the practitioners can agree on the precise mechanism by which prayer handkerchiefs operate.” But they apparently work.

⁵ C. Douglas Weaver, *The Healer-Prophet: William Marrion Branham* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000), 71.

⁶ David E. Taylor, “Through the Years,” *JMMI*, <https://joshuamediaministries.org/feature-presentation/about-apostle-david-e-taylor-jmmi/>.

⁷ David E. Taylor, “Free Miracle Prayer Cloth,” *JMMI*, <https://joshuamediaministries.org/free-miracle-prayer-cloth/>.

⁸ Peetz gave a two-hour presentation with the Bethel School of Creativity, specifically concerning fashion. The lecture description says, “In this class Brienne Peetz will teach on the Father’s original intent for the fashion industry and ultimately His original design for your destiny! What does it look like to be part of the fashion industry in the kingdom? You will leave this class equipped and empowered to release heaven through fashion!” Brienne Peetz, “The Fashion Industry’s Heavenly Design,” *Sched*, <https://schoolofcreativity2017.sched.com/event/9f8J/the-fashion-industrys-heavenly-design>.

I recently designed a custom piece of clothing (a top) for a family member.... I prayed over it and released anointing.... She has had back pain and nerve pain off and on her whole life with no explanation from doctors. About a week after receiving the top, she was in a car accident. She immediately had burning pain in her back and nerves, shooting down her legs. When she returned home, she felt the Holy Spirit tell her to go put the custom top on. When she did she was immediately healed of her back and nerve pain.... The following day she went on a 2.5-hour walk, something she typically cannot do!⁹

While Peetz does not directly connect this clothing to Paul's ministry in Ephesus, the testimony frames the gift as an item intentionally commissioned to convey power.

Looking to Cape Town, South Africa in 2004, the media arm of the late T. B. Joshua's ministry (Emmanuel TV) tells the story of Sanet Badenhorst, who suffered a catastrophic accident horseback riding.¹⁰ Due to extensive bleeding, the nine-year-old girl was near death. But the Nigerian prophet Joshua gave a handkerchief to the girl's father who then placed it on the girl to heal her.¹¹

Other African leaders are deeply concerned with the abundance of such prayer cloths and other commissioned items. Edward Agboada says,

A development in modern Christianity that attracts attention is the subtle but strong emergence of the use of charms and talismanic elements by some Pastors, Prophets and Bishops. The craze for so-called mega church with huge membership and quest to keep each one of them has pushed some pastors to enter into contract with some juju men and women for charms and talismans. Some of these charms and talismans have been in the forms of holy water, anointed oil, handkerchiefs, hand-bangles perfumes, stickers etc. Unsuspectingly, these are sold to members in the name of prophetic guidance.¹²

Collium Banda directs a critical question to Christian communities situated amid their traditional religions. The increasing popularity of modern prophets is tied to anointed objects, and he wonders if such objects have fed dissatisfaction "with the sufficiency of Christ in the African context."¹³ In other words, weighty issues and essential doctrine may hang on the thread of a small cloth.

⁹ Brienne Peetz, "Healing Through Kingdom Fashion Design," *Bethel*, 20 July 2017, <https://www.bethel.com/testimonies/healing-through-kingdom-fashion-design>.

¹⁰ "Impossible! A Dying Girl and TB Joshua's Handkerchief," *Emmanuel TV*, <https://emmanuel.tv/content/impossible-a-dying-girl-and-tb-joshuas-handkerchief/>. The Emmanuel TV website no longer displays the entire story, but the longer narrative continues to circulate through "Prophet T. B. Joshua's Miracle Handkerchief," *News Ghana*, 30 January 2015, <https://newsghana.com.gh/prophet-t-b-joshuas-miracle-handkerchief/>.

¹¹ "Prophet T. B. Joshua's Miracle Handkerchief."

¹² Edward Agboada, "Charms, Talisman, and Amulets in Contemporary African Christianity," *AJBT* 4.1 (2021): 181–82.

¹³ Collium Banda, "Complementing Christ? A Soteriological Evaluation of the Anointed Objects of the African Pentecostal Prophets," *Conspectus* (December 2018): 55. He says at length, "Various studies have highlighted that many African Christians struggle with the sufficiency of Christ and his salvation in their African context, prompting them to maintain one foot in Christ and another in their African traditional religions (ATR). This raises the question: to what extent are the anointed objects of the African Pentecostal prophets an expression of the resilience of dissatisfaction with the sufficiency of Christ in the African context?"

Yet the church has a ministry of healing through the gifting of the Spirit, though occasional and incomplete before the recreation of all things. As Wayne Grudem says, “The healing miracles of Jesus certainly demonstrate that at times God is willing to grant a partial foretaste of the perfect health that will be ours for eternity.”¹⁴ While critical of “so-called divine healers,” Lewis Chafer asserts, “Spiritual believers in all past generations have experienced divine favor, healing included.”¹⁵ At a minimum, even the most miracle-skeptic Christian should concede that the prayers of the church lead to occasional healings. The question that lies ahead is whether Acts 19:11–12 sustains a specific practice of healing cloths for the church today. Consider the text:

And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.¹⁶

Δυνάμεις τε οὐ τὰς τυχοῦσας ὁ θεὸς ἐποίει διὰ τῶν χειρῶν Παύλου, ὥστε καὶ ἐπὶ τοὺς ἀσθενοῦντας ἀποφέρεσθαι ἀπὸ τοῦ χρωτὸς αὐτοῦ σουδάρια ἢ σιμικίνθια καὶ ἀπαλλάσσεσθαι ἀπ’ αὐτῶν τὰς νόσους, τὰ τε πνεύματα τὰ πονηρὰ ἐκπορεύεσθαι.

Let us now reflect on the circumstances surrounding the healing cloths.

2. *The Events Surrounding Acts 19:11–12*

Ephesus is a city of some challenge for Paul’s mission work. Acts depicts “a clear knowledge that Ephesus was indeed the magic capital of Asia Minor. If Christianity could triumph there, its God would clearly be seen to be great.”¹⁷ Luke’s telling of the gospel’s entrance into Ephesus is not subtle; Ephesus overflows with religious and magical practices. Even beyond the book of Acts, it bears “a reputation in antiquity.”¹⁸ Spirits are central to their world, and “harnessing spiritual power and managing life’s issues through rituals, incantations, and invocations” is the norm.¹⁹ In addition to Artemis, Ephesus also boasts other temples of worship to Hestia and Serapis.²⁰ In fact, while the influence of Artemis in Ephesus cannot be overstated, the entire city exuded religious and magical power with Arnold claiming, “up to fifty other gods and goddesses were worshiped.”²¹ Thus, the larger narrative concerning Ephesus in the book of Acts is a snapshot into the community’s spiritual rhythms—exorcisms, magic items, and idols.

Having an active and evangelizing Christian church in Ephesus proves strategic, and the city receives a significant portion of Paul’s missional attention. “This city was not only the site of his longest missionary tenure, as presented in the scheme of Acts, but also the base of operation for Paul and his

¹⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 1315.

¹⁵ Lewis Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 7:183.

¹⁶ Biblical quotations come from the ESV, unless otherwise noted.

¹⁷ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 576.

¹⁸ Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 34.

¹⁹ Arnold, *Ephesians*, 34.

²⁰ Richard E. Oster Jr., “Ephesus,” *ABD* 2:545.

²¹ Arnold, *Ephesians*, 33.

associates as they spread the Christian Gospel into the adjacent cities and regions of Asia Minor.”²² The challenge of Ephesus was met by an unusual length of stay for Paul as well as an unusual plan for ministry.

Paul had a sustained public presence in Ephesus, unlike many of his other locations of ministry. After three months of reasoning in the synagogue, conflict led to his withdrawal (Acts 19:8–9). Yet he cleverly redeployed his efforts to “the hall of Tyrannus” (τῇ σχολῇ Τυράννου). “Securing use of an official lecture hall meant that Paul no longer played the role of a street corner Cynic... , user of public buildings, or lecturer at banquets; he is a recognized teacher of philosophy in Ephesus, with his own students, listeners, and patrons.”²³ By setting up shop in a public hall, Paul is now incarnating himself into the Greco-Roman context as a “Christian philosopher,” setting up a headquarters for his work in the area and extending his evangelistic reach.²⁴ In Acts 19:10, Luke aptly summarizes the impact of this two-year-long endeavor on Ephesus and on the surrounding regions: “All the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”

In addition to Paul’s public ministry in the synagogue and the public hall, the Lord expands his influence in Ephesus still further. “Extraordinary miracles” (translated from the litotes “δυνάμεις τε οὐ τὰς τυχοῦσας”) are attributed to Paul in 19:11, “no less spectacular than those by the group of Jerusalem apostles.”²⁵ From Luke’s point of view, no other location of Paul’s work receives miracles of such a kind. The miracles in this city are beyond the ordinary ministry of the apostle, who already performs miracles which are unusual. In Ephesus, Paul is an apostle, rabbi, philosopher, and miracle-worker.

Paul’s ministry could almost be construed as magic, especially for the common Ephesian saturated in the religious culture of the city. But Luke’s construction of the broader narrative steers us away

²² Oster, “Ephesus,” 2:548.

²³ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012–2015): 3:2830–31.

²⁴ Keener explains,

Established philosophers and other teachers often lectured in rented halls; this could have been a guild hall, but because it is named for a person it seems likelier a “lecture hall” (NIV), where Tyrannus is the landlord or (somewhat more probably) the customary lecturer. “Tyrannus” (a common name in Ephesus) might be a nickname, perhaps for a severe teacher. Public life in Ephesus, including philosophical lectures, ended by noon; most people in antiquity rested for one or two hours at midday, and advanced education lectures might finish by 11 a.m. Thus if Tyrannus lectured in the mornings Paul used it in the afternoons (perhaps doing manual labor in the mornings, cf. 20:34). In any case, residents of Ephesus would view Paul as a philosopher or sophist (professional public speaker). Many early Greco-Roman observers thought that Christians were a religious association or club (like other such associations in antiquity), or a philosophical school that took the form of a such an association. To outsiders, groups that taught ethics and lacked the sacrifices and idols characteristic of most religious groups could appear like philosophic schools.

Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 382–83.

²⁵ Keener, *Acts*, 3:2839. Parsons says, “Paul uses litotes (lit. ‘not ordinary’...) to describe the miracles God performs through Paul.” Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts*, Paideia (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 269. A litotes refers to use of the negative to emphasize a positive, and many English translations (e.g., NIV, ESV, NASB, KJV) prefer to leave the literary device untranslated in this passage.

from such thinking.²⁶ Chance comments, “From the narrator’s perspective, Paul is clearly not an ally of the forces of darkness; hence, he is no magician, no matter how much methods associated with him appear magical.”²⁷ Paul does not coerce God or employ some clever, repeatable, consistent method for wonderworking like a magician to earn a wage or acquire fame. “Luke draws a line between magic and miracle,” and Paul performs miracles for the spread of the gospel, not as an end in themselves.²⁸ With that in mind, he is no magician, just a servant.²⁹

Considering Paul’s many roles, one wonders how he sustains such a busy schedule. A skeptic could question how Paul manages to work, teach, and survive financially in Ephesus. But it is possible “for a dedicated, hard worker, as Paul obviously was.”³⁰ Clinton Arnold clears up the concern:

One ancient tradition (the Western text of Acts) explains that Paul teaches “from the fifth hour to the tenth,” that is from 11:00 A.M. until 4:00 P.M. If this tradition is true, we can surmise that Paul spends the mornings plying his leatherworking trade in the workshops (see Acts 18:3). Then he engages in a daily period of intense teaching in this public hall at a time that is normally reserved for a meal and rest. During the evening he returns to work or spends time meeting with people house to house.³¹

Not a lot of time remains for public signs and miracles. Yet God finds a way through the extraordinary miracle of cloths.

3. *The Cloth of Acts 19:11–12*

While we are concerned primarily with the use of handkerchiefs as a healing device, Acts 19:12 points to two items (“handkerchiefs or aprons” [σουδάρια ἢ σιμικίνθια]) being involved in the miraculous healings and exorcisms. Both words are loanwords from Latin (*sudarium*, *semicinctium*), and their exact identity is debated, depending on the job with which they are associated.³² The items could be from Paul’s leatherworking/tentmaking outfit or his teaching paraphernalia.

²⁶ The story of Ephesus has prescriptive implications. “Luke alerts Christians to distance themselves from magic.” Francis Innocent Otopo, “Luke’s Use of the Spirit to Engage Gentile Christians,” *ABR* 69 (2021): 59.

²⁷ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, SHBC (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), 346.

²⁸ Dirk van der Merwe, “The Power of the Gospel Victorious Over the Power of Evil in Acts of the Apostles,” *Scriptura* 103 (2010): 87. He says in full, “Luke is drawing a distinction between magic and miracle. Magic is confined to those who attempted to manipulate the power of God through various means for their own purposes. Miracles, on the other hand, are confined to utilize this power as support for the proclamation of the gospel.”

²⁹ Witherington says, “What characterizes magic is the attempt through various sorts of rituals and words of power to manipulate some deity or supernatural power into doing the will of the supplicant.” Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 577. Paul does not behave in this manner, while the exorcists of Acts 19 do.

³⁰ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 601.

³¹ Clinton E. Arnold, *Acts*, ZIBBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 191–92. Bock adds, “If correct, then Paul meets in an off-peak time but also when people would be free to hear him. Although the Western text is not original, the timing is likely.” Bock, *Acts*, 601.

³² Keener says, “Paul’s ‘handkerchiefs and aprons’ (NIV) could be rags tied around his head to catch sweat and his work aprons tied around his waist (cf. 20:34; or, less commonly suggested, pieces of his teaching uniform).” Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 383.

A σουδάριον has a wide range of meaning, including its function as a “face-cloth for wiping perspiration.”³³ The word also appears in Luke 19:20 to hold money and in John 11:14 and 20:7 to cover the face of the dead.³⁴ With the immediate context of Acts 19:8–9 and the σχολή in mind, Richard Strelan suggests, “The *sudarium* worn around the neck was part of the uniform of an orator and was worn and used for effect as much as it was for practical purposes.”³⁵ The ancient historian Suetonius also records that emperor Nero wore “a handkerchief bound about his neck.”³⁶ In sum, both a worker’s sweat rag or a philosopher’s neck/head cloth are possible.

A σιμικίνθιον is often translated as an “apron, such as is worn by workers.”³⁷ Its exact identity is mysterious, but T. J. Leary argues that it is likely best translated as a belt, rather than a vocation-specific apron.³⁸ In other words, both items are not necessarily associated with his morning trade but could be identified with his afternoon teaching garb. Ben Witherington disagrees, positing that it is an apron and not a belt. He adds, “The image conjured up is that when Paul’s reputation as a miracle worker got around, people came to see him while he was at work, and upon their request, he gave them items of his clothing, used in his trade apparently (leather working or tentmaking).”³⁹

Upon consideration of the context and the spiritual environment of Ephesus, it seems more likely that the healing items are associated with Paul’s public teaching ministry. After all, “craftworkers were not highly regarded, and a worker with animal skins would not have been thought to possess ‘power’ in his clothing or skin.”⁴⁰ Meanwhile, a gifted public speaker could be seen as powerful.⁴¹ And in sharp contrast to the prior image painted by Witherington, Strelan says,

Paul wore the *sudarium* and the *semicinctium* in the hall of Tyrannus where he debated, dialogued, and taught. He wore that clothing because it was the accepted dress of an orator. People wanted access to that particular clothing because the voice and the stomach/genital area of a holy man were considered bodily areas of special power.⁴²

Yet the exact identity of the cloths is less important than how they are used.

In Ephesus, cloths themselves are not a healing device. Craig Keener says, “Cloths had no specifically ‘medical’ use and certainly no specifically thaumaturgic function.”⁴³ However, the cloths may have been surreptitiously stolen or politely requested to recreate the healing bags common in Ephesus

³³ BDAG, “σουδάριον,” 934.

³⁴ “σουδάριον,” *EDNT* 3:258.

³⁵ Richard Strelan, “Acts 19:12: Paul’s ‘Aprons’ Again,” *JTS* 54 (2003): 155. Parsons agrees, “The context of these items implies that they were a part of his lectureship attire consisting of a sweat-rag and a belt, not a sweat-rag and apron from his tent-making enterprise.” Parsons, *Acts*, 270.

³⁶ Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, trans. Joseph Gavorse (New York: The Modern Library, 1931), 278.

³⁷ BDAG, “σιμικίνθιον,” 924.

³⁸ T. J. Leary, “The ‘Aprons’ of St Paul—Acts 19:12,” *JTS* 41 (1990): 527–29.

³⁹ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 579–80.

⁴⁰ Strelan, “Acts 19:12,” 156.

⁴¹ Strelan, “Acts 19:12,” 156.

⁴² Strelan, “Acts 19:12,” 157.

⁴³ Keener, *Acts*, 3:2840.

(and associated with Artemis), as they were specifically used as an apotropaic device, an object to ward away evil and illness.⁴⁴ Recreating one with a piece of cloth (which can be used to hold items according to the usage found in Luke 19:20) is not beyond the realm of possibility.

But the healing power is not ultimately in the cloth or even in Paul. Luke articulates that God is performing the miracles (19:11). Paul and his cloths serve as instruments of healing and deliverance, much like Peter and his shadow in Acts 5:12–16.⁴⁵ Carl Holliday says, “What both Peter and Paul have in common is access to the name of Jesus, who himself can emit thaumaturgic power through indirect physical contact.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, nothing about the text indicates that Paul is intending to imbue power into the cloths. Thus, Witherington says,

Luke does not say Paul traded in healing handkerchiefs or the like, or that he initiates such practices. It appears not to be Paul who takes these clothing items and lays them on the ill, but others who apparently did believe in the magical properties of the clothing of a healer. Furthermore, one must pay close attention to the flow of the narrative here, which concludes with the repudiation of magical recipes and books.⁴⁷

These healing cloths are not procedurally anointed or commissioned. Avoiding any endorsement of magical behavior among the church, Luke’s presentation is plain: “These ‘extraordinary miracles’ are performed by God ‘through the hands of Paul’; God is the actor, Paul is the agent, and the explication of Paul’s teaching (the ‘kingdom of God’; 19:8) is the goal.”⁴⁸ The emphasis is not on the cloths (or even Paul) but on the God who works wonders to unveil the gospel and loose those obsessed and enslaved by magic.⁴⁹

4. A Comparison of Acts 19:11–12 and the Modern Practice of Healing Cloths

In 2019, Simon Herrmann wrote a paper reflecting on the spitting of ginger upon the sick. The Christian Lele of Papua New Guinea exercise this practice as a Christianized version of a local concept for healing. In support of the spitting of ginger, Herrmann said that the handkerchief narrative means that “God was willing to connect with people on the basis of their beliefs, which were, without doubt,

⁴⁴ Arnold, *Ephesians*, 35.

⁴⁵ Beverly Gaventa points to the similarities between Peter and Paul’s miracles: “These [miracles of Paul] are, of course, parallel to earlier healings accomplished by the fringe of Jesus’ garment (Luke 8:44) and the shadow of Peter (Acts 5:15).” Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, ANTC (Nashville: Abington, 2003), 266–67.

⁴⁶ Carl L. Holladay, *Acts*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 371. Pervo probably speaks too boldly when he claims, “Paul surpasses Jesus in power” because this event is more extraordinary than the healing of Mark 5:28–29. Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 472.

⁴⁷ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 578.

⁴⁸ Parsons, *Acts*, 269–70.

⁴⁹ Jaap Doedens insightfully comments regarding the purpose of miracles in the New Testament: “Within the Book of Deuteronomy the expression ‘signs and wonders’ refers in most cases to God’s mighty deeds as part of the Exodus-story to free his people from slavery under the Pharaoh. It would be interesting to take this into account when we read about ‘signs and wonders’ in the New Testament: they are probably an indication of God’s new Exodus, liberating slaves of idols from their idolatry.” Jaap Doedens, “The Things That Mark an Apostle: Paul’s Signs, Wonders, and Miracles,” *The Biblical Annals* 11.1 (2021): 105.

shaped by their culture and environment.”⁵⁰ He then argued that this “hybridity” supports the ongoing, God-focused expression of the ginger-spitting practice. Yet Luke’s intention to promote “hybridity,” in which local religious practices are amalgamated into Christian norm, remains in question. To discern the proper relationship between Acts 19:11–12 and modern healing cloths, let us compare the two.

From the previously provided examples, most healing handkerchiefs today are intentionally commissioned to perform that role. A common term is “anointed.” From the southern Africa context, Banda explains, “Anointing is the process by which prophets sanctify an object through a prayer of blessing or touching it to impart on it God’s miracle-working power. The object is then considered holy by hosting God’s miracle working power.”⁵¹ This perspective is pervasive throughout the world concerning healing cloths. And Christians who offer such devices occasionally find themselves in competition with other religious practitioners and magicians who commission similar items.

The events in Ephesus are drastically different. The apostle “did not promote himself as a miracle worker, unlike Simon Magus (8:9–10) and the sons of Sceva (19:13–15).”⁵² While the events are permissible, Paul does not commission or anoint the cloths. The text says nothing about Paul approving, encouraging, selling, or giving the cloths.⁵³ A possibility even exists that the items are “taken without his knowledge.”⁵⁴ Thus, Paul’s practice in Ephesus, as described by Luke, stands in contrast to the magicians of that time and modern healing handkerchiefs.

Furthermore, modern cloths are often tied to need, as in a Christian “needs” one for healing. Then people clamor for such items and rely on them for healing. Yet Paul’s ministry in Ephesus displays a different arc. Arnold says, “God chooses to manifest his healing power in spite of this deficient understanding of spiritual power.... God dramatically teaches the Ephesian Christians about the futility of their magical practices.”⁵⁵ It is as if God uses “magical” events to display to the Ephesians that they no longer need magic. Instead of producing a dependency upon “Paul-blessed” items, the exact opposite occurs, for the miracles help lead locals to the burning of magical items (19:19) and the rejection of false religion (19:26).

5. Conclusion

The practice of religiously commissioning and distributing healing cloths has more in common with the Ephesian sons of Sceva than with the miracles wrought by God through Paul. The local exorcists attempted to replicate and bottle the miracles, distributing them as they willed. But in fact, God, not the items or the human instruments, dictated the miracles performed during this seminal moment in

⁵⁰ Simon Herrmann, “Spitting Ginger in Jesus’ Name? The Concept of Hybridity in a Lele Theology of Healing,” *IBMR* 43.4 (2019): 349.

⁵¹ Banda, “Complementing Christ?,” 57. He also mentions that this anointing extends to a variety of items. He says, “Although the standard list of anointed objects commonly compromised [olive] oil, water and handkerchiefs, recent Zimbabwean times have seen regalia branded with the prophets’ names, branded bottled water and bizarre cases of objects such as cucumbers, pens for exams, and even condoms.”

⁵² Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 795.

⁵³ Schnabel, *Acts*, 796.

⁵⁴ Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 383.

⁵⁵ Arnold, *Acts*, 192.

church history as God places his apostle in a philosopher's chair and heals the diseased and demonized with cloths.

Luke has no interest in propping up Paul by endorsing magical practices. He “distinguishes between Christian miracle-working and the practice of magic in the Greco-Roman world. His purpose is to draw attention to the unique role and status of Peter and Paul in God's purposes.”⁵⁶ And as the story of Ephesus concludes, neither Paul nor his cloths are idolized or granted exaggerated importance.⁵⁷ But this differentiation is exactly what eludes us today in many of these practices. When cloths are specifically and repeatedly commissioned by so-called miracle-working Christian leaders, the line between magic and Christian miracle fades.

We previously examined Kane and his concern that Pentecostalism needs to recover its distinctiveness, as if Christianity is missing something without occasional or regular faith-filled healings through handkerchiefs. But “the power of God manifested in Paul's miracles ultimately led to the Ephesians' overcoming their magic and superstition (cf. 19:17–20),” and Paul does not heal everyone in his ministry.⁵⁸ There is no variant reading of 2 Timothy that says, “I have included an anointed prayer cloth with this letter to heal your stomach.”⁵⁹ Perhaps, contrary to Kane, Christians who predominantly pray for healing and eschew cloths signify a wealth of faith, not a lack thereof.

To use the words of Stott, let us neither be “sceptics” or “mimics.”⁶⁰ We do not doubt or discard the “extraordinary miracles.” Yet we also do not seek “to copy them” by becoming magicians who can manipulate spiritual power upon request.⁶¹ Instead, we see the gracious work of God in credentialing Paul's ministry and reaching into the magical mania of Ephesus to heal, deliver, and save.⁶²

I was standing before a room of godly women, mothers in the faith, who pray fervently for the lost and the sick. The question had come concerning the prayer cloth that they had commissioned. And after a pause, I said, “The practice of prayer cloths arises from Acts 19 with Paul in Ephesus, but I do not think that Luke intended that section of Scripture to provide a prescriptive norm for the church today. Sadly, a preoccupation with miraculous objects can become a crutch upon which our faith begins to rest.” Having now reconsidered Acts 19:11–12 at length, that counsel remains unchanged.

⁵⁶ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 538.

⁵⁷ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, AB 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 647.

⁵⁸ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC 26 (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 402.

⁵⁹ While we need not subscribe to the cessationism espoused by Derickson, we would still do well to recall “the men Paul did not heal” such as Epaphroditus, Timothy, and Trophimus. Gary W. Derickson, “The Cessation of Healing Miracles in Paul's Ministry,” *BSac* 155 (1998): 308–11.

⁶⁰ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: To the Ends of the Earth*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 306.

⁶¹ Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 306.

⁶² Jesus did the same in his ministry by meeting people where they were. “Jesus himself condescended to the timorous faith of a woman by healing her when she touched the edge of his cloak.” Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 306.

The Agonistic Imagery of the New Testament and the Paradox of the Cross

— Andreas-Christian Heidel —

Andreas-Christian Heidel is lecturer in New Testament at the Internationale Hochschule Liebenzell (University for Applied Sciences) in Germany and postdoctoral researcher at the Institute for New Testament Studies of the University of Bern in Switzerland.

Abstract: Early Christians had to develop and negotiate their (new) identity within a society, to which their beliefs and ethical convictions were largely alien. These beliefs were rooted in the Christ event, especially in the understanding of Jesus’s death on the cross as an event of salvation, both individually and collectively. However, the cross contradicted the values of their Greco-Roman environment, and New Testament authors used various imageries to express this tension. This contribution traces this relationship by looking at the usage of agonistic imagery in New Testament writings: Sports metaphors are used by taking up their triumphalist character but at the same time transforming it with a contradicting ethos of defeat that expresses a new kind of paradox identity, both individually and collectively.

What is the victory prize? Not a palm branch, but what? The kingdom of heaven, eternal rest, glory with Christ, inheritance, brotherhood, innumerable goods beyond description. It is impossible to describe the beauty of this prize of victory; he alone knows it who has already won it, and he alone knows it who is about to receive it.

—John Chrysostom, *Homiliae in epistulam ad Philippenses* 13.2

It is a major concept in New Testament theology that a change of dominion takes place upon confessing and following Jesus (e.g., Rom 6:4–6; Gal 2:20; 1 Cor 6:20; 2 Cor 5:14–15). Considering their understanding of this change of dominion, earliest Christians had to reconcile their “new” identity with the conditions and phenomena of their real-life world. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 1:18–25, the death of Jesus at the cross contradicts the values of the world, leading Christ’s followers into a paradoxical existence: They shall judge the world spiritually (1 Cor 2:14–16), possess as if they do not possess, and experience fear and sufferings as if they were not cause to mourn (1 Cor 7:30). Even death itself assumes a new, apparently contrary meaning: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21; cf. 1 Cor 15:54–55). New Testament authors use a rich variety of different metaphors and analogies as expressions of this (new) identity. Among these, the agonistic imagery (ἀγών = contest)

represents a particularly memorable form of expression, linking Christian identity and individual and communal Christian life to the all-familiar world of sport. Sports activities were an important part of most ancient cultures that shaped their way of life. This was also true of the Greco-Roman environment of the early Christians. There is little need to wonder why ancient thinkers chose to illustrate their ideas using terminology and images from the omnipresent world of the agonistic. Besides the professional athleticism that developed throughout history, the Greek gymnasia and Roman thermal baths also offered opportunities for sporting activity in daily life, not only to the higher castes of society but also to the general public.¹ And regardless of individuals' athleticism or respective levels of interest in sport, images of competition, discipline, victory, and defeat captured (and still capture) common experiences with which nearly everyone could identify.

In light of this conflict inherent in early Christian life, I would like to explore the way in which the imagery of sport contributed to the formation of early Christian identity, as it is expressed throughout New Testament writings. I will demonstrate how the paradox of the cross influenced the language of these writings relating to the world of sport: The New Testament provides examples of the use of sportive metaphors as expressions of Christian identity, most notably in ethical treatises. Thereby, the various adaptations of this imagery operate in a tension between an already known *ethos of victory* and a mostly new *ethos of defeat*.² The former echoes the familiar triumphalism of the world of sport and competition in antiquity. But the latter was unknown in the ancient world of sport and therefore highly distinctive, showing how the paradox of the cross drove both an adaptation and concomitant transformation of the ideas, values, language, and behavior known to early Christians within their social context.

1. The Ethos of Victory

Numerous New Testament traditions and authors draw on agonistic motifs to illustrate Christian existence and especially its consequences for Christian ethics. Certainly, this was not an invention of New Testament authors, as they tie in here with familiar figures of thought from their intellectual environment.³ The motivation of an athlete in competition and the discipline required to achieve it offered concepts and metaphors through which both the triumph of Christian identity and the effort required to achieve that triumph could be expressed positively.

1.1. The Goal Ahead: The Imperishable Wreath as the Ultimate Prize

"No gain, no pain!" Turning the old saying around reveals the basis of the use of sporting metaphors in New Testament writings. For perhaps the most significant feature of Christian existence is hope in a higher good, to which the followers of Christ are called both individually and collectively. It is this hope that motivates the believer to live the life of a disciple of Christ, even if this discipleship means denying oneself and taking up one's cross (Mark 8:34). There are many ways to describe this hope (i.e., messianic

¹ Cf. Harry W. Pleket, "Zur Soziologie des antiken Sports," *Nikephoros* 14 (2001): 182–83, 208–9.

² I refer here to two aspects pointed out in a similar way by Thomas Söding, "Der Sport des Apostels. Die Dialektik von Kampf und Sieg auf dem Weg von Phil 3 zu 2 Tim 4," in *Das Ziel vor Augen: Sport und Wettkampf im Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt*, ed. Karl-Heinrich Ostmeyer and Adrian Wypadlo, BWANT 226 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2020), 81–99.

³ On this see Amphilochios Papatthomas: "Das Agonistische Motiv 1Kor 9:24ff. im Spiegel zeitgenössischer dokumentarischer Quellen," *NTS* 43 (1997): 223–41.

salvation or eternal life), but all connect to the expectation of a transcendent and simultaneously eschatological existence in communion with God.

To express this eschatological hope, one symbol from the field of sport stands out clearly throughout different New Testament writings: ὁ στέφανος, the wreath (or crown) of victory. If not all, most in the Roman Empire must have understood this symbol's meaning, just as everyone today comprehends the ramifications of "Olympic gold." The highest sporting achievement that athletes could dream of was winning the victory wreath of one of the so-called "crown-games" (ἀγών στεφανίτης) as the highest symbol of triumph. As Lucian famously describes it in his *Anacharsis*,

Anacharsis: "And these prizes of yours, what are they?" Solon: "At the Olympic games, a wreath made of wild olive, at the Isthmian one of pine, and at the Nemean one of parsley, at the Pythian some of the apples sacred to Apollo, and with us at the Panathenaea, the oil from the holy olive."⁴

For early Christians this στέφανος symbolized the eternal victory of participating in Christ's rise from death, which they longed to achieve (Rev 2:10; 3:11). Therefore, Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians in 1 Cor 9:24–25 of their ultimate goal, the runner's prize (βραβεῖον) for which they are to strive: an imperishable wreath (στέφανος ἄφθαρτος). Within the Corinthian congregation there had been tensions, mainly arising from class conflicts and an orientation towards former ways, the value standards of their Greco-Roman world. With the image of the eschatological victory wreath, Paul sets a fixed point that readjusts perspective in such questions of worth and values. He moves within the horizon of experience of his conflicting addressees and at the same time chooses a metaphor that operates by intrinsic motivation. He invokes the triumphant feeling of the victorious athlete, which for the vast majority of Corinthian Christians might have been a wishful thought or impossibility.

It should come as no surprise that Paul uses the same metaphor in his letter to the Philippians. Here, too, he seems to write to a community marked by conflicts, such that he feels compelled to correct their perspective. But Paul offers in Philippians additional insights into the process of attaining the goal. Although every Christian is to invest considerable energy in chasing this prize to eventually win it (Phil 3:13–14; cf. 2 Tim 4:5), the grace of God forms the very foundation and strength for it (see also Phil 2:12–13). It is a granted prize, the "upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:14). Paul would write this again to the Christians in Rome (Rom 9:16): "So then it depends neither on the one who will nor on [the exercise of] the runner, but on God, who has mercy." This prize is unavailable to human effort alone, not only because of the necessity of divine grace but also because the gaining of this prize is subject to an eschatological condition (Phil 3:12–14). In 1 Pet 5:4 this future good to come (the award ceremony) is thus explicitly linked to the Parousia: "And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading wreath of glory."

Paul prominently wants these Christian communities to be properly oriented towards eschatological participation in Christ (1 Cor 9:24): "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run [οἱ ἐν σταδίῳ τρέχοντες], but only one receives the prize [βραβεῖον]? So run that you may obtain it!" The Christian life

⁴ Lucian, *Anacharsis* 9, trans. Austin M. Harmon, LCL 162 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925). According to Pausanias 10.7.5, from 582 BCE prizes at the Pythian games were also wreaths of laurel. Cf. David G. Romano, "Athletic Festivals in the Northern Peloponnese and Central Greece," in *A Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, ed. Paul Christesen and Donald G. Kyle (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 180.

and lifestyle are not without purpose. Every little step should support the journey to the higher goal.⁵ They are to diligently pursue (διώκειν, Phil. 3:14), and the completion of the life contest is even more important than life itself, as Paul confesses before the elders of Ephesus, according to Acts 20:24: “But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my [race-]course [δρόμος] and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.” Moreover, this quotation shows that orientation towards the future does not require turning away from the present. In fact, Paul understands his mission to witness to the hope to which he reaches out as an essential part of his athletic endeavor.

It is the unknown author of the Letter to the Hebrews, who like no other concentrates and expresses the athletic focus of Christian life on the exclusive following of Jesus:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run [τρέχωμεν] with endurance the race [ἀγών] that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb 12:1–2)

One’s eyes should be unmistakably directed towards Jesus, who is, according to Hebrews, the only one who has entered completely into heavenly communion with God. Within the context of Hebrews, to focus on Jesus means to stay strong to the confession of Jesus as Son and Savior. The exhausted athletes of faith must look to him alone. The image speaks for itself: With a stable chest, the running athlete can convert maximum energy into his forward movement. The upright, forward gaze is essential to do so. This orientation towards Jesus is expressed by the composite ἀφορᾶν. Literally (ἀπό + ὀράω), the term describes a process of looking away from everything else to focus attention exclusively on something concrete.

Sports imagery offers an impressive and memorable way to mirror one of the most distinctive aspects of early Christians within their Greco-Roman world in the first century: the exclusive character of their identity and ideology.⁶ This exclusivity leads to further consequences, again expressed through ideas from the world of sport.

1.2. Endurance and Discipline

Even though the hope of reaching the desired goal rests on the assurance of faith in Christ, the journey there remains challenging. Naturally, the more alien a conviction and its effects on one’s own way of life appear in a particular context, the greater the resistance arising against them. From the beginning, early Christians encountered resistance from their environment: inner-Jewish disputes, clashes with pagan customs, or later even reprisals up to offensive persecution by Roman authorities. It is therefore no wonder that they were concerned about encouraging each other to persevere. Once again, there are numerous references to the world of athletes, who naturally know that the crucial thing

⁵ Otherwise, Christian beliefs and ethics would be like an aimless runner, or a boxer who is just beating air (1 Cor 9:26).

⁶ Cf. Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2016), 86–92.

in exercise and combat is to endure. Those who give up lose, as Rev 3:11 insists: “Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your wreath [στέφανος].”⁷

The Pastoral Epistles’ special use also bears noting, especially 1 Tim 1:18–19 and 6:12. The latter reads as follows: “Fight the good fight [ἀγωνίζου τὸν καλὸν ἀγῶνα] of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.” Whether Paul himself was involved in writing these texts does not really matter here. Regardless, they speak to an advanced situation within the development of early Christian movements. They call for continuing the contest of faith and keeping it alive by passing on the apostolic teachings to the next generation(s). Here, the aspect of persevering and enduring extends beyond individuals to the Christian community as a whole, through the ages, as it is especially expressed in 2 Tim 2:2. This succession in the transmission of tradition that is brought up here reminds one of the handovers in a torch relay race, likewise a facet of Greek sporting events (e.g., at the Panathenaia, cf. Pausanias, *Description* 1.30.2).⁸

Closely related to the call to persevere are those sports metaphors expressing self-discipline. These are likely the most prominent images, particularly those used by Paul in 1 Cor 9:25–27. In discussing whether followers of Jesus may eat meat sacrificed to idols, Paul reminds the Corinthians of his apostolic role. He, too, would have the spiritual freedom to far more things, but voluntarily exercises abstinence and endures deprivations for the proclamation of the gospel and with regard to weaker consciences. He compares this self-discipline, which he also demands from the Corinthians, with the workout of athletes: “Every athlete exercises self-control [ἐγκρατεύομαι] in all things” (1 Cor 9:25). Here, Paul can refer to familiar experiences of the Corinthians: At the Olympic Games, athletes had to swear an oath that they had lived abstinely and focused on training (Pausanias, *Description* 6.23–24) for the ten months before the competitions (Pausanias, *Description* 5.24–25). Such a code of honor and strict

⁷ At this point, it is fitting to refer to a second aspect of numerous sports metaphors: They often have an explicit military connotation. This is reasonable because numerous competitive disciplines such as running, spear throwing, archery, or chariot racing originate from the world of warfare. In general, the development of sport in the Greek world was closely interwoven with military training. Cf. Reyes Bertolín Cebrián, *The Athlete in the Ancient Greek World*, Oklahoma Series in Classical Culture 61 (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2020), 159–76. These metaphors primarily seek to urge Christians to be watchful of spiritual temptations and the expected increase of end-time tribulations. Cf. Victor C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif: Traditional Athletic Imagery in the Pauline Literature*, NovTSup 16 (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 163–64. To be prepared Christians should arm themselves with “spiritual weapons” such as justice, prayer, sobriety, or truthfulness (cf. Rom 13:11–13; 2 Cor 10:3–5; 6:7; Eph 6:11–18; 1 Thess 5:4–8). By fighting in this way, they share in Christ’s suffering as his good soldiers (2 Tim 2:3–5), equipped with the same mind as Christ (1 Pet 4:1).

⁸ See Donald G. Kyle, “Sport, Society, and Politics in Athens,” in *A Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, ed. Paul Christesen and Donald G. Kyle (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 159–75, 163. See also Donald G. Kyle, *Athletics in Ancient Athens* (Leiden: Brill 1987), 190–93.

preparation certainly also applied to the Isthmian Games,⁹ which were likely to have taken place during Paul's first stay in Corinth.¹⁰

Even more memorable is Paul's comparison to a boxer in 1 Cor 9:26b–27: “I do not box [πυκτεύω] as one beating the air. But I discipline [ὕπωπιάζω] my body and keep it under control [δουλαγωγέω], lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” The term πυκτεύω is the technical term for the well-attested athletic discipline of boxing (πυγμή), a brutal one-on-one fight, that ended only when one of the opponents surrendered or was knocked out. The fighters tried to punch out their opponents with precisely aimed blows, especially to the head, and to evade such blows themselves with skillful parries.¹¹ In Paul's case, the opponent of his boxing match is his own σῶμα, against which ὕπωπιάζειν is directed. This term means to “strike one under the eye.”¹² On the one hand, this once again signals goal orientation, and on the other hand it expresses the high degree of self-discipline Paul demands of himself. Because Paul, especially in 1 Corinthians, shows much emphasis on careful mindfulness of the body (1 Cor. 7), it can hardly be argued here that he advocates physical self-mortification.¹³ Rather, μου τὸ σῶμα refers to the holistic human existence, the blows to be taken as alluding to the experiences of suffering the apostle was forced to endure (2 Cor 4:7–12; 6:4–10; 11:23–33; 12:10).¹⁴ Considering Paul's emphasis on the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit in 1 Cor 6:19, it becomes clear how strongly he connects the body (and the experiences associated with it) to Christian identity: The body shows where the person belongs and what determines him.¹⁵ For the athlete, this is an uncompromising commitment to training and competition for the sake of victory. For the apostle—but according to his claim, also for every Christian—it is an uncompromising commitment to discipleship, witness, and communion in Christ. In this sense, the Christian life should be marked by sobriety (2 Tim 4:5), so as not to jeopardize

⁹ See Philostratos, *Life of Apollonius* 5.43: “When the Olympics come round, the Eleans train the athletes for thirty days in Elis itself. While the Delphians assemble them at the time of Pythian games, and the Corinthians at that of the Isthmian, and say ‘Proceed to the stadium, and show yourselves to be true men qualified for victory,’ the Eleans address the athletes as follows on their arrival at Olympia: ‘If you have trained in a way worthy of your coming to Olympia, and have done nothing lazy or dishonorable, proceed with confidence. But those of you who have not so trained in this way may go wherever you please.’” (trans. Christopher P. Jones, LCL 17; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). On further ancient sources about the preparation of the athletes for the Panhellenic festivals see: Stephen G. Miller, *Arete: Greek Sports from Ancient Sources*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), nos. 83–86.

¹⁰ Cf. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology*, 3rd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2002), 12–15; Oscar Broneer, “The Apostle Paul and the Isthmian Games,” *The Biblical Archaeologist* 25/1 (1962): 1–31. One has to admit that a real-life experience of sport festivals cannot be proven with certainty in the case of Paul, neither is that possible for his stays in Tarsus nor for Corinth/Isthmia. However, it remains plausible, even though Paul could have mainly known these agonistic motives from his intellectual environment, such as Cynic and/or Stoic philosophy.

¹¹ See Ingomar Weiler, *Der Sport bei den Völkern der Alten Welt* (Darmstadt: WBG, 1981), 176–83.

¹² Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott: *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed., ed. Henry S. Jones and Roderick McKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 1904.

¹³ See Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, HTA (Wuppertal: Brockhaus; Giessen: Brunnen, 2006), 517.

¹⁴ See Helmut Merklein, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther: Kapitel 5,1–11,1*, ÖTK 7/2 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher; Würzburg: Echter, 2000), 235.

¹⁵ Wolfgang Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther: 1Kor 6,12–11,16*, EKK 7/2 (Düsseldorf: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1995), 370.

completion of the course (2 Tim 4:7). The ethical claim thus formulated is the practical consequence of the exclusivity of early Christian identity and ideology. The repeated emphasis on this claim in Paul, but also in other ancient and early Christian writings, does, however, raise questions about the extent to which this claim truly resonated with the everyday reality of Christian communities and individuals.

It is not surprising that the later Christian lifestyle of asceticism, as a quasi-professionalized practice of spiritual and physical self-discipline, adopted another technical term from the Greek world of sport: ἄσκησις.¹⁶ The Greeks were already familiar with mental asceticism, especially in the older Sophistic, as well as in Stoicism as a sophisticated technique for controlling one's own affections (see Epictetus, *Diatribai* 3.16).¹⁷ In its special association with the body or physical exercise, it became a fixed term for athletic training, effectively synonymous with γυμνάζεσθαι or μελετᾶν. Although ἄσκησις appears only once (and only as the verb ἀσκέω) in the New Testament (Acts 24:16), it became a key concept of Christian ethics in early church writings, particularly from the third century on. Those writings factually referred to the New Testament, above all to Paul, from whom they derived their language and their categories from Greek philosophy, as well as from Philon's theological ethics.¹⁸ From these forms of asceticism originally located within the Christian community, monasticism finally developed from the second half of the third century onwards in both Egypt and Syria as a consequent retreat, initially of individual ascetics, into seclusion.

2. The Ethos of Defeat

We have seen how New Testament authors could adopt imagery and language from the world of ancient sport to express their (new) identity and values. But in at least two ways, the fact that the Christian faith was deeply rooted in the confession of Christ as the crucified Son of God led to new perspectives by including an *ethos of defeat*, which supported a new value system. I mean to describe the New Testament and early Christians' revolutionary use of symbols of weakness and defeat to paradoxically express the hope for victory we have already examined. It is a victory won against the odds—even won in only this way.

2.1. Strength through Weakness

The ancient athletic world submitted to the law of the strongest and the most skillful. Obviously, the fight for victory remains today the very purpose of any competition-based sport. And in antiquity, too, value was given to fairness, although there is no shortage of evidence of athletes' trying to gain

¹⁶ See Hans Windisch, "ἀσκέω," in *ThWNT* 1 (1933): 492–94.

¹⁷ Cf. Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 47: "When you have become adjusted to simple living in regard to your bodily wants, do not preen yourself about the accomplishment; [...]. And if ever you want to train [ἀσκέω] to develop physical endurance, do it by yourself and not for outsiders to behold [...]" (trans. William A. Oldfather, LCL 218, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928). Here, the idea of asceticism as voluntary abstinence, which is not forced by external circumstances, but motivated by inner conviction, is already obvious.

¹⁸ See Windisch, "ἀσκέω," 493. Philo applies sophistical pedagogy to the interpretation of the three patriarchs, whereby Jacob represents for him the (mental) ascetic: "But in spite of her [i.e., pleasure] expecting to throw and cheat the good mind, she shall herself be thrown by Jacob who is practised in wrestling [πρὸς τοῦ πάλην ἡσκηκότος], not the bodily wrestling but that in which the soul engages against dispositions that are her antagonists, fighting as she does with passions and wickednesses." Philo, *Embassy* 3.190; trans. Francis H. Colson and George H. Whitaker, LCL 226 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929).

an advantage even by using magical aids.¹⁹ In Roman chariot races, the (imaginative but quite unfair) disturbance of the opponent was part of the charioteers' repertoire—of course for the great entertainment of the spectators.²⁰ However, there was no idea of any value in “just” being part of the event.²¹ Victory was all that mattered, especially as it involved considerable material and immaterial rewards for the athletes, including enormous benefits in their hometowns.²² Yet the motivation for athletics and participation in competitions must not be relegated solely to the pursuit of these benefits. As Harry W. Pleket has shown with numerous examples, a sporting ideal developed alongside (or perhaps despite) the material awards, stating that the actual achievement of an athlete was not the (material) prize, but victory itself.²³ This attitude is reflected by the “fan base” in its clearly higher appreciation of the “crown-games”—or later “holy games” (ἁγῶν ἱεροί)—in comparison to (more local) “prize-games” (ἁγῶν χρηματίας) in Roman imperial times.²⁴ Sport here followed the general standards of ancient societies, according to which no gain (such as learning a lesson) could be found in defeat, because social values were primarily honor-and-shame based.²⁵

However, the Christian faith's emphasis on the cross turns these values upside down (1 Cor 1:27–28): “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.”

At the very heart of Christianity is the paradoxical idea of strength in weakness (2 Cor 12:9–10), victory in defeat—and most strikingly—life in death (John 11:25). In the triumph of God over the powers and forces of the world through self-sacrifice and defeat, Paul and his fellows found an intrinsic motivation that stood in contrast to the sporting spirit of their world, which was at least also highly

¹⁹ “Plenty of evidence suggests at least a healthy level of superstition on the part of competitors,” as “[a] number of lead curse tablets discovered in Corinth, at Isthmia, and in Athens show athletes invoking divine aid to inhibit the performance of their opponents.” Sarah C. Murray, “The Role of Religion in Greek Sport,” *A Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity* ed. Paul Christesen and Donald G. Kyle (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 309–19, 315.

²⁰ See Karl-Heinrich Ostmeyer, “Vier Pferde, Farben und *factiones*. Die apokalyptischen Reiter und ihr zeitgeschichtlicher Hintergrund (Offb 6,2–8),” *ZNW* 113 (2022): 112.

²¹ See Söding, “Sport,” 96: “Die Siegermentalität ist nicht nur dem Sport, sondern der gesamten Kultur eingeschrieben,” with reference to Tonio Hölscher, “Die Geschlagenen und Ausgelieferten in der Kunst des Hellenismus,” *Antike Kunst* 28 (1985): 120–36.

²² Cf. Philip F. Esler, “Paul and the Agon. Understanding a Pauline Motif in Its Cultural and Visual Context,” in *Picturing the New Testament. Studies in Ancient Visual Images*, ed. Petra von Gemünden and Annette Weissenrieder, WUNT 193 (Tübingen: MohrSiebeck, 2005), 366–68.

²³ Harry W. Pleket, “Sport und Leibesübungen in der griechischen Welt des hellenistisch-römischen Zeitalters,” in *Geschichte der Leibesübungen: Leibesübungen und Sport in der Antike*, ed. Horst Ueberhorst (Berlin: Bartels und Wernitz, 1978), 300–305.

²⁴ See Papathomas, “Motiv,” 232. On the terminological development of the different categories of the games see: Sofie Remijsen, “The So-Called ‘Crown-Games’: Terminology and Historical Context of the Ancient Categories for Agones,” *ZPE* 177 (2011): 97–109.

²⁵ Cf. Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 27–57; Philipp Steger, “Die Scham in der griechisch-römischen Antike: Eine philosophisch-historische Bestandsaufnahme von Homer bis zum Neuen Testament,” in *Scham – ein menschliches Gefühl: Kulturelle, psychologische und philosophische Perspektiven*, ed. Rolf Kühn and Michael Raub and Michael Titze (Opladen: Westdeutscher 1997), 57–73; Esler, “Paul,” 369–70.

motivated by the desire for social status and honor.²⁶ Of course, the preparation of the athletes for the competitions as well as the competitions themselves were also a painful torture of extreme hardship and deprivation. Seneca, actually a critic of sporting spectacles, nevertheless impressively describes the attitude of an athlete (for the Stoic, of course, a welcome comparison for his own required moral effort):

An athlete cannot bring true courage to his fights unless he has sometimes been beaten black and blue. The fighter who has seen his own blood, whose teeth have been rattled by a blow from his opponent, who has been thrown to the ground and felt the whole weight of his rival's body on him, who has not lost his spirit even when hurled about the ring, who every time he has been knocked down, has got to his feet again more pugnacious than ever, this is the man who faces his next fight with confidence.²⁷

In this respect, the athletes were fully familiar with the idea that victory could be achieved only through pain. But the Christian ethos surpassed this concept in that the “real” victory, though not earthly realizable, is neither to be attained through own effort nor through lowliness alone, but is to be found in defeat itself. Although sporting imagery and terminology provided powerful opportunities to express Christian identity, aspiration, hope, and certainty, New Testament writers transformed these metaphors by integrating an ethos of defeat, weakness, and humility.²⁸ Furthermore, experiences of suffering for Christ or the gospel became a sign of victory itself and a central aspect of participating in God's triumph (Jas 1:12). Here the paradox of the Christian existence in the shadow of the cross appears particularly clearly because suffering, pain, and even death become themselves a joy and a distinction of a persevering, faithful struggle (Rev 2:10; cf. Phil 1:29).

The early and later Christian use of the metaphor of the στέφανος—the wreath/crown of victory (see above)—impressively echoes this paradox: there hardly has been any other symbol in later Christian iconography as closely associated with Jesus's “shameful” victory on the cross as the crown of thorns (ἀκάνθινος στέφανος, see Mark 15:17 parr.). Christ's wreath of honor consisted precisely of a symbol of humiliation, contradicting all worldly high status.

This paradoxical correlation of strength through weakness expressed through the symbol of the wreath has been increasingly marginalized in the further development of early Christian sources. Tertullian (second century) could still point to it in his critical (and polemical) treatise on the reception and wearing of wreaths (*coronae*) from different occasions as a “profane” honorary (and also cultic) symbol:

Christ Jesus, I am asking, what sort of wreath did he have put on? [...] Made of thorns, I think, and of spines [...]. If you owe your own head to him for all these things, offer it

²⁶ See Söding, “Sport,” 96. Here, however, there were also considerable differences in the individual sporting traditions. In the Roman context, athletes in the circus or in the arena were considered socially infamous (*infamie*) professions. The stigma attached to this profession is somewhat contradictory to the sometimes religious veneration of some of the sport's famous heroes. See Ostmeier, “Vier Pferde,” 103.

²⁷ Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* 13.2. The quote in English translation comes from Harold A. Harris, *Sport in Greece and Rome: Aspects of Greek and Roman Life* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), 67.

²⁸ Cf. Pfitzner, *Paul*, 194, who also emphasizes that by binding the new Christian identity to Christ, an essential motivation is now to earn honor for Christ through the Christian ἀγών. While ancient athletes sought the honor of their city in addition to their own, here, a shift within the value system takes also place in light of the cross.

to him, if you can, just as he gave his for yours; or if you cannot be crowned with thorns, you should at least not crown yourself with flowers, since that is inappropriate.²⁹

Though Tertullian is a clear example of the presence of the wreath of thorns among early Christian written sources, in iconographic sources the symbol is missing—at least as a symbol of weakness and shame. It was not until the Middle Ages that it attained its iconographic prominence, by which Christian art is still influenced today. As an exception, a (only) fourth-century sarcophagus from the Domitilla Catacombs in Rome could be mentioned here (today on display in the Vatican Museums).



Fig. 1: Sarcophagus with Scenes from the Passion of Christ (c. 350 C.E.)³⁰

The sarcophagus features scenes from the passion and resurrection of Christ, including one scene showing Christ being crowned with the wreath of thorns by a Roman soldier. But as everyone knows, exceptions confirm the rules because the scenes reflect a rather triumphalist style. Instead of the dying Jesus, a victory wreath hangs from the cross. And the coronation scene also seems rather victorious: Christ appears as a calm philosopher with a scroll in his hand, while a soldier holds a jeweled tiara over his head. The shameful New Testament portrayal of Christ suffering during his passion seems to have no place here anymore (and not yet again).³¹

2.2. Team Spirit: Our Common Salvation

The integration of the ethos of defeat had an impact not only on individual (or self-related) ethics, but also on how Christians treated each other within their spiritual community, or better to say, how they were meant to treat each other according to New Testament authors. The problems within the Corinthian church Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians—many of them arising certainly from social

²⁹ Tertullian, *The Crown*, 14.3–4 (own translation; see the Latin version in Tertullian, *De corona* [trans. Fabio Ruggiero, Oscar Classici greci e latini 30; Milan: Mondadori, 1992]).

³⁰ Displayed at the Vatican Museum (inv. no. 31525). Photo Copyright © Governorate of the Vatican City State-Directorate of the Vatican Museums.

³¹ Luke's depiction of Jesus's prayer ἐν ἁγώνῃ in Gethsemane (Luke 22:44) admittedly tends to illuminate Jesus's struggle for suffering more strongly from the point of view of his obedience and his victory, but here too Jesus is precisely not the ideal—"Stoic"—martyr, but is portrayed as truly "wrestling for a positive victory," as Pfitzner has rightly pointed out (cf. Pfitzner, *Paul*, 132). On the often drawn comparison between Luke's portrayal of the Passion and Jewish accounts of martyrdom as well as with the "noble" death of Socrates, cf. critically Brian J. Tabb, "Is the Lukan Jesus a 'Martyr'? A Critical Assessment of a Scholarly Consensus," *CBQ* 77 (2015): 280–301.

differences—demonstrate that Christians’ lived reality could be indeed less harmonious. However, here too we can clearly observe how the paradox of Christian identity and belief transforms the sports metaphors and language Paul used to demand unity.

As Paul illustrates his call to humble self-sacrifice in his own deprived life as an apostle, he returns the ball to the disputing Corinthians. They, too, should not insist on their rights, for the sake of the community in Christ and for the sake of the missionary witness to their neighbors. Rather, if necessary, they should willingly renounce their rights and freedom. They should not only be strong, but also become weak. They should not use strength against weakness; rather they should exercise thoughtfulness, so that others may not stumble and be hindered in reaching the shared goal: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it!” (1 Cor 9:24). This call is not to be understood as an exhortation to exceed other Christians—that is, in an ethical sense or in a certain degree of spiritual giftedness. Rather, Paul is transforming the sporting ideal of the ancient world with the ethos of defeat by including the idea of love and compassion, emphasizing the importance of the unity of the Christians, which was motivated by their common goal: eternal community with God. While the ancient world understood sport primarily as a “cut-throat competition,”³² Christian ethics is concerned with the hope of achieving the eschatological goal for *all* believers.

The common achievement of the goal and the faithfulness of the cared-for Christians even become the hallmarks of the successful apostle and a spiritually “healthy” congregation: “For what is our hope or joy or crown [στέφανος] of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?” (1 Thess 2:19; cf. Phil 2:16). Therefore, they should take Paul as an example in their common ἀγών (Phil 1:30), as well as their church leaders (1 Thess 5:12; cf. Heb 13:7). A central form of expressing this mutual care is intercession as a form of joint competition (Rom 15:30; cf. Eph 6:18; 2 Thess 3:1)—a team sport, so to speak (cf. Jude 3). Such a (for ancient values rather revolutionary) understanding of community found its practical counterpart in diaconal care—probably one of the most characteristic and distinctive features of the early Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire (cf. Jas 2:15–17; Matt 25:35–36; Tertullian, *Apology* 39), recognized by their contemporaries, even by those who more or less rejected them (e.g., Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 10.96; Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus* 12).³³

Once again, the Letter to the Hebrews gives this distinctive sense of community a reality that transcends even time and space. In his use of agonistic metaphor to appeal to the perseverance of his faith-weary addressees (see above), the author lets the earthly athletes of faith chase towards their goal surrounded by a cloud of spiritual team members: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, [...] let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” (Heb 12:1). The “cloud of witnesses” refers to all true believers, listed named and unnamed in Heb 11, a community that ends up in an open number and ultimately includes all those on their way to the future heavenly city (Heb 13:14), following their forerunner Jesus. The imagery in Heb 12:1 thus invokes the cheering crowd at a sporting event, illustrating the special (and exclusive) community of believers throughout all time—an idea later shaped into the expression of an *ecclesia invisibilis*.

³² Söding, “Sport,” 97: “Verdrängungswettbewerb.”

³³ Cf., e.g., Hurtado, *Destroyer*, 144–48; Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World’s Largest Religion* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 103–19.

3. Conclusion

The world of ancient sport exerted considerable influence on the development of the formation of earliest Christian identity and its expression throughout the New Testament. This world of experience offered that movement, and its adherents from a wide variety of social, regional, and cultural origins, a broad spectrum to articulate self-understanding, convictions, hopes, and ethical principles in a familiar way contemporaries could understand. At the same time, this usage of agonistic imagery mirrors the ambivalence earliest Christians inevitably faced in the midst of their Greco-Roman environment. This was raised by the significance of the cross for their new identity, which contradicts common ancient values. This ambivalence led to the integration of a then mostly unknown paradoxical ethos of weakness and defeat as a paradoxical and dialectical expression of triumphalist hope.

The Function of Divine Christology in Hebrews: Critical Reflections on a Recent Proposal

— Jared Compton —

*Jared Compton is associate professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology
at Bethlehem College and Seminary in Minneapolis, Minnesota.*

Abstract: The recent “theological turn” in biblical studies sparked fresh, creative interest in Hebrews’ Christology. The latest entry in the field, Nick Brennan’s carefully argued *Divine Christology in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, advances the conversation and, at the same time, illustrates a danger attending the larger project of theological retrieval. This essay explores Brennan’s thesis, commending his theological instincts, while cautioning against his specific conclusions. Readers must account for Hebrews’ theology but never at the expense of the letter’s explicit argument.

While I was completing my dissertation on Hebrews in 2013, the field of NT studies was undergoing a revolution.¹ NT scholars and others, frustrated with historical criticism, were beginning to read the NT *theologically*, often with fresh sympathy for “pre-modern” exegesis and the so-called “Great Tradition.”² The effects have been far-reaching,³ especially for Hebrews’s Christology. In just the last three years alone, three new monographs have specifically focused on He-

¹ See Jared Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, LNTS 537 (London: T&T Clark, 2015).

² This salutary theological turn is variously referred to as “theological interpretation of Scripture,” “theological retrieval,” and “reading in light of the Great Tradition.” For representative examples, see, e.g., Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005); Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), and, with an eye on Hebrews, Richard Bauckham et al., eds., *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). See also the (slightly critical) account in D. A. Carson, “Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Yes, But...,” in *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. R. Michael Allen (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 187–207.

³ See, e.g., Matthew W. Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

brews's divine Christology, each with an eye squarely on this larger conversation.⁴ The most recent—Nick Brennan's *Divine Christology in the Epistle to the Hebrews*—focuses not only on the presence of divine Christology in Hebrews but takes the further and, indeed, necessary step of exploring its place in the letter's argument.⁵ After all, it's one thing to insist *that* Hebrews says Jesus is divine and still another to probe further and explain *why*. But it's precisely at this point that Brennan's thesis runs into trouble and, at the same time, usefully illustrates one of the dangers attending the larger project of theological retrieval:⁶ theological inference *overriding* textual assertion. In what follows, I show this by surveying Brennan's work and by reflecting on two of Hebrews's claims that Brennan's thesis overrides. I conclude with three suggestions about where this conversation about Hebrews's Christology might go next.

1. Survey: What a Divine Christ Alone Can Do

Hebrews's soteriology *requires* Hebrews's divine Christology. Or, to summarize Brennan's thesis in his own words, "The Son can *only* be the fully effective Saviour and Priest he is, because he is himself true God, and thus brings to his people resources beyond their own, *those of God himself*."⁷ To make his case, he marshals five chapter-long arguments.

1.1. A Divine Christ Alone Can Save (Heb 1:6, 10–12)⁸

This is how Brennan explains two citations in the author's opening argument of 1:5–14, namely Deuteronomy 32:43 in Hebrews 1:6 and Psalm 102:25–27 in Hebrews 1:10–12. Brennan explicitly argues against my own reading of these texts,⁹ specifically my claim that each citation is applied to Jesus because it is *messianic*. To his credit, Brennan acknowledges the catena's enthronement frame (he calls

⁴ Madison N. Pierce, *Divine Discourse in the Epistle to the Hebrews: The Recontextualization of Spoken Quotations of Scripture*, SNTSMS 178 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); R. B. Jamieson, *The Paradox of Sonship: Christology in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Studies in Christian Doctrine and Scripture (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2021); Nick Brennan, *Divine Christology in the Epistle to the Hebrews: The Son as God*, LNTS 656 (New York: T&T Clark, 2022). For reflections on the first two, see Jared Compton, review of *The Paradox of Sonship: Christology in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, by R. B. Jamieson, *Themelios* 46 (2021): 685–88; and Compton, review of *Divine Discourse in the Epistle to the Hebrews: The Recontextualization of Spoken Quotations of Scripture*, by Madison N. Pierce, *Themelios* 46 (2021): 689–91. For a recent survey of Hebrews's Christology in general (i.e., *beyond* divine Christology), see, e.g., Brandon D. Crowe, "Son and Priest, Then and Now: Christology and Redemptive History in Hebrews in Light of the History of Interpretation," *WTJ* 84 (2022): 19–38; and William R. G. Loader, "Revisiting High Priesthood Christology in Hebrews," *ZNW* 109 (2018): 235–83.

⁵ Jamieson and Pierce make passing comments about the function of divine Christology in the letter's argument, but it is not their focus (see, e.g., Pierce, *Divine Discourse in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 34, 209–11; Jamieson, *Paradox of Sonship*, 168–69).

⁶ It is precisely at this point as well—on the relevance of divine Christology to Hebrews's decidedly salvific argument—that Brennan insists my own work falls short. Brennan charges me, along with David Moffitt, with treating the letter's divine Christology as something "seem[ing]ly irrelevant" (*Divine Christology*, 15–19).

⁷ Brennan, *Divine Christology*, 201, emphasis added. See also what Brennan says about these "resources" on pp. 55, 67, 70, 141, 199; cf. also "access to power" on p. 144.

⁸ The labels for each of Brennan's argument are my own.

⁹ See, e.g., *Divine Christology*, 195–96.

it an “orbit”) and that a Davidic psalm (i.e., Ps 97)¹⁰ may have influenced *one* of the two citations (i.e., Deut 32),¹¹ which, it turns out, would leave *only one*—Hebrews 1:10–12—clearly outside the Davidic orbit.

Brennan, nevertheless, insists that both texts play a different role than the other citations applied to Jesus in the catena. Instead of anticipating messianic enthronement, each anticipates *God’s* eschatological salvation: a salvation accomplished by God *alone* and, therefore, decidedly and explicitly agent-less,¹² so that God may highlight his unique saving ability (cf., e.g., Deut 32:43, esp. in the light of vv. 12, 31, and 34–43; and Ps 102:12–13).¹³ One, of course, may wonder whether Deuteronomy means to exclude *all* human agency. It was not much earlier, after all, that God told Moses that one day he would raise up a prophet just “like” him. And the fulfillment of this promise, according to the early Christians, turned out to be the “murdered,” and, thus, *very human* Jesus (see Acts 7:37; 52–53).

Brennan, moreover, recognizes that the use he has proposed for Deuteronomy 32 and Psalm 102 is distinct, and not just because he insists the two texts are not messianic. His proposal also requires a hermeneutic at odds with the author’s normal practice elsewhere. Hebrews everywhere else uses Scripture persuasively, over and over again pointing its audience to expectations *already* in the OT.¹⁴ It is, therefore, one thing to say God’s salvation was anticipated; it is quite another to say *Jesus* is the God bringing that salvation. Brennan insists that what brings these texts closer in line with Hebrews’s normal practice are the many specific correspondences between the texts and what Jesus has done in history.¹⁵ In short, his argument is circular; it assumes an equivalence between God and Jesus. But it is not “viscious[ly]” circular.¹⁶ It points to a warrant *beyond* the author’s own Christian conviction.

1.2. A Divine Christ Alone Can Build (Heb 3:1–6)

Brennan next argues that Jesus’s superiority to Moses is based on his divinity. We might represent this argument with a three-premise syllogism.

¹⁰ See my argument, Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, 33–36.

¹¹ *Divine Christology*, 194 n. 141.

¹² *Divine Christology*, 52.

¹³ *Divine Christology*, 69. For a similar, if also more thorough argument, see Jonathan A. Rinker, “Creation, Consummation, and Perseverance: The Meaning of Psalm 102:25–27 and the Significance of Its Use in Hebrews 1:10–12” (PhD thesis, Baptist Bible Seminary, 2017).

¹⁴ See Brennan, *Divine Christology*, 39–41; cf. Kopic’s comments on Owen’s similar understanding, “Typology, the Messiah, and John Owen’s Theological Reading of Hebrews,” in *Christology, Hermeneutics, and Hebrews: Profiles from the History of Interpretation*, ed. Jon C. Laansma and Daniel J. Treier, LNTS 423 (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 143–44.

¹⁵ Thus, at the Son’s resurrection-exaltation, he (1) receives worship that Deuteronomy said would follow God’s salvation (Deut 32:43; cf. also vv. 8–9, 31; *Divine Christology*, 51–52), (2) opens up “land” (Canaan’s archetype) just as God does in Deuteronomy (cf. Heb 1:6; 2:5 with Deut 9:3; 20:4; 31:3, 6; *Divine Christology*, 52–53, incl. n. 148), and (3) shows, according to Brennan’s reading of Heb 7:16, that the Son possesses the kind of enduring, un-created life that God alone possesses in Ps 102 (see the contrast in Heb 1:7–8 [μὲν...δέ]; also 7:16; 13:8; cf. with Ps 102:12, 24b–27; *Divine Christology*, 55–58, 66–67). Brennan also points to the fact that in the Son’s incarnation, which is at most *associated* with OT expectation elsewhere in Hebrews (see, e.g., Heb 10:5), the Son shows he exists outside creation and, thus, in the realm from which God’s anticipated salvation comes according to Ps 102 (vv. 12–22, 24b–29; *Divine Christology*, 56–58, 61–62, 66–67, 69).

¹⁶ *Divine Christology*, 18

Premise 1: Jesus is superior to Moses because of something he has built (Heb 3:3b).

Premise 2: Jesus has built God's redemptive household (cf. Heb 3:6; similarly, 10:21).¹⁷

Premise 3: Only a divine being can build God's redemptive household.

Conclusion: Jesus, therefore, has "engaged in a divine eschatological prerogative."¹⁸

To prove his first two premises, Brennan argues that Hebrews 3:1–6 alludes to the prophet Nathan's oracle recorded in 2 Samuel 7 (cf. 1 Chron 17).¹⁹ In that oracle, God promises to build David a house, later understood to refer to a *messianic people*.²⁰ And David asks to build God a house, a temple. The text, in other words, links both God and David with building projects. Granted these projects are actually reversed in Brennan's reading of Hebrews 3. God builds the eschatological temple, and Jesus builds God's redemptive household. The reversal, we are told, simply underscores certain ambiguities already present in the Samuel text itself. God only *allows* David's son to build him a temple—a son, in fact, whom the text says, God *will give him* (cf. 2 Sam 7:12). And at one point God calls this temple "*my house*" (1 Chron 17:14).²¹ This, of course, may allow us to see why Hebrews might say *God* built David's house (i.e., the eschatological temple), but it is not clear, at least to me, how Brennan's explanation allows us to say that Jesus—David's son—builds *God's* house (i.e., a redemptive household), which is exactly what we need to be able to say in order to support Brennan's first two premises.

Now to prove his third premise, Brennan notes that every eschatological reality in Hebrews is built by God himself:²² God builds the heavenly sanctuary, the heavenly city, and the heavenly rest. And, in light of the (ostensible) overlap between God and David's building activity in 2 Samuel 7 and in light of the fact that Jesus equips believers to live in God's eschatological reality, Brennan concludes that Jesus is engaged in a divine building project. As he says it, "only divine agency can fit things for the unshakeable kingdom."²³

As a passing note, I should say that I am not yet convinced that Jesus builds anything in Hebrews 3. Might it not be that all the talk of building is meant to emphasize *God's* greatness and, therefore, to explain why Jesus's status as a "Son over" God's house makes him so much superior to Moses, who was simply a "servant in" God's house (3:5–6). It is a prestigious thing indeed to have a father like that.²⁴

1.3. A Divine Christ Alone Can Live (Heb 7:16)

Third, Brennan says that the "indestructible life" (Heb 7:16) that qualified Jesus for priesthood was his "divine life."²⁵ He notes, first, that only sons qualify for Melchizedekian priesthood. Unlike Levitical

¹⁷ *Divine Christology*, 110.

¹⁸ *Divine Christology*, 73.

¹⁹ For his evidence, see *Divine Christology*, 88–89.

²⁰ Cf. 4Q147; *Divine Christology*, 90 n. 98.

²¹ See *Divine Christology*, 87–93.

²² See, similarly, Chris Bruno, Jared Compton, and Kevin McFadden, *Biblical Theology According to the Apostles: How the Earliest Christians Told the Story of Israel*, NSBT 52 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 168–74.

²³ Brennan, *Divine Christology*, 111.

²⁴ NB: Hebrews goes on to explicitly describe this redemptive house as "God's" (3:6; the antecedent of οὗ ἀνθρώπου, whose antecedent is distinguished in v. 5 from Χριστός; cf. God's analogous activity in 2:10).

²⁵ *Divine Christology*, 122.

priests, specific tribal lineage was not the deciding factor. (It was, in fact, an *anti*-factor in Jesus's case [see 7:14; cf. 8:4]). And sons, he goes on, are those who are disciplined through suffering so that they might learn obedience and be perfected (cf. Heb 12:4–12). Hebrews says this is precisely what Jesus experienced and what qualified him for priesthood. Therefore, the *disciplining*-perfection that qualified Jesus for priestly office was a perfection related—necessarily—to his *existing* status as a son.

Brennan then claims that the only kind of son who qualifies for Melchizedekian priesthood is a *divine* son. Only a divine son can be the pattern for a character with “unbounded” life.²⁶ Right after saying that Melchizedek was “without beginning of days or end of life,” Hebrews says that in this way he was made like—he “resembl[ed]—the “Son of God” (ἄφωμοιωμένος, 7:3).²⁷ This quality of life also explains the contrast Hebrews later makes between Levitical and Melchizedekian priests in Hebrews 7:8, 28. In both of these texts Brennan sees a contrast between Levitical priests who are *human* and Melchizedekian priests who are not.²⁸

While it is true, Brennan notes, that the Son's identity as son did entail his obedient death (5:7–10), his identity as *divine* Son also “meant that his life could not be destroyed by it.”²⁹ And it is *that* indestructible life that qualified Jesus for priestly office and, at the same time, now allows him to “save completely those who come to God through him” (7:25).³⁰

1.4. A Divine Christ Alone Can Guarantee (Heb 7:22)

Fourth, if Jesus is the guarantor of God's covenant (Heb 7:22), then he “must” be divine.³¹ Here Brennan points out that God's covenant with Abraham was secured or guaranteed by God's own character: “Since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore *by himself*” (6:14). Thus, if this oath is God's guarantee to Abraham (ἐμεσίτευσεν ὄρκῳ, 6:17),³² then “only one who is God's equal may act as [God's] guarantor [ἔγγυος].”³³ Hebrews then goes on to say that this is *exactly* what Jesus has done through his faithful obedience (cf. 10:5–10).³⁴ He secured God's covenant promises.³⁵

²⁶ On Melchizedek's slightly different typological status, see *Divine Christology*, 146, which my later contrast between a “literary” and “literal” reality attempts to capture. See also Brennan's use of “typological portrayal” in regard to Melchizedek (p. 144).

²⁷ Brennan sees this description of Melchizedek as simply another way to say what Hebrews has already said about the Son (see, esp., Heb 1:10–12; cf. also 10:5–10; 2:14; 13:8; *Divine Christology*, 132–34) and of *God* elsewhere (see “the *living* God” in 3:12; 9:14; 10:31; *Divine Christology*, 136).

²⁸ See *Divine Christology*, 140–42.

²⁹ See *Divine Christology*, 143.

³⁰ See *Divine Christology*, 144.

³¹ See *Divine Christology*, 168.

³² See *Divine Christology*, 153.

³³ See *Divine Christology*, 170.

³⁴ See *Divine Christology*, 163, 170.

³⁵ Brennan further insists, were Jesus only God's human agent or servant, then the certainty of God's covenant could be called into question, which is precisely what God's promise and self-referential oath were meant to rule out according to Hebrews 6:17. “Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath” (see 6:17; *Divine Christology*, 165). Only if the Son is divine is “the link in the chain of God's faithfulness, relative to Christ's faithfulness ... secure” (165). It is, moreover,

It is worth noting in passing the similarity between this and his first argument (“A divine Christ *alone* can save”). In both, all other agencies, besides *divine* agency, are ruled out.

1.5. A Divine Christ *Alone* Can Perfect (Heb 2:9–10)

Fifth and finally, Brennan says that only a divine Son could fulfill Davidic sonship and perfect humans, or, as he puts it, could enable humans to fulfill their *telos*.³⁶ Humans were created with a certain end, variously described in Hebrews as “glory” (2:10), “rest” (4:4–5), and obedience (10:5–10).³⁷ Sin now prevents them from reaching it.³⁸ Jesus, therefore, came to fulfill humanity’s *telos* representatively. He acts as humanity’s “pioneer,” “forerunner,” “firstborn,” and “priest.”³⁹ And, when he does, he also fulfills his own, unique end or *telos*, one anticipated in Psalm 40 (Heb 10:5–7) and implied in the language of “perfection” in Hebrews 2:10, 5:9, and 7:28. It is this dual fulfillment—filling up his own and the sons’ *teloi*—that Brennan sees anticipated in the letter’s Davidic typology, especially in the author’s use of Psalm 45 in Hebrews 1:8–9, where God calls the Davidic son *God*. This way of reading the letter’s messianism would fit with other explicit references to Jesus’s divine sonship in Hebrews (see, e.g., 1:2, 3, 10–12; 5:8)⁴⁰ and with the author’s other types (e.g., sacrifice, sanctuary, priesthood). Hebrews’s typology, in fact, demands just this sort of “heightening.”⁴¹

Once more we may note in passing the similarity between this argument and Brennan’s third (“A divine Christ alone lives”): just as the Melchizedek-typology requires a divine archetype, so too the messianic. I would add that considering the prevalence of this species of typology in Hebrews, one might wish Brennan had lingered longer over the messianic readings proposed for Psalm 102 (101 LXX). Perhaps Psalm 45 and Genesis 14 should cause us to take one more look at αὐτῷ in Ps 101:24 LXX.⁴²

2. Critical Reflection: What a Divine Christ Does Not Do Alone

Before pushing back on Brennan’s thesis, I should begin by acknowledging the weight of his clear, theologically informed, and, here-and-there, convincing entry into the conversation on Hebrews’s divine Christology. Brennan has convinced me, for example, about the divine Christology latent in Psalm 45 and Genesis 14. He is exactly right: the author’s typology *expects* this kind of heightened fulfillment. Added to this, the argument made in each instance might still be persuasive to the kind of audience Hebrews’s addresses—one with a loosening grip on its Christian confession⁴³—since it works

the Son’s link in the chain of God’s faithfulness that makes “faith in the promises of God and trust in the faithful response of the Son to the Father ... effectively indistinguishable” (148; see also 164).

³⁶ See, e.g., *Divine Christology*, 196. This chapter corresponds quite closely to Jamieson, *Paradox of Sonship*. See, e.g., the similar taxonomies of Jamieson, *Paradox of Sonship*, 7–20 and Brennan, *Divine Christology*, 174–76.

³⁷ See *Divine Christology*, 184–89; also 192.

³⁸ See *Divine Christology*, 190.

³⁹ Brennan here also points to Hebrews’s use of ὑπέρ in 2:9; 6:20; 7:25; 9:24.

⁴⁰ See *Divine Christology*, 179–83.

⁴¹ *Divine Christology*, 196. See, similarly, Jamieson, *Paradox of Sonship*, 122–42.

⁴² See Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, 31–33.

⁴³ See, e.g., Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, 17–18, 24–27.

even apart from the heightening. And this is to say nothing of how Hebrews's doubting audience may have heard the letter *a second time around*. If the tent, cult, and priesthood admittedly foreshadowed greater realities, might not David and Melchizedek have as well?⁴⁴

These salutary features notwithstanding, Brennan's thesis runs into trouble specifically along two lines. In his attempt to account for the place of divine Christology in Hebrews's argument, he incorrectly attributes to Jesus's divine nature what Hebrews attributes to something else. Or, as I said above, Brennan lets theological inference override explicit textual claims.

First, Hebrews implies that God's long-anticipated salvation is in one very specific way dependent on just the sort of agency Brennan denies in his first and fourth arguments and downplays explicitly in his third and implicitly in his fifth—namely, *human* agency.

Second, when Hebrews describes the divine agency that energized Jesus's saving work, it points us not to *divine* Christology but to *pneumatology*. That is, the letter points us to the assistance given the Son by the Holy Spirit. Hebrews, in other words, gives us a way of affirming divine agency without ruling human agency out of bounds.

2.1. Jesus's Human Agency

Brennan is right to see a divine Christ anticipated in Hebrews's Melchizedekian typology, but he is also wrong to see this divine life as the reason—at least *stated* reason—for Jesus's indestructibility and qualification for priesthood.⁴⁵ Hebrews says it was Jesus's *human* obedience that led to his indestructible, resurrected life and, thus, to his priestly appointment. Seven observations point in this direction.⁴⁶

First, whether the prayers Jesus prays in Hebrews 5:7 were those offered in Gethsemane (I think they were) or elsewhere is not as important as noting the *fact* that he prayed—*urgently* (“fervent cries and tears”)—and that he did this “during the days of [his] life on earth.”

Second, Jesus offered these prayers to “one who could save him from death.” That tells us whom Jesus prayed *to* and, likely, what he prayed *for*.

Third, Jesus's prayers were “heard.” The positive reason that follows—“because of his reverent submission”—and the fact that Jesus died, implies that God “heard” and positively answered Jesus's prayers by raising him from the dead. After all, Hebrews says this is what followed Jesus's death (13:20).⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Added to this, if we accept Ruben Böhner's recent argument in his *Messianic High Christology: New Testament Variants of Second Temple Judaism* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021), then the line between Christian and Jewish messianism, especially before the 2nd century, becomes far less clear cut than we have often imagined. Thus, if Böhner is right, then the divine messianism Brennan identifies may have been persuasive even on a first reading of the letter.

⁴⁵ Again, see Brennan, *Divine Christology*, 143–44.

⁴⁶ The following arguments adapt material from Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, 70–75, 76–85, 86–95.

⁴⁷ What this means about the specific content of Jesus's prayers, however, is an open question. It is not at all clear whether he prayed to be saved *from* or *out of* the grave. His “fervent cries and tears” point toward the first option, while his commitment to do God's will (Heb 10:5–10) points toward the second. For an argument for the latter, see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 3:387; also David M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, NovTSup 141 (Boston: Brill, 2011), 190–92.

Fourth, the language of “perfection” in 5:9 implies Jesus’s resurrection.⁴⁸ Perfection in Hebrews refers to being fit to enter God’s presence,⁴⁹ a place described, for example, as “the world to come” (2:9), “Mt. Zion” (12:22), and “the city that is to come” (13:14; see also “rest,” 4:3, “eternal inheritance,” 9:15, and “better country,” 11:16). For sinners, access to this place requires *complete* forgiveness. This is why it was not available to old covenant believers (11:13, 39–40), and, related, why the Levitical priesthood had to be replaced. Because it could not perfect, it could not give people this kind of access to God (7:11; 10:2). Hebrews tells us at one point that the Holy Spirit tried to say this *every time* Israel celebrated the Day of Atonement (see 9:8). Access to God also requires a certain kind of body, the kind fit to live in God’s enduring, unshakeable reality (12:25–29).⁵⁰ Only those bodies freed from sin and all its effects are fit to enter that future “glory” (2:10).⁵¹ Or, in light of Hebrews 11:35, only those who have experienced a “better resurrection” can enter God’s presence.⁵² Revivified, non-resurrected life simply will not do (Hebrews 11:35a). This means that while in his pre-resurrected life, Jesus was free from sin (4:15), he was not free from sin’s effects,⁵³ including mortality. Rather, his life on earth, “lower than the angels,” was a life lived *necessarily* (see, e.g., 2:17–18; 4:14–5) in a non-enduring, shakable body—one not yet crowned with the glory and honor intended for Adam’s race (2:5–9). When Hebrews says that Jesus was “made perfect,” following his death, Hebrews implies Jesus’s reception of his enduring, no-longer mortal, resurrected life. It implies a life now *fit* to enter God’s very presence.

Fifth, 5:8 tells us that Jesus was perfected “*because of his reverent submission*” (ἀπὸ τῆς εὐλαβείας).⁵⁴ Hebrews gives a similar rationale for Jesus’s subsequent exaltation. Hebrews 1:8–9, citing Psalm 45:6–7, says “You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; *therefore* [διὰ τοῦτο] God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.” And Heb 2:9 says that Jesus was “crowned with glory and honor *because* [διὰ] he suffered death.” (For a similar sequence, see 1:3.) It should go without saying that this obedience was *human* obedience, especially since it climaxed in Jesus’s obedient *death* (5:8; cf. 2:9; 10:5–10). This, in fact, may be what Hebrews is trying to emphasize in the concessive clause at the beginning of 5:8, when it says, “Son *though he was*, he learned obedience.” Hebrews seems to saying that while simultaneously existing as the “living God” (cf. 1:1–3 with 3:12;

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, 194–200.

⁴⁹ Bruno, Compton, and McFadden, *Biblical Theology According to the Apostles*, 174–75; cf. Brennan’s similar note, *Divine Christology*, 110–12, including n. 224.

⁵⁰ See Bruno, Compton, and McFadden, *Biblical Theology According to the Apostles*, 174; see also Moffitt, who says, reflecting on early Jewish texts, “The earth is transformed into a dwelling place fit for God, just as the mortal body is transformed into something fit to enter heaven” (*Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, 179).

⁵¹ See Moffitt, e.g., who comments on the use of “glory” in 1 and 2 Enoch: “For the human body to be comfortable in the presence of God and the angels, it must be imbued with the glory of God” (*Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, 177).

⁵² So, e.g., Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection*, 186–87.

⁵³ See Steven J. Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism: Biblical Christology in Light of the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 282: “While the Son did not have in himself any cause of incurring such defects [e.g., ‘our infirmities’], since he came ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’ (Rom 8:3) he still took up weaknesses consequent to the human race’s fall into sin. In short, while he did not assume *defectus culpae* (defects rooted in one’s own guilt), he still assumed *defectus poenae* (defects resulting from punishment common to the human race).”

⁵⁴ For a justification of the NIV’s reading, see Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, 73 n. 29.

9:14; 10:31), the Son, as *human* son and *as only a human son could*, learned obedience through suffering to the point of death and was resurrected and “crowned” as a result.⁵⁵

Sixth, 5:9–10 say that Jesus’s perfection was followed by his installation as Melchizedekian priest. “Once made perfect [τελειωθεῖς],” Jesus “became [ἐγένετο] the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, and was [at the same time] designated [προσαγορευθεῖς] to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.” When Hebrews later says that Jesus “has become [γέγονεν] a priest... on the basis of the power of an indestructible life” (7:16), we are meant to see an equivalence between this life and the language of perfection in 5:9–10. This is why, at the end of 7:11–28, the author returns to the language of 5:9–10, noting that the one who is “appointed” is one “who has been made perfect [τετελειωμένον].”

Seventh, the main contrast between Levitical priests and Melchizedekian priests is, therefore, not between humans and God, as Brennan argues, but rather between humans who *die* and humans who *no longer die*.⁵⁶ Thus, in 7:8, Levi’s priests “die” in contrast to Melchizedek’s, who are “declared to be living.” And in 7:23–24, “death prevent[s] Levitical priests] from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood.”⁵⁷ At the same time, Hebrews also denies that Levitical priests possess the qualities that would lead to enduring life. They are sinners (7:27) and demonstrably weak (7:28; cf. 5:3); whereas Jesus is “holy, blameless, pure, [and] set apart from sinners” (7:26). Again, according to Hebrews 5:7, this is why Jesus has been perfected and appointed Melchizedekian priest *and they have not*.⁵⁸

In short, Brennan rightly says that Melchizedek prefigures Jesus’s deity. The Son is, to an even greater degree, “without beginning of days or end of life,” since the “literary” type in Genesis anticipates the “literal” antitype in Jesus. That said, as in 5:8, so also in 7:3, there is *no explicit connection* made between Jesus’s anticipated and necessary divinity and his qualification for priestly office.⁵⁹ Hebrews, in fact, *explicitly connects* Jesus’s qualification to something else: his *human* obedience. With Hebrews, therefore, we must affirm the Son’s divinity, while at the same time point to his *human* obedience as

⁵⁵ Cf. Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism*, 251. I can wonder, moreover, if 5:8 might not refer to Jesus’s divine nature. Might the concessive clause indicate instead that the audience had forgotten the congruity between suffering and sonship? In 5:8, the author prepares for what he will say in 12:5a. “Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered.” Then, in 12:5, the author returns to this idea and reminds his audience that sonship and suffering are not, in fact, incongruous, now with the example of Jesus firmly-fixed in their minds. “Have you *completely forgotten* this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son” (12:5a). And the author follows this with a citation of Prov 3:11–12 (12:5b–6) and the claim that “hardship” or suffering should be *reinterpreted* as fatherly “discipline” (12:7).

⁵⁶ The focus on Jesus’s humanity is seen also in the attention given to his tribal lineage in 7:14.

⁵⁷ Related, Hebrews also says that Levitical priests qualify for priesthood by means of lineal succession over against Melchizedekian priests who qualify by possessing an enduring life, 7:5, 16. In other words, Hebrews implies that succession assumes *death*.

⁵⁸ Cf. my slightly more restrained conclusions in Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, 95 n. 130.

⁵⁹ Whether Jesus’s divine life “meant that his life could not be destroyed by [death]” is simply not a connection Hebrews draws between 7:3 and 7:16 (contra Brennan, *Divine Christology*, 143; cf. Luther’s similar reading of Heb 2:9 in Mickey L. Mattox, “Christology in Martin Luther’s *Lectures on Hebrews*,” in *Christology, Hermeneutics, and Hebrews: Profiles from the History of Interpretation*, ed. Jon C. Laansma and Daniel J. Treier, LNTS 423 [London: T&T Clark, 2012], 117). Cf. Duby’s similar comment about Jesus’s sinlessness, following Lombard: “Since the human nature is indissolubly united to the Word, it is incapable of sin” (*Jesus and the God of Classical Theism*, 308). The difference between the two is that the hypostatic union while, perhaps, preventing Jesus from sinning, did not prevent him from dying.

the reason for his resurrection to the kind of life that qualified him for priesthood. The only one who qualifies for Melchizedekian priesthood is, therefore, one who fills up the Melchizedekian typology *and* who is raised from the dead after a life of hard-fought obedience.⁶⁰

2.2. The Holy Spirit's Agency

In the one place where Hebrews tells us *how* Jesus lived a life of “reverent submission” and qualified for priestly appointment, the author points not to Jesus’s divine power but to his reliance on the Holy Spirit. The author says,

The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who *through the eternal Spirit* offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (Heb 9:13–14)⁶¹

While Brennan does not equate “the eternal spirit” with Jesus’s divinity, others have, and have done so based on reading 7:16 just like Brennan does.⁶² It is better, however, to see a reference to the Holy Spirit in 9:14 for at least the following three reasons.

First, fully half of the twelve references to “spirit” in Hebrews refer to the Holy Spirit. One of these occurs in the paragraph just before 9:11–14 (see 9:8; see also 2:4; 3:7; 6:4; 10:15; 10:29).⁶³ Of the other five instances—leaving to the side 9:14, two refer to angels (1:7, 14), two to human spirits (4:12; 12:23),⁶⁴ and one either to angels or humans (12:9).⁶⁵ In light of this, we may say that the audience was, more or less, primed to hear in “eternal Spirit” a reference to “Holy Spirit.”⁶⁶

Second, this is the way many early Christians read 9:14, as we can see from the manuscript tradition, where “holy” (ἁγίου) often substitutes for the more difficult “eternal” (αἰώνιος; see, e.g., **8**², D). I suspect “eternal” was likely original and was used in lieu of the more frequent “holy” to emphasize that the enabling Spirit had the exact quality necessary for the task he had been given, one instrumental in “obtaining *eternal* redemption” (9:12) and securing the “*eternal* inheritance” (9:15).

⁶⁰ This dual basis for qualification answers Brennan’s question: “Could anyone raised from the dead fill this role by virtue of an *a parte post* indestructible life?” (*Divine Christology*, 143).

⁶¹ The following two paragraphs adapt material from Compton, *Psalms 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, 124–26.

⁶² See, e.g., Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 251; Ceslas Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1952), 2:258–59; B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 3rd ed (London: Macmillan, 1909), 261–62.

⁶³ The author’s reference to the Holy Spirit as “the Spirit of grace” in 10:29 likely echoes the language of OT expectation of an end-time pouring out of God’s spirit (Zech. 12:10 [πνεῦμα χάριτος]; 1QSb 2:24; Joel 3:2 LXX), something early Christians associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 2:17–21). On this, see Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 295; also Barnabas Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 57 n. 45.

⁶⁴ The connection between human spirits and “righteous spirits” in 12:23 is based on the author’s other uses of the adjective *righteous*, which are used exclusively in reference to human beings (10:38; 11:4).

⁶⁵ See, e.g., Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 362–63.

⁶⁶ See, similarly, Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 398.

Third, the idea of a Spirit-enabled messiah was long-anticipated in the OT (see, e.g., Isa 11:2; 42:1; 61:1)⁶⁷ and is thoroughly-attested elsewhere in the NT (see, e.g., Luke 4.18–19 [citing Isa 61.1–2]).

When, therefore, Hebrews tells us that it was “through (διὰ) the Holy Spirit that Jesus “offered himself unblemished to God,” it emphasizes the *means* by which Jesus was enabled to offer what God required: an “unblemished [ἄμωμον]” sacrifice (cf. Heb 10:5–10).⁶⁸ The moral virtue, learned, as we have seen, during Jesus’s lifetime and culminating in his obedient death, was virtue enabled, 9:14 tells us, by the Holy Spirit.⁶⁹ This posture of dependence, in any case, corresponds to what we read of Jesus elsewhere in Hebrews. We have already seen that Jesus prays (5:7), and in another place he is said to “trust” (2:13, citing Isa 8:17).⁷⁰

This is, of course, not to deny the inseparability of God the Son’s and God the Spirit’s operations,⁷¹ much less to suggest there was no concurrence between Jesus’s divine and human natures.⁷² It is only to say that when Hebrews explicitly talks about *how* Jesus could live the kind of life necessary to bring God’s salvation, it points us not to Jesus’s divine nature but to the empowering of the Holy Spirit.⁷³

⁶⁷ It is, as F. F. Bruce notes, “in the power of the Divine Spirit, accordingly, that the Servant accomplishes every phase of his ministry, including the crowning phase in which he accepts death for the transgression of his people, filling the twofold role of priest and victim, as Christ does in this epistle” (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 217; cf. David Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the “Epistle to the Hebrews”* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982], 138; Anthony Thiselton, “Hebrews,” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 1468).

⁶⁸ On διὰ, see Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed., BLG, 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 148–49; cf. C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge, 1975), 119–20.

⁶⁹ See Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism*, 208.

⁷⁰ See Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism*, 272, 279. Cf. Daniel Keating’s note about Aquinas in “Thomas Aquinas and the Epistle to the Hebrews: ‘The Excellence of Christ,’” in *Christology, Hermeneutics, and Hebrews: Profiles from the History of Interpretation*, ed. Jon C. Laansma and Daniel J. Treier, LNTS 423 (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 93.

⁷¹ See, e.g., Duby: “Affirming the simplicity of God’s essence and the attendant unity of God’s operations does not obstruct the recognition that a certain divine work can pertain to a certain divine person in a special way” (*Jesus and the God of Classical Theism*, 217; see also, e.g., “peculiar relation,” p. 220, and “eminently,” p. 227).

⁷² See Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism*, 312–13.

⁷³ Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism*, 242: “On the other hand, given that the mode of union in the incarnation is hypostatic rather than essential, it is not the case that the Son’s divine power and activity are communicated to the Son’s human nature. The Son *qua homo* is still left in a position of finitude and dependence upon the Spirit of God.” Duby elsewhere says, “That Christ exercises habitual knowledge of divine things and a rectitude of will in resisting temptation underscores that he truly exerts himself as man in the midst of temptations, instead of having the human use of his faculties overridden by the Spirit” (240). Still, in his later discussion of Christ’s sinlessness, Duby says, “The determination of Christ’s life in the way of holiness is not established at the resurrection but is present from the beginning by virtue of the *hypostatic union* and the Spirit’s indwelling” (312, emphasis added). Nevertheless, he goes on to say, “within the unity of God’s outward works, the Spirit empowers Christ’s human action. The Spirit’s empowerment does not exclude the divine activity of the other two persons, but the empowerment does pertain *in a special way* to the Spirit as the third person of the Trinity” (313, emphasis added).

3. Conclusion

Here, then, let me conclude with three observations about where this conversation about Hebrews's divine Christology stands and where it might go next.

First, in light of the above, any account of the divine Christology in Hebrews must make room for the significant place Hebrews gives to Jesus's *human* agency. Again, it is one thing to insist that Jesus *must* be divine, it is another to explain this necessity without sufficient sympathy for Hebrews's argument.

Second, any account of the divine Christology in Hebrews must also make room for the place Hebrews gives to the Holy Spirit's role in Jesus's *human* obedience. It is tempting, in the light of human sin, to suggest that such obedience owed to Jesus's divine nature—to “resources” available only with reference to Jesus's divinity. But Hebrews does not say this. To put it another way, it is true that only a *theandric* person could fulfill the Davidic or Melchizedekian typologies. But it is not necessarily the case that one was needed to fulfill the human typology of Psalm 8 (or, perhaps, of Isaiah 8).⁷⁴ Hebrews's emphasis on Jesus's human obedience and the Spirit's enabling may imply, moreover, that the heightened antitype of Adam *post-Fall* might just be a sinless, obedient human being, fully dependent on God's Spirit. To suggest otherwise would seem to put a question mark over the “very good” God pronounces at the beginning (Gen 1:31), over God's justice for requiring of humans what they are *ontologically* incapable of doing, and over the value of Jesus's example, which Hebrews places a great deal of emphasis upon.

Third, to suggest Brennan's “resources” might be sufficiently supplied by human agency and the Spirit's empowerment is not, at the same time, to say that Jesus's divinity is theologically irrelevant. But it is to say that its relevance should be found in places other than where Brennan points us, if we are to account for the specific topography of Hebrews's argument. I can wonder, for example, if the author's divine Christology was one more way of affirming the audience's felt incongruity between the messiah's expected exaltation and Christianity's surprising claim that suffering—death!—necessarily came first. On my reading of Hebrews, showing the plausibility of that claim is, indeed, the author's leading argument.⁷⁵ Beyond this, I can wonder if Hebrews's divine Christology underscores *just how closely* God has joined himself to his human project (i.e., with his *sons*)—a “typological” heightening of, say, Deuteronomy 4:7 (i.e., a God *so very* near).

In any case, these and other potential saliences must be explored if we are to follow Brennan's salutary lead and account for Hebrews' divine Christology. Hebrews, after all, clearly wants us to see that Jesus is divine; our next step must be to listen *even more closely* and let Hebrews tell us why.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ On this typology in Psalm 8, see Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, 40–51.

⁷⁵ See Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, 165–71; also Bruno, Compton, and McFadden, *Biblical Theology According to the Apostles*, 151–52.

⁷⁶ On the relationship between Jesus's divinity and the efficacy of his death, see, e.g., Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism*, 319–26; also Frances M. Young, “Christological Ideas in the Greek Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *Christology, Hermeneutics, and Hebrews: Profiles from the History of Interpretation*, ed. Jon C. Laansma and Daniel J. Treier, LNTS 423 (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 36–37. (Interestingly, Young ends his essay noting, “This problem of the relationship between Christology and soteriology needs further exploration.”) Whether Hebrews makes this connection is an open question; cf., e.g., Heb 2:9, which points, instead, to God's grace. Jonathan King's comments on Rom 5:12–21 are relevant here; see his *The Beauty of the Lord: Theology as Aesthetics*, Studies in Historical and Systematic Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018), 176–77.

Thomas Aquinas on Total Depravity and the Noetic Effects of Sin

— David Haines —

David Haines is assistant professor of philosophy and theology at Bethlehem College and Seminary in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Abstract: One of the most common critiques of Thomas Aquinas to be found in contemporary Protestant theology and apologetics is that Aquinas either outright denies the noetic effects of sin, or, at very least, minimizes the noetic effects of sin. Examples can be found in the writings of Dooyeweerd, Schaeffer, and Oliphint. This article provides a much-needed corrective to these all-too-common and perpetually promoted misinterpretations of Aquinas by showing that Aquinas thinks that human nature in its entirety (both intellect and will) is affected by sin. Protestant theologians can adopt his approach without sacrificing Protestant particulars.

One of the most common critiques of Thomas Aquinas to be found in contemporary Protestant theology and apologetics is that Aquinas either outright denies the *noetic effects of sin* (that is, the effect of original sin on the human intellect) or at least minimizes the noetic effects of sin. Francis Schaeffer, for example, explicitly states, “In Aquinas’s view the will of man was fallen, but the intellect was not.”¹ This critique, that Aquinas’s incomplete understanding of the noetic effects of sin opened the door to an unwarranted confidence in the ability of the human intellect to somehow infer the existence of God from nature, appears to be a fairly recent development in the history of Reformed critiques of Aquinas, finding its roots, according to some, in the work of Herman Dooyeweerd.² In his 1959 book *Roots of Western Culture*, Dooyeweerd describes the scholastic view, of which Aquinas was apparently the “Prince,” as suggesting that the fallen “human ‘nature,’ which is guided by the natural light of reason, was not corrupted by sin and thus also does not need to be restored by Christ. Human nature is only ‘weakened’ by the fall.”³

¹ Francis Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason*, reprint ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 11.

² Cf. R. J. Snell, “Thomism and Noetic Sin, Transposed,” *Philosophia Christi* 12 (2010): 7–10; Arvin Vos, *Aquinas, Calvin, and Contemporary Protestant Thought* (Washington, DC: Christian University Press, 1985), 131.

³ Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*, trans. John Kraay, eds. Mark Vander Vennen and Bernard Zylstra (Toronto: Wedge, 1979), 116–17. Cf. Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought: Studies in the Pre-tended Autonomy of Philosophical Thought* (Philadelphia: P&R Publishing, 1960), 140.

Even though some scholars (both Catholics and Protestants) have attempted to correct this misinterpretation of Aquinas,⁴ the misunderstanding persists and maintains its popularity in many Protestant circles. This can be seen clearly in the recent publications of K. Scott Oliphint, who states,

During the Middle Ages, insufficient attention was given, in general, to the problem of sin as it relates to our reasoning process.... Because the effects of sin were thought to be less extensive in their application to us (as compared with Reformation thought), in that sin was not seen as radically affecting our reasoning, there was an improper view of the faculty of reason, especially with respect to reason's ability to understand and discern God's revelation and his existence. Reason was regarded as fairly well intact, even after the fall, such that all men followed the same basic rules of thought.⁵

These claims are summarized in his 2017 book on Aquinas: "what the medievals, including Thomas, neglected to incorporate in their theological system was the radical effect that sin has on the mind of fallen man."⁶ Oliphint does not stray far from Cornelius Van Til, who portrays the Roman Catholic view of the noetic effects of sin as follows: "According to this view the disturbance is endemic to human nature because man is made up, in part, of nonrational elements. To the extent that man consists of intellect, he does not and cannot sin. The 'disturbance' in man's make-up is not due primarily to any fault of his own."⁷ Whether or not some Roman Catholic theologians may have affirmed such a claim, we will argue that Aquinas did not.⁸

It is the primary purpose of this article to provide a much-needed corrective to these all-too-common and continually repeated misinterpretations of Aquinas that continue to be promoted by

⁴ Cf. Arvin Vos, *Aquinas, Calvin, and Contemporary Protestant Thought: A Critique of Protestant Views of the Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids: Christian University Press, 1985); Snell, "Thomism and Noetic Sin"; R. J. Snell and Steven D. Cone, *Authentic Cosmopolitanism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013).

⁵ K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 128.

⁶ K. Scott Oliphint, *Thomas Aquinas, Great Thinkers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 33.

⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 97.

⁸ There is a second contemporary critique of Aquinas that can be dealt with at the same time, coming this time from an advocate of Thomistic thought. R. J. Snell suggests, "Aquinas is constrained by a faculty psychology" (Snell, "Thomism and Noetic Sin," 18). How is Aquinas constrained? Snell, under the influence of Bernard Lonergan, argues, first that Aquinas's faculty psychology "risks treating our faculties almost like reified parts which need piecing together, harmoniously or otherwise (18). That is, Aquinas's psychology so divides man up that we lose sight of the unity of the human person, which, thinks Snell, opens Aquinas up to the accusation that the will alone, and not the whole person, is infected by original sin (19). Second, argues Snell, Aquinas's faculty psychology "risks neglecting the concrete, conscious subject, that is, the actually existing person" in favor of a metaphysical abstraction (18). Aquinas, according to Snell, fails to account for the lived experience of the concrete subject—the conscious self, and "the things concrete human beings do when they reason," "how reason works in the concrete," or the "operations of consciousness" (20). These two main critiques bring Snell to the conclusion that a faculty psychology "overlooks the consequences of sin" on the concrete person (20). Snell concludes that Aquinas's psychology needs to be supplemented by, or worse, transposed into, Lonergan's "introspective phenomenology" (20). He thinks that this transposition will resolve the complaints of the Neo-Calvinists. I would suggest that a proper reading of Aquinas demonstrates that each of Snell's critiques are unfounded, and, therefore, that there is no need for any phenomenological supplements or transpositions.

contemporary Protestant theologians and apologists. In this article I show not only that Aquinas clearly states that human nature in its entirety (i.e., both intellect and will) is affected by sin, but also that his approach can be adopted by Protestant theologians without sacrificing Protestant particularities. First, I overview Aquinas's approach to human nature and faculty psychology. Second, I turn to his understanding of sin (actual and original) in order to show not only that he clearly thinks that man is totally depraved (such that original sin affects even reason), but that his views concerning the nature and transmission of original sin entail that man is totally depraved. Aquinas's understanding of the interrelation of the intellect and will is essential for a proper understanding of his claims concerning the noetic effects of sin. In the process, I show how Aquinas's articulation of the effects of sin on the entire human nature includes not only intellect and will, but all of those faculties that can be moved by the will to act.

1. Aquinas on Human Nature

How a theologian articulates the doctrine of original sin, and the effects of original sin on the human being, will be strongly influenced by their understanding of human nature. It is necessary, then, to understand Aquinas properly, to begin with a summary explanation of Aquinas's approach to human nature.

1.1. Hylemorphism

First of all, a *substance*, for Aquinas, is a particular existing essence. An individual human, Socrates, is a particular instance of the human nature. Socrates is, therefore, a substance. Socrates, is not, for Aquinas, a soul in conjunction with a body (two separate substances), but a single unique substance composed of two substantial parts (the rational soul and designated matter—his body).⁹ Though we can distinguish between the substantial parts, matter is part and parcel of human nature, and, therefore, of the “person”—that is, what we talk about when we think of the seat of rationality, consciousness, action, and so on, is the single, unique, substance that is composed of soul and body. For Aquinas, it is the whole substance (not the soul alone) that is the “person.” The unity of the human person is a necessary and fundamental element of any discussion of human nature, the human person, and the morality of human action. Aquinas's *hylemorphism* puts so much emphasis on the human being as “informed matter” or an “ensouled body” that some contemporary philosophers have had trouble deciding whether to classify it as a form of materialism (attribute theory) or a form of dualism.¹⁰ This must be kept in mind whenever we read Aquinas on human nature, human action, etc.: the human person is a single united particular instance of human nature. We can abstract from the person for the purpose of theory, but the reality that is in act and which acts is not the abstraction, but the individual embodied soul.

⁹ Though it is doubtful that John Calvin was a *hylemorphist* (which is what the approach to human nature associated with Aristotle and Aquinas is called), it is clear from the *Institutes* that he agrees, in general, with this portrayal of human nature. For he says, “Moreover, there can be no question that man consists of a body and a soul; meaning by soul, an immortal though created essence, which is his nobler part” (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.15.2, trans. Henry Beveridge, reprint ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), p. 104). Calvin goes on to discuss the nature of man and the human faculties, admitting that even pagan authors have described human nature better and more eloquent than he does (1.15.2, p. 105; cf. 1.15.3, p. 107; 1.15.6, p. 109).

¹⁰ Cf. D. M. Armstrong, *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*, reprint ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 12.

1.2. Human Action: Faculties and Habits

Aquinas's approach to human action has often been described as a "faculty psychology."¹¹ Understanding Aquinas's approach to human action is the next step in understanding his view of the effects of sin (both original and actual) on human nature and human actions. There are two major terms that we need to understand in order to grasp Aquinas here: *Powers* or *Faculties* and *Habits*.

First, a "power" or "faculty" is a principle of activity that is directed to an act.¹² Aquinas notes, "a power of the soul is nothing else than the proximate principle of the soul's operation."¹³ A power can be described in relation to the first act of a living being—the soul, which is the substantial form of the individual human being, as the second act of a living being.¹⁴ We discover the nature of a power by considering the act, which finds its source in the power, towards which the power is directed (for the most part).¹⁵ Such a consideration of human action allows us to distinguish between passive and active powers,¹⁶ and the five genera of the powers: (1) vegetative, (2) sensitive, (3) locomotive, (4) appetitive, and (5) intellectual. The powers proper are classified under the five genera as follows:

1. Vegetative: generative, augmentative, nutritive
2. Sensitive: interior senses, exterior senses
3. Locomotive: outer movement
4. Appetitive: Intellectual appetites (will & choice), Sensuality (Irascible and concupiscible appetites)

¹¹ Though I will not go into any detail in considering Calvin's psychology, he clearly also held to what would be broadly called a "faculty psychology." In fact, he suggests that it is not possible to truly grasp what is meant by saying that man is made in the image of God until "it appears more clearly what the faculties are in which man excels" (*Institutes*, 1.15.3, p. 107). Calvin goes on to explain in a manner that is very Thomistic (though the resemblances can be traced through Aquinas all the way back to Augustine and beyond to Aristotle) that there are five *senses* (1.15.6, p. 110), three *cognitive faculties* of the soul: Intellect, Imagination, and Reason; and that there are three *appetitive faculties*: will ("whose office is to choose whatever reason and intellect propound"), irascibility, and concupiscence (1.15.6, p. 110). For other Reformed theologians who hold to a faculty psychology, see Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 83; L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed., reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 195–96.

¹² *ST I*, q. 77, a. 1, *ad* 3; *Questions on the Soul*, q. 12, *resp.*, p. 156. All quotations from the *Summa Theologiae*, unless otherwise noted, are from the following translation: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, reprint ed. (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1981). Aquinas helpfully explains, "since the powers of the soul are destined for operations proper to animate beings, an operation has a special power of the soul appointed for it for the reason that it is an operation proper to an animate being" (*DV*, q. 22, a. 3, *resp.*, 43). All quotations from the *De Veritate*, unless otherwise noted, are from the following translation: Thomas Aquinas, *Truth*, 3 vols., trans. Robert W. Mulligan, James V. McGlynn, and R. W. Schmidt, reprint ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994).

¹³ *ST I*, q. 78, a. 4, *resp.*

¹⁴ *ST I*, q. 77, a. 1, *resp.*, *ad* 4; *Questions on the Soul*, q. 12, *ad* 10, p. 160.

¹⁵ *ST I*, q. 77, a. 3, *resp.* In his *Disputed Questions on Truth*, Aquinas suggests, "inasmuch as to be moved is made an action proper to animate beings in the sense that they move themselves to definite species of movement, there is found in animals a hierarchy of special powers" (*DV*, q. 22, a. 3, *resp.* 44). He continues by providing the examples of locomotive power and vegetative powers and then discusses the appetitive powers.

¹⁶ *ST I*, q. 77, a. 3, *resp.*

5. Intellectual: Active (reason and understanding), passive (memory).

The *appetitive* faculties could also be referred to (shorthand) as the *will*, and the *intellective* faculties could be called *intellect/reason*. The appetitive power is a “special power of the soul,”¹⁷ which can be simply described as the tendency to the perceived good.¹⁸ For Aquinas, the human will can be distinguished into the “sensible” and “intellectual appetites”, but, in both cases, as human, the will is informed and directed by reason.¹⁹ More could be said, here, but this should be sufficient to allow us to grasp what Aquinas is doing.

Second, a “habit” is that by reason of which we are well or ill-disposed with regard to actions and passions.²⁰ Habits can be distinguished from powers in the following manner: “by a power man is, as it were, empowered to do the action, and by the habit he is apt to act well or ill.”²¹ Habits are formed through repeated acts of a certain type. We might sum up the notion of a habit as follows: a habit is a quasi-permanent tendency towards a certain actualization of a power that allows a person to act immediately (without reflection), when the appropriate stimuli are present; and to perform that act either rightly (virtuously—from whence the virtue) or wrongly (viciously—from whence the vices). A *vice* is a habit that tends towards a wrongful act; a *virtue* is a habit that tends towards a right act.

We need a quick reminder before we move on: though Aquinas distinguishes (1) between the powers, intellect, and will, and (2) between the principles from which a person acts (powers/faculties) and that by which the person acts, without reflection, either rightly or wrongly (the habits), he nevertheless views the action of a human person as the effect of a single united individual. It is the person who acts, the whole person, not a part. We must not, *contra* some reformed critics of Aquinas, and even some Catholic Thomists such as Bernard Lonergan and R. J. Snell, see these distinctions as creating some sort of absolute fracturing of the human person such that one can act sinfully, or be affected by original sin, in one faculty, without this also both (1) affecting the whole person and (2) being an act of the whole person. To see, this, however, we now need to turn to Aquinas’s treatment of actual sin and of original sin.

2. On Sin and Human Action

Having briefly considered Aquinas’s understanding of human nature and human actions, we turn now to what constitutes the properly human act, and Aquinas’s explanation of how humans are effected by sin: actual and original.

2.1. The Properly Human Act

Following Aquinas’s development of this issue in the *Summa Theologiae*, we begin by noting that human actions, properly so called, are those which are proper to man *as man*. A human is, according

¹⁷ DV, q. 22, a. 3, *resp.*

¹⁸ DV, q. 22, a. 3, *resp.* Here Aquinas says, “To tend, which is in a way common to all things, likewise becomes in a way special for animate beings, or rather animals, inasmuch as there are found in them appetite and what moves the appetite. This latter, according to the Philosopher, is the apprehended good itself.”

¹⁹ DV, q. 22, a. 12, *resp.*

²⁰ ST I, q. 83, a. 2, *resp.*; ST I-II, q. 49, a. 1, a. 2.

²¹ ST I, q. 83, a. 2, *ad 2.*

to Aquinas, a rational animal;²² which means, not that man is some sort of rational Cartesian ghost in a machine, but, rather, that everything that man is and does is informed by reason.²³ For example, Aquinas thinks that will and choice (the intellectual appetites) in man, are what they are because man is a rational animal. With this in mind, if we look at the actions done by a human being, some actions are done without deliberation (breathing or scratching an itch); but, others are done only after some deliberation (or, based upon deliberately formed habits).²⁴ The former are not proper to humans *as* humans, while the latter—actions based upon deliberation—are. It follows, then, that properly human actions are those “which proceed from a deliberate will,”²⁵ for “man is the master of his actions through his reason and will.”²⁶ We can summarize this as follows: *a properly human action is a voluntary and deliberate action.*²⁷

2.2. Of Sin, Sins, and the Subject of Sin

No, this is not a grammatical error. The word “subject” here refers to “that in which something adheres.” Aquinas, in his articulation of sin, takes time to not only explain what sin *is* in relation to properly human acts, but to distinguish between types of sin based upon their “subject.” A *sin*, for Aquinas, is “an inordinate act.”²⁸ Thus defined, an objection might be raised: what then of “sins of omission”?²⁹ Aquinas’s answer to this question helps us to better understand what is meant by the definition of sin as any “inordinate act.” We are not talking about the concept of original sin yet. We are dealing with the question, What is true of every single action (interior or exterior) which is sinful? Answer: in some way, it breaks the divine law.³⁰

²² This definition is not only found in Aristotle, and major theologians in the Christian tradition (such as Augustine and Boethius), but Calvin also clearly agrees with this definition of man (cf. *Institutes* 1.15.3, p. 107.).

²³ Another way of saying this is to say that all of the faculties or powers are informed in the way that they bring about their proper acts, by reason. This includes not only the appetitive and intellectual powers, but also the vegetative power and even our use of the sensitive and locomotive powers.

²⁴ Or as the result of a habit (which is the result of many actions of a similar type, in similar situations, repeated).

²⁵ *ST IaIIae*, q. 1, a. 1.

²⁶ *ST IaIIae*, q. 1, a. 1.

²⁷ *ST IaIIae*, q. 1, a. 1. Aquinas adds a distinction: “an action is voluntary in one of two ways: first, because it is commanded by the will ... secondly, because it is elicited by the will, for instance the very act of willing.”

²⁸ *ST IaIIae*, q. 7a, a. 1, a. 6; q. 72, a. 2; q. 74, a. 1, a. 3; q. 75, a. 1. In other places, Aquinas unpacks this two-word definition. He says, for example, that “sin is nothing else than a bad human act,” and “a human act is evil through lacking conformity with its due measure” (*ST IaIIae*, 71, a. 6). What is this “due measure”? The two rules of the human will: (1) the proximate and homogenous will—human reason, and (2) the first rule—eternal law (cf. *ST IaIIae*, q. 74, a. 7, *resp.*). This allows us to point out two elements in the definition of sin: the *matter* of sin—sin is related to the substance of a human act—word, deed, and desire; and the *form* of sin—sin is related to the nature of evil—it is contrary to the eternal law. This basic definition is accepted by many Reformed theologians, including Berkhof (*Systematic Theology*, 230–33) and Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, reprint ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:187–88.

²⁹ *ST IaIIae*, q. 71, a. 5.

³⁰ I may not know (be conscious of the fact) that my action has broken the divine law, but if I voluntarily committed the sinful action, I have broken the divine law and, therefore, sinned.

First of all, says Aquinas, if “we look merely at that in which the essence of the sin consists, the sin of omission will be sometimes with an interior act ... while sometimes it will be without any act at all.”³¹ Furthermore, if “we consider also the causes or occasions of the omission then the sin of omission must of necessity include some act.”³² That is, when we consider the causes or occasions of the omission that is sinful (that is, a failure to act when one should have acted), we realize that some other act is the cause of the sin of omission. For example, we may be obstructed from performing act A because we have decided to do act B instead; or we may be obstructed from performing act A at time₂ as a consequence of having decided to perform act B at time₁. In both of these cases, the subject—the individual human person—voluntarily performs act A, and it is because of the performance of act A that they are kept from performing act B—which they should have done. The result is a “sin of omission”—not doing what they should have done.³³ Thus, even when there is no voluntary action at the time of the omission, the sin of omission is caused by some voluntary action. It is also worth noting that exterior action is related to the “interior act.” In other words, Aquinas is not simplistically confining sin to “exterior actions” but recognizes full well that there are interior sins (even if they don’t issue into exterior acts).³⁴ This discussion drives home Aquinas’s point, which is, for a wrong action to be sinful, it must be voluntary.³⁵

Aquinas goes on to ask the question, “*what is the Subject of Sin?*” That is, in what does sin inhere, or in what is sin found?³⁶ That sin, by nature, is an inordinate act will be the guiding principle for Aquinas’s answer to this question. Aquinas proceeds as follows: if sin is, by nature, an act, then “the proper subject of sin must needs be the power which is the principle of the act.”³⁷ An act, to be properly human (and moral) must be voluntary—flowing from the will. “Now,” says Aquinas, “since it is proper to moral acts

³¹ *ST Iallae*, q. 71, a. 5.

³² *ST Iallae*, q. 71, a. 5.

³³ Aquinas provides us with a specific example that appears to have been as common in the Middle Ages as it is today: failing to attend corporate worship in church. One may decide to mow one’s lawn or attend a game on Sunday morning, knowing full well that by doing so it will be impossible to attend church (a greater good that one has culpably failed to do). In example 2, one stays up late partying on Saturday night knowing full well that by staying up so late it will be impossible to attend church on Sunday morning. In this case, when one sleeps through the Sunday morning service, it is not a voluntary action on Sunday morning that is the cause of the sin of omission, but a voluntary action on Saturday night whose consequence was the sin of omission on Sunday morning.

³⁴ Indeed, Aquinas notes (in *ST Iallae*, q. 72, a. 7) that sins can be distinguished into sins of thought, words, and deed (as three types of one species). Aquinas notes, for example, (1) sin, before it is consummated, begins in the mind (sins of thought); (2) man also sins in word by declaring sinful thoughts; and (3) the deed, the sinful act, is the consummation of the act. We could add, using Aquinas’s own concepts, that even if there is no “external” action, if there is a voluntary interior act that is inordinate (whether it terminates in an exterior act or in the omission of an exterior act), then a sin has been committed (i.e., dwelling on a sinful thought).

³⁵ If, in my sleep, I roll over and hit my wife in the face, I am not guilty of “beating my wife.” In fact, even if a person is not sleeping, it may be possible to non-culpably strike a person. My wife and I continue to laugh about the night when, adjusting her sleep-mask, her hand slipped, and she punched me (peacefully sleeping) in the nose. She did not intend to hit me. Thus, though it is wrong to hit an innocent person, it is not always a sin to hit an innocent person.

³⁶ A somewhat simplistic but illuminating way of illustrating this point is to word it in relation to rust. The point of this question is, “in what is rust found?” Rust is something which, by nature, depends upon some other being for its very existence—it is found in something.

³⁷ *ST Iallae*, q. 74, a. 1. This claim points both to those faculties which, tending towards an object, terminate in an action and to the will, which moves the person, through their faculties, to their proper end.

that they are voluntary ... it follows that the will, which is the principle of voluntary acts, both of good acts, and of evil acts or sins, is the principle of sin.”³⁸ In other words, if “to sin” is “to act wrongly,” or “to act inordinately,” or to act against the divine law in some way shape or form (whether the act is an exterior or interior act), and if all properly human acts proceed from the will, then it follows that the will is the “principle” of sin. The will, then, is the subject of sin—that in which sin is primarily found.

This conclusion may be one of the reasons why some scholars have thought that Aquinas did not think that sin had affected (or could flow from) the intellect or human reason. One should ask, however, “does this mean that sin is *only* in the will?” I would suggest we keep reading and not close our copy of the *Summa* triumphantly, having found another reason to reject Aquinas; for Aquinas answers this apparent problem in the very next question. Is sin found in the will *alone*? Aquinas’s answer: no, sin is found in any power of the soul that can be moved to, or restrained from, its proper act by the will. As we have already seen, the powers/faculties each have their proper act. They also have their own proper end, which is the good towards which they tend. For example, the intellect tends towards truth as to its end; the will tends to the good perceived; the irascible appetite tends to the difficult good; the concupiscible appetite tends to the pleasurable good.

Let’s go deeper. In rational animals, Aquinas suggests, there is an interaction (perhaps we could talk about interchanging and related roles) between intellect and will,³⁹ which brings us to the conclusion that in one way intellect is prior to will, but that in another way, will is prior to intellect. Intellect is prior to will in that it perceives and presents to the will the good to be pursued—moving the will, therefore, as final and formal cause.⁴⁰ Will is prior to intellect in that it moves the intellect to pursue its proper object—the truth—as an efficient cause.⁴¹ Thus, inasmuch as the will is said to move the intellect to pursue its proper end or good (truth), the intellect is said to be moved to act by the will.⁴²

³⁸ *ST IaIIae*, q. 74, a. 1.

³⁹ Calvin also agrees with the notion that man’s higher faculties are intellect and will and that there is an interaction between intellect and will. He describes the purpose of the intellect in relation to action as “to distinguish between objects, according as they seem deserving of being approved or disapproved” (*Institutes*, 1.15.7, p. 110). Another way of putting this would be that the intellect presents things to the will as things to be pursued as good or rejected as evil. The purpose of the will, according to Calvin, is “to choose and follow what the intellect declares to be good, to reject and shun what it declares to be bad” (*Institutes*, 1.15.7, p. 111). Or, to move the person to obtain the good and avoid bad. He here mentions the subtleties of Aristotle but prefers to keep his explanation as simple as possible, describing the intellect as “the guide and ruler of the soul” and the will as following its lead, waiting for its decision (*Institutes*, 1.15.7, p. 111). The intellect distinguishes between good and evil and presents this to the will; the will chooses and moves to action. In this description, though not as in-depth as Aquinas, there is general agreement.

⁴⁰ In *De Veritate*, q. 22, a. 12, *resp.*, for example, Aquinas argues, (1) “The reason for acting is the form of the agent by which it acts. It must accordingly be in the agent for it to act.” (2) “It is in the agent by way of an intention, for the end is prior in intention but posterior in being.” (3) “Thus the end pre-exists in the mover in a proper sense intellectually ... and not according to its real existence.” (4) “Hence the intellect moves the will in the way in which an end is said to move—by conceiving beforehand the reason for acting and proposing it to the will.”

⁴¹ *DV*, q. 22, a. 12, *resp.*

⁴² It is worth considering how the will, as corrupt, may move the intellect (also corrupt) to pursue (even to take pleasure in) error/falsity, to recognize as true what is clearly false, to ignore certain truths, etc. (because of some good which is, falsely, perceived as higher). Such an act, if indulged in repeatedly, would become, according to Aquinas, a habit (vice) of mind—such that the intellect (created to love truth by nature) loves and rejoices in a lie.

Similar points can be made about each of the other powers/faculties of the soul. Let's not forget, whenever there is an act done by a rational animal that act may be ordinate or inordinate. Inordinate act is sin. Thus, all the powers/faculties of the human person, inasmuch as they are moved by the will to act, are also subject to sin. It follows, then, that though the will is primary (as it is the will that moves the powers to act) in relation to sin, sin is found in each of the faculties as in a subject. Another quick reminder, it is the human person—a substantial unity—who acts (the will directing the powers, forming habits, etc.). Thus, in any sin, it is the entire person who sins. This is one way in which we demonstrate that the entire soul—every faculty and power—is subject to sin.⁴³ Aquinas goes on to show how sin is in each of the powers.⁴⁴

We won't look at each power/faculty individually, though it is worth noting some of the general principles that Aquinas uses to prove that sin is in each of the faculties as in a subject. For example, he notes, "sin may be found in any power whose act can be voluntary and inordinate."⁴⁵ "The sin of any power is an act of that power."⁴⁶ All human acts can and should be governed or regulated by two rules: (1) divine law and (2) human reason.⁴⁷ Consent to an action (good or bad) is both an act of the will and of reason. In relation to *the will*, "consent is an act of the appetitive power, not absolutely, but in consequence of an act of reason deliberating and judging."⁴⁸ As to *reason*, "consent implies a judgement about the thing to which consent is given. For just as the speculative reason judges and delivers its sentence about intelligible matters, so the practical reason judges and pronounces sentence on matters of action."⁴⁹ Sin, then, is in all of the faculties, but primarily in the will—by which man is moved to action. To deny that Aquinas places sin in reason should be seen, therefore, as not just a "misreading" of Aquinas, but as what Aquinas would call "culpable ignorance"—we should know the truth, but we willingly either deny it, overlook it, ignore it, or distort it.

2.3. On Original Sin

To prove that Aquinas has a robust and profound understanding of the noetic effects of sin, it is not enough to prove that he situates actual sins in reason (as their subject and principle). One must also prove that reason is itself corrupted by the fall. To do this we turn to his understanding of original sin. What, then, is original sin, and does it affect reason in all humans? As with his explanation of

⁴³ Aquinas proves this in the following manner: (1) "Whatever is a principle of a voluntary act is a subject of sin," and (2) "voluntary acts are not only those which are elicited by the will, but also those which are commanded by the will" (*ST IaIIae*, q. 74, a. 2). The notion of "elicited by the will" refers to the proper act of the will—to will, wish, or desire x. The notion of being "commanded by the will" refers to any actions executed by another faculty as put to its execution by the will (i.e., to walk, speak, seek to know, etc.), or to not do some action (*ST IaIIae*, q. 6, a. 3. Cf. *ST IaIIae*, q. 1, a. 1, *ad* 2; q. 1, a. 2, *resp.*; q. 6, a. 4, *resp.*). (3) "Therefore not only the will can be a subject of sin, but also all those powers which can be moved to their acts or restrained from their acts, by the will" (*ST IaIIae*, q. 74, a. 2, *resp.*).

⁴⁴ Sense and Sensuality (the sensual appetites: irascible and concupiscent): *ST IaIIae*, q. 74, aa. 3–4; q. 78, a. 1. Reason: *ST IaIIae*, q. 74, aa. 5–6. Higher and Lower Reason: *ST IaIIae*, q. 74, aa. 7–10; *DV*, q. 15, a. 3, *resp.*

⁴⁵ *ST IaIIae*, q. 74, a. 3.

⁴⁶ *ST IaIIae*, q. 74, a. 5.

⁴⁷ *ST IaIIae*, q. 74, a. 7.

⁴⁸ *ST IaIIae*, q. 74, a. 7, *ad* 1.

⁴⁹ *ST IaIIae*, q. 74, a. 7, *resp.*

particular actual sins, the answer to this question is obvious to any who take the time to actually read Aquinas. In short, Aquinas agrees with Augustine, against Pelagius, that all humans are infected and corrupted, *via* generation, in the entirety of their nature, by original sin. To get there, we need to read through three questions, where Aquinas considers three aspects of original sin: (1) its transmission, (2) its essence, and (3) its subject. We will look rapidly at each of these questions in order to gain a proper understanding of Aquinas's views. What we will find is that in each of these subjects, Aquinas clearly affirms the corruption of the entire human nature—not just one part of the human nature, such as the will.

2.4. The Transmission of Original Sin

For Aquinas, the doctrine of original sin is based in part on Romans 5:12–21, which claims that through the sin of one man all men sin, and therefore, death spread to all men.⁵⁰ One of the most important questions related to original sin, in light of Romans 5:12, becomes how did it so spread? Throughout the history of the church, and in both Protestant and Catholic churches, there have been different theories on both the nature of original sin and on the nature of its transmission. Aquinas, following Augustine, argues that original sin is transmitted from Adam to all of his descendants,⁵¹ through the human nature, corrupted by the fall—by way of origin.⁵² For Aquinas, though the human nature is corrupted and some form of guilt is transmitted, the guilt of the actual sin of Adam is not transmitted; for men are guilty only of those sins which they actually commit. There is, however, for Aquinas, a form of “guilt by association”—by the fact that we share the same nature, and are thus in Adam, we share in Adam's guilt.⁵³

Therefore, as original sin is tied to human nature, as a “stain which infects it,” and human nature is transmitted to the next generation through the semen, it follows that original sin—the stain which infects human nature—is also transmitted by the semen⁵⁴ and, furthermore, by our generation from

⁵⁰ *ST IaIIae*, q. 81, a. 1, *sed contra*.

⁵¹ He argues that as all men share one common nature inherited through Adam, “all men born of Adam may be considered as one man” (*ST IaIIae*, q. 81, a. 1, *resp.*). Therefore, in Adam, all fell. Aquinas provides the example of an “association” of men. In any true association, all the members may be considered as one under the name of their association.

⁵² *ST IaIIae*, q. 81, a. 1, *resp.*, *ad 1, ad 2*; q. 81, a. 2, *ad 3*; q. 81, a. 2, *resp.*; q. 81, a. 4, *resp.* That is, by generation. This is what is often called *traducianism*. This is summarized well by Millard J. Erickson: “we were present in germinal or seminal form in our ancestors; in a very real sense, we were there in Adam. His action was not merely that of one isolated individual, but of the entire human race” (Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998], 652).

⁵³ *ST IaIIae*, q. 81, a. 1, *ad 1, ad 2*. We could consider this other example provided by Aquinas: “thus a man may from his birth be under a family disgrace, on account of a crime committed by one of his forebears” (*ST IaIIae*, q. 81, a. 1, *ad 5*). There is some debate in Reformed theology on how original sin is inherited, and those debates affect our understanding of guilt. The debates turn around either a federal or natural headship approach to our relationship to Adam. Berkhof's discussion of original guilt is helpful (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 245–46), and it would be interesting to see whether it would be in agreement with Aquinas's view of the guilt transmitted from original sin.

⁵⁴ *ST IaIIae*, q. 81, a. 1, *ad 2*. The Westminster divines appear to have agreed with Aquinas on this point, as they state, in chapter 6, section 3, “They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature, conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation” (Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 87).

Adam we are associated with him in his guilt. It follows from this that “original sin” was transmitted to *all* men who are descended from Adam—with one exception.⁵⁵ Aquinas’s argument for this claim is that if this was not the case, then not all men would be in need of Christ’s redemptive work on the cross. However, all men, except Christ, need redemption. Therefore, all men are corrupted by original sin.

In sum, original sin is a stain on, or a corruption of, human nature (such that the entire nature is affected, and all men are affected from conception), and it is, therefore, transmitted to all the descendants of Adam, *via* generation, such that all men, Christ excepted, are affected by the stain of original sin and associated with the guilt of Adam, through one human nature. Not only do we inherit this stain, infection, corruption, or disorder of our nature,⁵⁶ and guilt by association, but we also lost, according to Aquinas, “original justice,” which was given to man at creation, as a special grace.⁵⁷

2.5. The Nature of Original Sin

In sum, we can say that, for Aquinas, original sin is (1) an inherited “stain,” “infection,” “corruption,” “defect,” and “disorder” of the human nature itself,⁵⁸ (2) a sharing in the guilt of Adam—not as having committed Adam’s sin, but by association with Adam, and (3) a loss or deprivation of original justice.⁵⁹ We have already seen what Aquinas means by the first two parts of this description, so we will explain the last element as we delve a bit deeper into just what original sin is by nature. The notion of “original justice,” and its loss through Adam’s sin, for Aquinas, has to do with man’s ability (or, inability) to fully submit to God.⁶⁰ Aquinas describes the loss of original justice as “removing the subjection of man’s

⁵⁵ *ST Iallae*, q. 81, a. 3, *resp.*

⁵⁶ *ST Iallae*, q. 81, a. 2, *ad* 3. Aquinas discusses the corruption of the human nature helpfully in his exposition of Romans 7:14.

⁵⁷ *ST Iallae*, q. 81, a. 2, *resp.*

⁵⁸ *ST Iallae*, q. 81, a. 2. Some might take exception with Aquinas’s description of original sin as an inherited stain, or a corruption of the human nature, but, even here, Calvin is in full agreement with Aquinas both in terminology and in doctrine. A couple of examples will suffice to prove this point. First, in discussing the image of God in man, Calvin says, “Wherefore, although we grant that the image of God was not utterly effaced and destroyed in him, it was, however, so corrupted, that anything which remains is fearful deformity” (*Institutes*, 1.15.4, p. 107). Later, he describes the posterity of Adam with the following words, “who, deriving their origin from him after he was corrupted, received a hereditary taint” (*Institutes*, 1.15.8, p. 111).

⁵⁹ *ST Iallae*, q. 81, a. 2, *resp.*; a. 5, *ad* 2.

⁶⁰ In *ST I*, q. 95, a. 1, *resp.*, Aquinas explains that God bestows upon man at creation, not by nature but as a divine grace, a primitive state of rectitude in which man’s “reason being subject to God, the lower powers to reason, and the body to the soul: and the first subjection was the cause of both the second and the third; since while reason was subject to God, the lower powers remained subject to reason, as Augustine says.” Put more succinctly, primitive rectitude or justice is the perfect submission of the human faculties, and in fact the entire concrete human, to the rule of reason, and reason to the divine will. With this claim, the Reformed, in general, agree (cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.3–8; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 207–9; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992], 1:466). Some Reformed writers either equate original righteousness with the image of God in man or see it as a part of the image of God in man (cf. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:466; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 226).

mind to God.”⁶¹ *Original justice* was a grace that was given to man in Adam,⁶² by which the will of man was subject to God.⁶³ With the loss of original justice in original sin, the will turned away from God to mutable goods. It could be said that by this turning away from God, “all the other powers of the soul become inordinate.”⁶⁴

This loss or privation of “original justice” has been the cause of some debate, such that some scholars think that when Aquinas says that original sin is the loss of “original justice” Aquinas is saying that the human nature remains entirely intact and that original sin is nothing more than the loss of something which was, in any case, extrinsic to the human nature. This is most certainly not what Aquinas is saying. He very clearly maintains that original sin is an infection and corruption of human nature (not just the loss of an extrinsic grace) when he says, for example, “original sin, being the sin of nature, is an inordinate disposition of nature.”⁶⁵ Furthermore, “Original sin infects the different parts of the soul, in so far as they are the parts of the whole.”⁶⁶ Or again, “Original sin is a sin of nature, infecting the whole nature and all those who possess that nature.”⁶⁷ In relation to these elements of original sin, Aquinas suggests that the “*formal element*” of original sin—the loss of original justice—is a rebellion of the human will against God and an inordinate turning of the human will away from God (man’s ultimate good) to mutable goods.⁶⁸ The “*material element*” of original sin then would be the disordering of the soul’s powers by which they turn to mutable goods rather than God.

Delving deeper into the nature of original sin, Aquinas calls again upon Augustine as authority, suggesting that *original sin is a type of habit*—or, perhaps better, that it has the character of a habit. We have seen that a habit is a learned tendency of a natural power (learned via repetition) by which the power tends as if by nature (always or for the most part) to the performing of some act in a way that is either good (virtuous) or bad (vicious). This is, for Aquinas, the primary sense of the term habit,⁶⁹ but it is not the sense in which original sin is like a habit. Rather, suggests Aquinas, there is a second sense

⁶¹ *ST IaIIae*, q. 82, a. 2, *resp.*

⁶² This claim (that original righteousness is bestowed on man as a grace that God gives him at creation, and not as a part, or perhaps consequence, of his nature thus created) is the specific issue on which many Reformed scholars disagree with Aquinas (arguing that it is a part or a consequence of the goodness of the human nature as created), and some have even made it the *locus* of their claim that Aquinas’s approach to original sin does not adequately (or at all) deal with the noetic effects of sin (cf. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2: 103, where he states that in relation to the subject of original justice, the only point of contention between the Reformed and Catholics is the question of how it was bestowed—by nature or by grace). His portrayal of the Catholic position is not fully accurate, but his claim about the one area of contention is. Another article would be required to adequately deal with this disagreement.

⁶³ It is worth noting that though the *nature* of the “endowment of original justice (natural or by grace)” is debated, and a point of difference between some of the Reformed and Aquinas, the *fact* of the privation of original justice, and the consequences of that privation is a point on which the Reformed agree fully with Aquinas. (Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15.4, 7; Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 83; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 246; Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:227, 230–31.)

⁶⁴ *ST IaIIae*, q. 82, a. 3, *resp.* Calvin appears to agree with this point as well (cf. *Institutes*, 1.15.8, p. 111).

⁶⁵ *ST IaIIae*, q. 82, a. 1, *ad* 2.

⁶⁶ *ST IaIIae*, q. 82, a. 2, *ad* 3.

⁶⁷ *ST IaIIae*, q. 82, a. 4, *sed contra*.

⁶⁸ *ST IaIIae*, q. 82, a. 3, *resp.*

⁶⁹ *ST IaIIae*, q. 82, a. 1, *resp.*

of the term “habit,” by which we understand the nature itself (not just one power/faculty, but the whole nature) to be “well or ill-disposed to something”—that is, when a disposition “has become like a second nature.”⁷⁰ It is in this second way that original sin is said to be a habit—that is, a disposition of the entire human nature by which man is, as if by nature, disposed towards inordinate acts (sin). Not just a part of man, but the whole nature is disposed to sin.

Original sin so corrupts human nature and disposes man to sin, that Aquinas can argue that (a) “all actual sins [all those sins that are actually committed by a real person] virtually pre-exist in original sin, as in a principle”⁷¹—that is, all those sins that are actually committed by a person flow from the corruption and disordering of human nature which I, as a particular human being, have inherited from Adam. (b) Aquinas also reminds us that every part of the soul is infected by original sin—every power or faculty. In his response to the third contrary position, Aquinas notes, “Original sin infects the different parts of the soul, in so far as they are the parts of one whole.”⁷² That is, just like a little poison, if mixed into the filling of a pie, infects the whole pie, and thus all of the pieces of the pie as parts of that pie (such that regardless of which piece you eat you will be poisoned); in the same way, original sin has so infected the whole human nature, and thus all of the parts as parts of that one nature—that it matters not which part you consider (i.e., will, intellect, sensibility, etc.), it is infected and corrupted by sin. This is what is generally meant by the doctrine of total depravity—not that through original sin man is absolutely depraved (or as depraved as he can be), but that through original sin no part of human nature remains untouched or uncorrupted.⁷³ This of course entails that all men born of Adam are equally infected

⁷⁰ *ST IaIIae*, q. 82, a. 1, *resp.*

⁷¹ *ST IaIIae*, q. 82, a. 2, *ad* 1. Again, the Westminster divines appear to agree with Aquinas here, as they state, in the *Westminster Confession*, ch. 6, a. 4: “From this original corruption ... do proceed all actual transgressions” (Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 87).

⁷² *ST IaIIae*, q. 82, a. 2, *ad* 3.

⁷³ John Calvin would be in fundamental agreement with this statement. Calvin describes the words of Paul, “Indeed, he had a little before drawn a picture of human nature, which shows that there is no part in which it is not perverted and corrupted” (*Institutes*, 2.3.1, p. 178). After having explained that human nature is depraved and having enumerated a number of consequences of the fall, he states, “I confess, indeed, that all these iniquities do not break out in every individual” (*Institutes*, 2.3.2, p. 179). Berkhof also notes how sin has affected the proper functioning of each of the faculties (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 223), describing the primary effect of original sin as follows: “the total depravity of human nature. The contagion of his sin at once spread through the entire man, leaving no part of his nature untouched, but vitiating every power and faculty of body and soul.... Total depravity here does not mean that human nature was at once as thoroughly depraved as it could possibly become” (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 226). K. Scott Oliphint appears to agree with Aquinas on this point: “But our faculties no longer function that way [enjoying the presence of God, serving him, and worshipping him]. They have been damaged, fractured, broken, impeded, hindered, hampered, thwarted from doing what they were designed to do, since the effects of sin have enslaved and influenced them” (“The Old-New Reformed Epistemology,” in K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton, eds., *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007], 212). It would seem that Van Til agrees with Aquinas on this point: “Sin involved every aspect of man’s personality” (Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 70). Or, later, “On the other hand, according to Calvin, there is no ‘disturbance’ in the nature of man as he comes forth from the hands of God. The ‘disturbance’ has come in as a result of sin. Accordingly, every one of fallen man’s functions operates wrongly. The set of the whole human personality has changed” (Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 97).

and corrupted by original sin (though this corruption shows itself differently in different individual humans).⁷⁴

2.6. The Subject of Original Sin

When we consider the subject of original sin, suggests Aquinas, we can consider it in relation to its “inherence in the subject”—that is, the way in which it is found in the individual human being; or we can consider it in relation to the individual being’s “inclination to act”—that is, how original sin affects the particular actions of a particular human. Considered in the *first way*, original sin can be said to be in our body as in an instrumental cause⁷⁵ but is properly said to be in the soul (the substantial form of the human person) as in a subject⁷⁶—thus, the whole nature is stained, the corruption is complete. If it is considered in the *second way*, original sin is “primarily” in the will. This is due to the fact that, as we have already seen, in relation to actual sin, all human action flows primarily from the will, as it is the will that moves the other powers to pursue their proper ends and perceived goods.⁷⁷

For Aquinas, humans have will and free choice specifically because they are, by nature, rational animals. Original sin is in the rational soul as its subject; thus all the rational powers of the rational soul (as has already been shown) are corrupted by original sin—insomuch as they are moved by the will; and they are all “punished” insomuch as they are used in the sinful actions as instrumental causes. It is the primacy of the will in action that leads Aquinas to say that the will is the primary subject of original sin.⁷⁸ When Aquinas says that original sin is *primarily* in the will, he says this in relation to the actual sins committed by an individual person. For what moves an individual to commit an actual sin is their will which, presented with actual goods to be pursued, moves the person by the relevant powers to obtain the good that is most desired (by that individual—not necessarily the good which is most desirable per se). However, this is not to say that the whole nature, and thus intellect or reason, is not (or is less) affected by original sin. Rather, it could be said that the will is so infected just because it is part of the nature, which is fully corrupted by and is the proper subject of, original sin.

3. Conclusion

We set out, in the first place, to refute and bury, once and for all, that persistent Protestant rumor that Aquinas allows for the corruption of the human will, but that he let reason get away scot-free.

⁷⁴ *ST IaIIae*, q. 82, a. 4.

⁷⁵ *ST IaIIae*, q. 83, a. 1. He does this by first distinguishing between two ways in which one thing can be said to be in another: (1) as an effect is in its cause—principle or instrumental; or (2) as an accident is in a subject. We can say, according to Aquinas, that original sin was in Adam as its principal cause and in the semen (thus part of our flesh) as in an instrumental cause—transmitting the corrupted human nature to all of Adam’s descendants. However, in the second sense (as an accident in a subject), original sin is not in the body for the body shares in sin only as an instrumental cause (at best). Rather, suggests Aquinas, the body shares only in the consequences of sin, not the guilt, but the punishment, of sin.

⁷⁶ *ST IaIIae*, q. 83, a. 2.

⁷⁷ Reminder: The intellect precedes the will by proposing its object to it, but the will precedes the intellect in the order of action (even moving the intellect to act). Sin, as has already been determined, is by nature an inordinate act. Thus, if we consider original sin in relation to action, the subject of original sin must be primarily what moves man to act—the will.

⁷⁸ “Original sin, in so far as it inclines to actual sins, belongs chiefly to the will” (*ST IaIIae*, q. 83, a. 4, *ad* 1).

This claim is, in light of a proper reading of Aquinas, not only false, but so clearly false that one could almost be accused of dishonesty for propagating such an idea. The fact that it has persisted in Protestant theology for so long is shameful, and it is my hope that this paper will go some distance to correcting this unfortunate twisting of Aquinas's thought.⁷⁹

Beyond correcting this misreading of Aquinas, I hope that these reflections will lead to a deeper understanding of human nature and sin and, in this way, to a practical application of this knowledge in Christian counseling and personal sanctification. I have labored to show that Aquinas's approach to human nature begins and ends in the concrete, particular human individual. It is not the faculty that sins, but the person through the faculty. In addition, Aquinas's approach to human nature (noting the interaction of intellect and will, the formation of habits, the tendency of the powers towards their proper ends, and the role of the will in directing each power to its proper end) provides us with the ability to introspectively analyze our own actions, thus discovering why we do certain things (right or wrong), and how we came to so act.

⁷⁹ We have also shown, *contra* R. J. Snell, that Aquinas's approach to human nature and sin is not in need of augmentation by, modification by, or even transposition of Aquinas's views into Lonergan's introspective phenomenology. Snell thought such a transposition is necessary for two reasons: (1) Aquinas's faculty psychology so divides man up into little parts that the unity of human nature and experience is fractured, and (2) it therefore neglects the concrete, factual, human being in favour of an abstraction.

Live and Let Spy? Thomas Aquinas and the Basis for Christian Engagement in Intelligence Work

— Ed Wright —

Ed Wright is assistant pastor of Danbury Mission in Essex, England.

Abstract: This article presents a framework for Christian engagement in government intelligence work, evaluating how the theology of Thomas Aquinas can inform such involvement. The article explores how to retrieve medieval theological resources for a distinctively modern issue. Four central pillars of Aquinas’s thought build a basis for Christian engagement in this field, and Aquinas’s understanding of both just war and deception are examined because of their importance to the complexities of intelligence operations. The article concludes by adumbrating a seven-point model for use by pastors and churches where its members may be employed by government intelligence agencies.

Spies are not “moral philosophers measuring everything they do by the word of God.”¹ The world of secret intelligence is notoriously ambiguous, complex, and opaque. This article presents a framework for Christian engagement in government intelligence agencies by evaluating the extent to which the theology of Thomas Aquinas informs such involvement.² Following recent discussion upholding Paul’s valuation of all work undertaken by Christians and the distinction between “work for the Lord” and “work for the kingdom” of God in Colossians, with the help of Aquinas we consider the appropriateness of Christian work for the Lord in the particularly complex realm of intelligence operations.³

Evaluating Aquinas is worthwhile given his “disproportionate influence” on natural law thinking and because his articulation of just war theory “climaxed a thousand years of Christian speculation on

¹ As Alec Leamas declared in the John Le Carre film, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, cited in Darrell Cole, “Whether Spies Too Can Be Saved,” *JRE* 36 (2008): 126.

² For example, in the UK, by government intelligence agencies we refer to GCHQ, MI5, and MI6.

³ Peter Orr, “Two Types of Work: Work for the Lord and Work for the Kingdom of God,” *Themelios* 47 (2022): 70–80.

war.”⁴ Following a year in which the horrendous reality of war has been felt again in Europe, appreciating Aquinas’s contribution in this area is germane for both the church and Christians engaged in the public square.

In our evaluation of this topic, (1) we make brief methodological remarks concerning the application of Aquinas’s work to this contemporary issue. (2) Then we consider Aquinas’s public theology by surveying four key pillars of his thought: political authority, natural law, the distinction between natural and supernatural goods, and the differentiation between theological and cardinal virtues. Building on these foundations, we consider their application to issues of (3) war and (4) deception. (5) We conclude by assessing how this analysis informs the possibility of Christian engagement in intelligence operations.

1. Challenges Concerning the Application of Aquinas’s Theology to Intelligence Work

In applying Aquinas’s theology to the field of intelligence work, two challenges emerge. First, Aquinas’s historical context is dissimilar from our own, not least with the recent emergence of significant technological developments and sophisticated intelligence agencies. Some of the challenges faced by Christians working in this sphere would have been unthinkable to our great grandparents, let alone Aquinas. One example would be the rise of the internet, enabling “the rise of an anarchic international order.”⁵ Second, evaluating Aquinas’s thought on war, where his treatment of this issue is relatively brief, requires synthesis from across his writings before making careful contemporary application.⁶

2. Identifying Key Pillars of Aquinas’s Thought That Inform Christian Engagement in the Public Square

To establish Aquinas’s framework for Christian engagement in the public square, we consider four salient pillars of his thought: politics, natural law, natural and supernatural goods, and virtues. These are just some of the many significant contributions that Aquinas has made to theology, epistemology, and ethics. However, these four are the ones pertinent to this article.⁷

⁴ David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 43; Frederick H. Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 289.

⁵ John Ferris, *Behind the Enigma: The Authorised History of GCHQ, Britain’s Secret Cyber-Intelligence Agency* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 689.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 60 vols. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1966), II–II q.40. For further discussion of this piecemeal methodological approach, see Daniel H. Weiss, “Aquinas’s Opposition to Killing the Innocent and Its Distinctiveness within the Christian Just War Tradition,” *JRE* 45 (2017): 482.

⁷ For an overview of his thought on a broader range of questions, see Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003).

2.1. Politics

In the first pillar, we observe two important emphases of Aquinas's political theory. First, Aquinas viewed political power positively, affirming its "original, pre-lapsarian goodness."⁸ Since man is "by nature a political and social animal," some form of political power was needed, even before sin.⁹ Consequently, the purpose of politics exceeds restraint of sin, affording dignity to broader Christian engagement in the political realm. This is not to suggest that serving in public office for the purpose of restraining evil does not have dignity, but is to recognize that the exercise of political power is not attributable solely to the fall. While Augustine emphasized political power as a post-lapsarian necessity, Aquinas upheld the "naturalness of political society."¹⁰ However, these differences should not be overplayed since their two contrasting emphases later "converged upon a consensus, that while powers of association, organisation, and management are among the creaturely possibilities of human existence, the crystallisation of these into political functions of command and restraint presupposed a threat to human existence."¹¹

Second, although Aquinas's conception of the relationship between church and state was complex, in *De Regno* he summarised three central facets of the king's role.¹² These were first, "establish the good life of the community," second, defend the community, which included authority to punish criminals and wage war, both consequences of the fall, and third, ensure the community's improvement.¹³

2.2. Natural Law

The second and most significant pillar of Aquinas's thought pertaining to this article is his understanding of natural law. Of the four pillars, we spend the longest establishing the foundation for natural law, given its importance for our subject, complexity, and extent to which it has been contested. We consider four aspects of Aquinas's view: his understanding of law, definition of natural law, his view of natural law's relationship to human law, and its relationship to the Mosaic law. Finally, we consider the ways in which natural law provides a helpful perspective for public theology.

⁸ Eric Gregory and Joseph Clair, "Augustinianisms and Thomisms," in *The Cambridge Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 186.

⁹ Aquinas draws on Aristotle who described man as a "political animal" (*zoon politikon*). See Thomas Aquinas, "On Kingship or the Governance of Rulers (*De Regimine Principum*, 1265–1267)," in *St. Thomas Aquinas on Politics and Ethics: A New Translation, Backgrounds, Interpretations*, trans. and ed. Paul E. Sigmund, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1988), 14.

¹⁰ Gregory and Clair, "Augustinianisms and Thomisms," 176.

¹¹ Gregory and Clair argue for a "revision of the standard interpretative pictures," bringing "Augustine and Aquinas closer together." O'Donovan speaks of the convergence of their views, evident in comments on political life made by Luther and Vitoria, from the Augustinian and Thomist positions respectively. Gregory and Clair, "Augustinianisms and Thomisms," 177; Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment: The Bampton Lectures, 2003* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 60.

¹² A full exploration of Aquinas's understanding of this relationship in his context is beyond our scope. However, we observe the complexities. For example, in *De Regno*, while Aquinas argues that "spiritual and earthly things may be kept distinct" in distinguishing between the responsibilities of "secular and spiritual powers," he also affirms papal supremacy over earthly rulers. While Sigmund identifies a contradiction, Weisheipl suggests that Aquinas is asserting the church's "moral authority," not its "legal right to intervene." See Aquinas, "On Kingship," 27, 28 n. 3; Paul E. Sigmund, "Law and Politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 218–19.

¹³ Aquinas, "On Kingship," 28–29; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.40 a.1, resp.

First, Aquinas defined law as “an ordinance of reason for the common good of a community made by the authority who has care of the community and promulgated.”¹⁴ Aquinas identified four types of law: eternal, natural, human (positive), and divine. We turn to the definition of natural law below, but we briefly observe Aquinas’s definitions of the other types of law. Eternal law is defined as “the ruling idea of things which exists in God as the effective sovereign of them ... the whole community of the universe is governed by God’s mind.”¹⁵ Natural law is the “sharing in the eternal law by intelligent creatures.”¹⁶ Human (positive) law is the “specific arrangements human reason arrives at ... [derived] from natural law precepts.”¹⁷ Geisler comments on human law, “It is a particularisation of the general principles of natural law.”¹⁸ Divine law “primarily directs man ... that he may cling to God,” consisting of biblical revelation.¹⁹ Aquinas’s account “beautifully exhibits the various dimensions of ordering wisdom.”²⁰

Second, building on the definition above, natural law is a teleological “moral order,” “direct[ing] people toward proper human goals.”²¹ It consists of “primary” and “secondary precepts.”²² Fundamentally, natural law provides the universal basis by which all humanity “is aware ... of what is good and what is bad,” as is often argued from Rom 2:14–15.²³ As Geisler observes, “all rational creatures share in the natural law. It is the law written on their hearts.”²⁴ Aquinas’s thought is significant for the public sphere since “by virtue of aiming at the common good in which moral virtue is central, politics presupposes and foreshadows a human *telos* more common than any particular regime can provide for or reflect and which should serve as the North Star for the compass of political theory.”²⁵

Third, natural law has been described as the “soil from which civil law ought to grow,” affording legitimacy for political life, outside of Scripture.²⁶ Two implications flow from this. First, natural law takes precedence over human law, overruling it when justice necessitates. For example, Aquinas identified an

¹⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I–II q.90 a.4, resp.

¹⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I–II q.91 a.1, resp.

¹⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I–II q.91 a.2, resp.

¹⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I–II q.91 a.3, resp.

¹⁸ Norman L. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1991), 166.

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke, 4 vols. in 5 parts (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 3:115.

²⁰ Matthew Levering, *Biblical Natural Law: A Theocentric and Teleological Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 194.

²¹ David VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 134–35.

²² VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom*, 135; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I–II q.94 a.2, resp.

²³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I–II q. 91 a.2, sed c. The question of whether Romans 2:14–15 pertains to unbelieving gentiles or gentile Christian obedience is often contested. According to the former view, Paul is describing natural law in these verses. For a recent and detailed discussion of these two interpretative positions, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., BECNT 6 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2018), 128–33.

²⁴ Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas*, 165.

²⁵ Mary M. Keys, “Politics Pointing beyond the Polis and the Politeia: Aquinas on Natural Law and the Common Good,” in *Natural Moral Law in Contemporary Society*, ed. Holger Zaborowski (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 185.

²⁶ David VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order: A Biblical Theology of Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 26.

exception to obeying the civil law concerning property rights.²⁷ Furthermore, Aquinas defended the prelate's duty "not to obey" if they were commanded to commit "an act of sin contrary to ... virtue."²⁸ Hence, human law "is not the final word," whereas natural law is the "unchangeable anchor for civil law."²⁹ The second implication arising from Aquinas's understanding is that political authorities derive their authority from natural law, not from the church. While this does not entail the church's silence on political issues, it does reflect that natural law, not the church, provides the origin of civil law.³⁰

Fourth, in his understanding of the relationship between natural law and the Mosaic Law, Aquinas upheld the tripartite division of the Mosaic law, understanding the Decalogue as having a "supplementing function ... provid[ing] a primary set of theorems from the axioms of" natural law.³¹ Aquinas argued, "all the moral precepts of the [Mosaic] law belong the law of nature," although they are evident to natural reason to varying degrees.³² For our analysis, two consequences follow. First, Aquinas identifies vices such as lying as contrary to natural law, the implication of which we return to below.³³ Second, through Aquinas's distinction between "precepts" of the "far range" and "middle range" of natural law, Helm suggests reflecting on the "middle range ... such a principle might perhaps be that it is permissible to kill an enemy in the prosecution of a just war."³⁴

Finally, we consider natural law's utility for public theology, acknowledging that natural law is not without its detractors.³⁵ Some Protestants are suspicious of natural law as a Romish doctrine, believing it undermines the need for special revelation and downplays sin's noetic effects.³⁶ Sigmund suggests a contradiction between natural law and the message of Christ.³⁷ However, others acknowledge that

²⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.66 a.7, sed c.

²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences II*, trans. Roberto Busa. (Parma Edition, 1858), div. 44 q. 2 a.2, resp. <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Sent.II.D44.Q2.A2.C>.

²⁹ Nigel Biggar, *In Defence of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 214–15; Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas*, 174.

³⁰ Thomas Gilby, "Appendix 1: Law and Dominion in Theology (1a2ae. 90, 1-4)," in *Summa Theologica* vol. 28, 60 vols. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1966), 161. Although as noted above (n. 12), Aquinas's view allowed for papal intervention in the political sphere.

³¹ Paul Helm, "Calvin and Natural Law," *SBET* 2 (1984): 11.

³² Aquinas makes a distinction: "the moral character of some human actions is so evident that they can be assessed as good or bad in light of these common principles [the moral precepts] ... with a minimum of reflection." However, others "need a great deal of consideration ... [by] those endowed with wisdom." He also recognizes another "class of actions, which require for their assessment the aid of divine instruction, such as those which belong to the province of faith." Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I–II q.100 a.1, sed c; resp.

³³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.110 a.1, resp.

³⁴ Helm, "Calvin and Natural Law," 11.

³⁵ Grabill identifies several reasons for natural law's fall from favor in "twentieth-century Protestant theological ethics," "not least of which can be attributed to Karl Barth's epistemological criticism of natural theology." Stephen John Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 52.

³⁶ For an overview, see C. Ben Mitchell, *Ethics and Moral Reasoning: A Student's Guide*, Reclaiming the Christian Intellectual Tradition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 63–64. For pointed criticism, see Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 56–57, 69–78.

³⁷ Sigmund identifies, "Protestant Christians are critical of ... [Aquinas's] refusal to recognise that there are contradictions between a rationalistic teleological natural law theory and certain aspects of the message of Christ,

while Aquinas's natural law theory needs some refinement, nevertheless historically it "has proven to be the most enduring and perennially relevant."³⁸ VanDrunen helpfully refutes the criticism that natural law undermines *sola scriptura*, observing that the Reformers continued to uphold natural law without confusing "God's own natural revelation" with "paganism."³⁹ Furthermore, Aquinas upheld the doctrine of original sin, reflecting that "natural law can be effaced, either by wrong persuasions ... or by perverse customs and corrupt habits."⁴⁰ Hence, despite its detractors, natural law is an important pillar of public theology.

2.3. Natural and Supernatural Goods

In the third pillar, Aquinas distinguished between natural and supernatural goods, while avoiding their separation. Natural (or temporal) goods derive their existence from God's creation, and are all necessary for human life.⁴¹ They are rightly pursued by all men, overseen by the state. Supernatural goods are pursued by Christians and the church, and they have eternal value. The ultimate supernatural good is the beatific vision of God, whereby that "final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence."⁴² As Gregory and Clair comment, "for Aquinas, the natural common good achieved in political community stands apart from the supernatural, eternal good found only in God, by grace, and is partially glimpsed in the ecclesial community."⁴³

Aquinas's distinction between goods enabled some demarcation regarding which institution was responsible for which "good."⁴⁴ For example, clerics were prohibited from fighting in war because they were "dedicated to the pursuit of spiritual goods by their office."⁴⁵ Aquinas "fundamentally and primarily view[ed] political life as *temporal*: the relationship between the goods constitutive of temporal political life and the *eternal* goods of ultimate human happiness form both the primary distinction and primary bridge between church and political society."⁴⁶

2.4. Virtues

In the fourth pillar, following Aristotle, Aquinas's distinction between cardinal and theological virtues is germane. Cardinal virtues, revealed by natural law to all humanity, include prudence, justice,

such as sacrificial love, martyrdom, rejection of wealth and worldly possessions, and 'turning the other cheek.'" Sigmund, "Law and Politics," 229.

³⁸ VanDrunen identifies six continuities and two discontinuities between his understanding of natural law and Aquinas's view. VanDrunen argues that two areas where Aquinas's thought needs reform are (1) the "larger metaphysics in which Thomas's understanding of natural law is embedded" and (2) "the famous Thomistic formula that grace does not destroy nature but perfects it." VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order*, 22–36.

³⁹ VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order*, 488–89.

⁴⁰ Aquinas cites robbery as an example of a vice that is not held as wrong by some people, due to the effacement of natural law in their hearts. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I–II q.94 a.6, resp.

⁴¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I–II q.94 a.2, resp.

⁴² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I–II q.3 a.8, resp.

⁴³ Gregory and Clair, "Augustinianisms and Thomisms," 178–79.

⁴⁴ Gregory and Clair, "Augustinianisms and Thomisms," 179.

⁴⁵ Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages*, 282. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.40 a.2, resp., ad 3.

⁴⁶ Gregory and Clair, "Augustinianisms and Thomisms," 178.

temperance, and courage.⁴⁷ Theological virtues, revealed by supernatural revelation to Christians, are faith, hope, and charity.⁴⁸ This distinction helpfully reveals the common ground and distinction between Christians and non-Christians. Furthermore, it assigns “true usefulness as well as considerable limits to natural law.”⁴⁹ Additionally, and the relevance of which becomes evident below, Aquinas posited orderings within the virtue of charity.⁵⁰

Aquinas believed the state should promote its citizens’ virtue.⁵¹ Consequently, some dislike Aquinas’s political theory because they believe it affords the state “truly expansive” powers.⁵² However, as Chaplin argues, by defining the state’s role as “promoting the common good,” Aquinas’s view was “as much restrictive as it is permissive” since many aspects of justice were beyond the state’s responsibility and “the state may *only* act pursuant to the common good.”⁵³ Furthermore, human law can operate only on “outward and observable behaviour,” not “inward motions which are hidden.”⁵⁴

Significantly, Aquinas shows how the “infused theological virtues of faith, hope, and love orient human beings to the eternal common good and thereby help direct their use and experience of temporal goods.”⁵⁵ Consequently, “the church is the locus of virtue formation ... and political society is the place where political virtue must be transformed by faith, hope, and love.”⁵⁶ Aquinas’s understanding of virtue provides a framework for contemporary Christian public engagement since their work in the public square should be distinctive through their embodiment of theological virtues. Furthermore, Christian influence should optimize the potential for a flourishing political society since theological virtues bring “the natural virtues to completion insofar as they are reoriented toward the supernatural end.”⁵⁷

⁴⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I–II q.61.

⁴⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I–II q.62.

⁴⁹ VanDrunen discusses how Aquinas’s “nature-grace structure” through its distinction of theological and cardinal virtues shows both the utility and limits of what can be known through natural law. VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms*, 106.

⁵⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.26.

⁵¹ Jones comments that Aquinas’s understanding of human law must be understood by reading both *Summa Theologica* and *De Regno* since the latter offers a fuller account of his position. In *De Regno*, Aquinas “is quite emphatic that the common good of society is not merely limited to establishing a condition of civic tranquility and unity among people ... genuine virtue is the proper aim of any ruler.” Brian Jones, “‘Securing the Rational Foundations of Human Living’: The Pedagogical Nature of Human Law in St. Thomas Aquinas,” *New Blackfriars* 96: 613.

⁵² For a response to suggestions that Aquinas was pushing for “truly expansive” powers, see Jonathan Chaplin, “‘Justice,’ the ‘Common Good,’ and the Scope of State Authority: Pointers to Protestant-Thomist Convergence,” in *Aquinas among the Protestants*, ed. Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen (Hoboken: Wiley, 2017), 288–89, 293.

⁵³ Chaplin, “‘Justice,’ the ‘Common Good,’ and the Scope of State Authority,” 291–93.

⁵⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I–II q.91 a.4, resp. 3.

⁵⁵ Gregory and Clair, “Augustinianisms and Thomisms,” 190.

⁵⁶ Gregory and Clair, “Augustinianisms and Thomisms,” 192.

⁵⁷ Darrell Cole, “Thomas Aquinas on Virtuous Warfare,” *JRE* 27 (1999): 76.

3. Just War Theory

Having considered the four pillars of Aquinas's public theology apposite to this article's subject, we turn to appraise his just war theory. Evaluating Aquinas's just war theory is necessary for two reasons. First, spying has been understood as "an act of force," and the "moral problems of spying" can be treated as "the moral problems of war."⁵⁸ Second, intelligence agencies provide support for military operations.⁵⁹ Hence Christian intelligence officers are aided by just war theory, not that it seeks to justify war, but rather it "aims to bring war under the control of justice."⁶⁰ We therefore consider three aspects of Aquinas's just war theory: its criteria, its constraints, and the context of charity. Finally, in this section on just war, we evaluate criticisms of Aquinas's view.

3.1. Three Aspects of Aquinas's Just War Theory

In the first aspect of his just war theory articulating *jus ad bellum*, Aquinas identifies three factors, drawing heavily on Augustine.⁶¹ A first factor is the requirement for legitimate authority.⁶² This involves the "authority of the sovereign" who may "lawfully use the sword of war to protect the commonweal from foreign attacks" (cf. Rom 13:4).⁶³ Conversely, private citizens have "no business declaring war."⁶⁴ However, Aquinas makes a salient distinction that if "a private person" draws the sword by the sovereign's authority, "he himself does not 'draw the sword,' but is commissioned by another to use it."⁶⁵ Aquinas understands just war as "a natural function of political authority."⁶⁶ A second factor is a "just cause ... namely that those who are attacked ... deserve it" on account of their wrongdoing.⁶⁷ Aquinas does not explicitly distinguish between offensive and defensive wars, but while his treatise is focussed on war's initiation, his framework readily applies to a state's self-defence under attack.⁶⁸ A third factor is "right

⁵⁸ Cole, "Thomas Aquinas on Virtuous Warfare," 126–27.

⁵⁹ Ferris comments on the role of signals intelligence (SIGINT) in counter-surgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan: "Siginters [analysts working on signals intelligence] became more entangled in battle than ever before. The decline in service Siginters and the rise of military precision strikes threw civilian officials into kill chains ... GCHQ no longer was just an intelligence organisation, but part of executive agencies for the use of force." Ferris, *Behind the Enigma*, 694–95.

⁶⁰ Arthur F. Holmes, "The Just War," in *War: Four Christian Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1981), 119.

⁶¹ *Jus ad bellum* refers to the factors governing a "decision to deploy" the use of armed force. In his treatment of just war in q.40 Aquinas repeatedly cites Augustine to advance his position. Russell comments on how Aquinas "fused the Aristotelian political theory to the traditional Augustinian outlook of his predecessors." Howard M. Hensel, "Christian Belief and Western Just War Thought," in *The Prism of Just War: Asian and Western Perspectives on the Legitimate Use of Military Force*, ed. Howard M. Hensel, Justice, international law, and global security (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 42–54; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q. 40; Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages*, 258.

⁶² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.40 a.1, resp. 1

⁶³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.40 a.1, resp. 1

⁶⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.40 a.1, resp. 1.

⁶⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.40 a.1, resp. ad. 1.

⁶⁶ Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages*, 280–81.

⁶⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.40 a.1, resp. 2.

⁶⁸ John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political, and Legal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 285.

intention,” whereby they must “intend to promote the good and to avoid evil,” reflecting natural law.⁶⁹ There is an “internal logic” to Aquinas’s order, and without all three factors, war is unjustified.⁷⁰

In the second aspect of his just war theory, Aquinas’s comments on *jus in bello* reveal his concern for virtue in war.⁷¹ While Aquinas’s account has a dearth of rules, it is “virtue-driven.”⁷² Of the cardinal virtues, courage and prudence are especially vital for soldiering, with duties carried out with right intention.⁷³ Cole describes how each of the cardinal virtues enables effective soldiering.⁷⁴ Aquinas evidently esteemed proportionality, desiring war’s ultimate goal of peace.⁷⁵ Consequently, those fighting should “be peaceful even while you are at war.”⁷⁶ Aquinas prohibited clerics from fighting, but they could provide counsel, thereby demonstrating that Christian engagement in wars “should bring a temperance and order to the process that would be lacking without them.”⁷⁷

A third aspect of Aquinas’s just war theory is the importance of charity as the context for just war. In *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas’s discussion of just war theory comes within his treatise on charity.⁷⁸ O’Donovan observes, “from the earliest attempts to understand how armed conflict might be compatible with Christian discipleship, the church has taken its bearings from the evangelical command of love.”⁷⁹ On the one hand, Miller suggests that Aquinas “derived from the virtue of charity” a “presumptive attitude” against war, partly revealed by his “stacking” of arguments in q.40 of *Summa Theologica*.⁸⁰ On the other hand, Reichberg cogently rejects this analysis, identifying methodological problems in Miller’s reading.⁸¹ Reichberg posits that Aquinas’s decision to include war within his discussion of charity served to “demonstrate how wrongful war, along with other conflict-causing vices such as discord and schism,

⁶⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.40 a.1, resp. 1.

⁷⁰ Biggar, *In Defence of War*, 251.

⁷¹ *Jus in bello* refers to the constraints on the application of war. Hensel, “Christian Belief and Western Just War Thought,” 54–60.

⁷² Cole, “Thomas Aquinas on Virtuous Warfare,” 58, 78.

⁷³ Hensel, “Christian Belief and Western Just War Thought,” 55.

⁷⁴ For example, prudence enables cogent military decision-making. Justice “enables us to distinguish just wars and unjust wars.” Courage is essential for soldiering. Temperance “is the virtue that can check actions born from hate and revenge.” Cole, “Thomas Aquinas on Virtuous Warfare,” 62–63.

⁷⁵ Hensel, “Christian Belief and Western Just War Thought,” 58; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.40 a.1, resp. ad. 3.

⁷⁶ In his discussion on war, this is another instance where Aquinas directly quotes Augustine. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.40 a.1, resp. ad. 3.

⁷⁷ Cole, “Thomas Aquinas on Virtuous Warfare,” 76. The reason for Aquinas’s prohibition on clerics is not because of their Christian faith, but because of their calling as Christian ministers. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.40 a.2, resp. ad. 2.

⁷⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.34–46.

⁷⁹ Oliver O’Donovan, *The Just War Revisited*, Current Issues in Theology 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9.

⁸⁰ Commenting on Aquinas’s opening question in q.40 (“is it always a sin to wage war?”), Miller suggests, “by starting with the idea that war might be sinful, Aquinas seems to establish a burden of proof in favour of nonviolence and against war.” Richard B. Miller, “Aquinas and the Presumption against Killing and War,” *JR* 82, (2002): 181, 193, 202. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.40 a.1.

⁸¹ Gregory M. Reichberg, “Thomas Aquinas between Just War and Pacifism,” *JRE* 38, (2010): 219–41.

stands opposed to the *concordia* that flows from charity.”⁸² The inclusion of war in Aquinas’s section on charity “emphasises the differences between wars fought unjustly from those fought with honourable intentions.”⁸³

3.2. Three Criticisms of Aquinas’s Just War Theory

Finally, we attend to three criticisms of Aquinas’ position on just war, the first of which addresses just war theory’s dependence on natural law. Hauerwas contends, “violence and coercion become conceptually intelligible from a natural law standpoint.”⁸⁴ However, rightly understood, “far from preparing society for violence ... [natural law] *preserves* social bonds and *guards* basic freedoms rather than threatening them.”⁸⁵ Natural law forms the basis for transnational norms of justice and human rights.⁸⁶ Biggar rightly comments that without natural law,

Nuremberg was nothing but victors’ vengeance dressed up in a fiction of ‘justice,’ and today’s high-blown rhetoric of universal human rights is just so much wind ... [these positions] assume that there is a universal moral order that transcends national legal systems and applies to international relations even in the absence of positive international law.⁸⁷

In a second criticism, Hauerwas argues Aquinas neglected to develop the “importance of hope” and that his “overall perspective is insufficiently eschatological.”⁸⁸ However, Hauerwas fails to adequately account for the “dual ethic” that Christians live under.⁸⁹ Furthermore, natural law establishes the basis for civil government, including its restraint of sin, until the Parousia.

A third criticism concerns Aquinas’s doctrine of “double effect,” which has been described as “dubious” and beset with problems.⁹⁰ This is Aquinas’s “morally significant” distinction between “intention and side-effects” in his discussion about the lawfulness of lethal self-defence.⁹¹ While this

⁸² Reichberg, “Thomas Aquinas between Just War and Pacifism,” 224.

⁸³ Pemberton evaluates the debate between Miller and Reichberg, agreeing with Reichberg while adding further reasons to reject Miller’s analysis. Lloyd George Pemberton, “Aquinas the Pacifist? A Comparative Study” (MA thesis, Liberty University Graduate School, 2015), 34.

⁸⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*. (London: SCM, 2003), 61.

⁸⁵ J. Daryl Charles, *Retrieving the Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 145.

⁸⁶ Biggar, *In Defence of War*, 214.

⁸⁷ Biggar, *In Defence of War*, 214.

⁸⁸ Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 159.

⁸⁹ In his account of natural law, VanDrunen highlights the law of love, the Decalogue and the Noahic covenant as reflecting natural law. The “minimalistic natural law ethic” of Gen 9:1–7, includes the “enforcement of retributive justice.” Consequently, VanDrunen persuasively suggests that “the error of the nonviolent perspective ... is that it fails to reckon with the dual covenants under which Christians live and hence the dual character of their ethics ... the church ... is to embody the peaceable ways of the kingdom, but this does not deprive the state of its legitimacy ... the legitimate use of the sword in defense of justice ends not with Jesus’ first coming, but at his second coming.” VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order*, 497–501.

⁹⁰ O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, 209–10; Biggar, *In Defence of War*, 106–10.

⁹¹ Finnis, *Aquinas*, 276. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.64 a.7, resp.

could be helpful for a soldier concerned about unintended consequences of their actions, contemporary application requires careful nuance.⁹²

4. Deception

Following our consideration of Aquinas's public theology and just war theory, we now move to evaluation of Aquinas's position on deception. While Cole's assertion that "spying is nearly synonymous with lying" is overstated given the gamut of intelligence-gathering techniques used by intelligence agencies, the question of deception is nevertheless germane to our discussion.⁹³ Consequently we evaluate two issues in relation to Aquinas's view on deception—namely "subterfuge in war" and lying.⁹⁴

First, Aquinas allows for "concealed tactics" in just war, citing Joshua's ambush against Ai.⁹⁵ Based on Aquinas's "novel and perhaps curious reasoning ... to the problems of ambushes and fighting on feast days," Russell suggests that when war is just, "logically it should be fought by any means and at all times."⁹⁶ Gvosdev suggests Aquinas can be used to justify "ambushes *and* deception."⁹⁷ However, these views misrepresent Aquinas, given his concern for virtue, "right intention," and careful distinction between dissimulation and simulation. Consequently, contra Smith, who argues that those who use false signification to protect the innocent grow in "holiness ... and justice," false signification can be "destructive of the integrity and virtue of the agent."⁹⁸ By focusing on edge cases (such as English Christians who provided false passports to Jews in the Second World War) Smith overlooks the impact of habitual lying on a person's character, a concern of Aquinas.

Furthermore, Aquinas considers the argument that "a lesser evil must be accepted when there is question of avoiding a greater ... [and so] for someone to lie in order to save one person from murdering and another from being murdered is permissible."⁹⁹ Consequently, it could be argued that in the context of saving life, to lie is sinful, but still justifiable. However, in responding to this position, Aquinas contends,

⁹² Full discussion of this doctrine is beyond our scope, although we note the use of this doctrine to defend nuclear deterrence. Sigmund, "Law and Politics," 228. For an argument that rejects the utility of double effect, see Alison McIntyre, "Doing Away with Double Effect," *Ethics* 111 (2001): 219–55.

⁹³ Cole, "Whether Spies Too Can Be Saved," 133. Cole's assertion is shown to be an overstatement by observing the range of techniques used for gathering intelligence, as described on MI5's website, suggesting that deception is not intrinsic to all of them, see MI5, "Gathering Intelligence," <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/gathering-intelligence>. However, the importance of deception is revealed in the description of "intelligence officers ... who may operate under non-official cover to conceal the fact that they work for an intelligence service—posing as a business person, student or journalist for example. In some cases, they may operate in 'deep cover' under false names and nationalities." See MI5, "How Spies Operate," <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/how-spies-operate>.

⁹⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.40 a.3; q.110.

⁹⁵ Josh 8:2, 14. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.40 a.3 sed c.

⁹⁶ Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages*, 272.

⁹⁷ Although the quotation from Aquinas that Gvosdev cites in his paper distinguishes between ambushes and deceptions, Gvosdev's analysis fails to adequately capture this nuance. Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Espionage and the Ecclesia," *JCS* 42 (2000): 817 [my italics].

⁹⁸ Janet E. Smith, "Fig Leaves and Falsehoods: Disagreeing with Thomas Aquinas," *First Things*, June 2011, 48, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2011/06/fig-leaves-and-falsehoods>.

⁹⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.110 a.3, ad. 4.

A lie has the quality of sinfulness not merely as being something damaging to a neighbour, but as being disordered in itself. Now it is not possible to employ any unlawful wrongdoing in order to prevent injury to another or another's failings ... for this reason, then, it is unlawful for anyone to lie in order to rescue another, no matter what the peril; one may, however, prudently mask the truth.¹⁰⁰

For Aquinas, telling a falsehood or breaking a promise with an enemy is always "unlawful," but nevertheless a soldier, and therefore by extension a government intelligence officer, may rightly disguise his intentions from an enemy.¹⁰¹ While subterfuge and concealment are permitted, lying is prohibited.

Second, Aquinas's position on lying is rooted in natural law, allowing no exceptions. Lying is "inherently evil," "contrary to [human] nature."¹⁰² Strikingly, Aquinas does not directly connect prohibitions on lying to God's character, unlike some contemporary arguments made against lying in all circumstances.¹⁰³ However, since the Decalogue is ordered to the love of God, revealing natural law, "false witness against a neighbour is explicitly forbidden."¹⁰⁴ While Aquinas permits exceptions to some other laws, such as private property, lying differs since it is rooted in natural law, not civil law.¹⁰⁵

Two potential critiques emerge. First, Aquinas's view of natural law does not appear to anticipate conflicts between two or more natural laws.¹⁰⁶ For example, in extreme cases such as the frequently cited example of a member of the Gestapo knocking on the door and asking if any Jews are inside, the desire "for good to be done and evil avoid[ed]" appears at odds with universal natural law prohibitions on lying.¹⁰⁷

Second, Aquinas's exposition of passages describing the lying of people commended in scripture as "figurative," "prophetic," or "mystical" is unpersuasive.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, while Aquinas's interpretation is closely mirrored in both Augustine and Calvin's thought, others such as Chrysostom and Luther believed it permissible to lie in order to save innocent life, highlighting the complexities and potential nuance.¹⁰⁹ If one accepts the Decalogue as reflecting natural law, the crux lies in interpretation of the

¹⁰⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II, q.110 a.3, resp. ad. 4.

¹⁰¹ Aquinas comments, "all the more then should we hide from the enemy our plans against him ... now this sort of concealment is the idea behind the subterfuge one may lawfully use in just wars." Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.40 a.3, resp.

¹⁰² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II, q.110 a.3. resp.

¹⁰³ For an example of a contemporary position on lying that directly makes this move, see Grudem, who argues that God's unchanging character as the one "who never lies" (Titus 1:2) is the grounds for ethical norms against lying. Christians should be progressively conformed to God's image, not that of Satan (John 8:44). Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.110; Wayne Grudem, "Why It Is Never Right to Lie: An Example of John Frame's Influence on My Approach to Ethics," in *Speaking the Truth in Love*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2009), 788–89.

¹⁰⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.110 a.4, resp. ad. 2.

¹⁰⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.66 a.7, sed c.

¹⁰⁶ Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas*, 169, n. 36.

¹⁰⁷ Cole, "Whether Spies Too Can Be Saved," 138.

¹⁰⁸ For example, "Jacob's assertion that he was Esau, Isaac's firstborn, has a mystical sense, namely that Esau's birthright was his by right." Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.110 a.3, resp. ad. 3.

¹⁰⁹ Cole compares the thinking of Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin about lying with Luther and some of the Eastern Christian Fathers. Cole, "Whether Spies Too Can Be Saved," 133–36.

ninth commandment, specifically how one conceives of the “neighbours” against whom false witness is forbidden (Exod 20:16).

5. Conclusion: Should Christians Work for Intelligence Agencies?

Finally, having surveyed the application of Aquinas’s theology to just war theory and deception, we conclude with seven ways in which Aquinas illuminates and shapes the grounds on which Christians might work in intelligence agencies, informing how a church might pastor those engaged in such work.

First, Aquinas provides a cogent basis for Christian engagement in the public square. By upholding the distinction between private citizens and individuals working for public authorities, there are *some* actions, such as wielding the sword, that Christians are permitted to do in a public capacity in particular circumstances, which would otherwise be prohibited for them as private citizens. This understanding encompasses, notwithstanding the qualifications discussed below, Christians working in intelligence. Furthermore, Aquinas’s distinction between supernatural and natural goods reveals how Christians should engage positively with temporal activities, such as pursuit of safety.

Second, intelligence agencies seek to advance and defend the national interest. In his treatise on charity, Aquinas identifies orderings, including “morally obligatory self-love” as a legitimate category.¹¹⁰ Biggar argues that since Aquinas recognizes the human individual’s “duty to care for himself properly ... seek[ing] what is genuinely his own good,” the same applies for national communities, and their government.¹¹¹ Consequently, working in the national interest is a legitimate activity for the Christian.

Third, the derivation of civil law from natural law meant that Aquinas upheld civil law to the extent that it pertained to the common good. Consequently, Aquinas would counsel that Christians disobey unjust human laws, for example, in Nazi Germany. For the Christian intelligence officer, this highlights the insufficiency of relying solely on legality as the basis for their work, illuminating the need for a broader ethical framework since what is legal is not always ethical.

Fourth, Aquinas’s articulation of theological and cardinal virtues shows how a Christian’s heart-attitude should be transformed by faith, hope, and love. Aquinas’s concern for theological virtue illuminates a danger for those in occupations where dealing with the necessary restraint of sin can easily lead to hard-heartedness and gallows humor. Christians in such roles must actively cultivate tender consciences.

Fifth, this distinction between virtues also reveals how Christians exert a positive witness and influence at work. The Christian’s embodiment of theological virtues should transform the ways they speak and pray for their “targets.”¹¹² In addition, the Christian’s exercise of theological virtue shapes their application of cardinal virtues, enabling virtuous decision-making in the political sphere, for the common good.

Sixth, Aquinas’s emphasis on just causes and evaluation of unintended consequences suggests he would affirm the desire for necessity and proportionality expressed in recent UK legislation pertaining

¹¹⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II q.26. Biggar, *In Defence of War*, 231.

¹¹¹ Biggar argues that a “national government has a moral duty to look after the well-being of its own people—and in that sense to advance its genuine interests.” Biggar, *In Defence of War*, 231.

¹¹² For an example of the language of “target[s] of an investigation,” see MI5, “Gathering Intelligence,” <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/gathering-intelligence>.

to intelligence activity.¹¹³ For example, Aquinas supported domestic rebellion against tyranny only *if* it was likely to result in greater benefit to the public good.¹¹⁴

Seventh, Gvosdev suggests that Aquinas can be used to justify espionage.¹¹⁵ However, if Christians accepted Aquinas's position on lying, they would need to absent themselves from some aspects of intelligence work. Even if one adopted the view, contra Aquinas, that some lying is permissible in a just cause, the Christian would need to carefully consider the scope of permissible lying and the impact on their character, especially in a private capacity. In the context of a local church where a significant number of its members are engaged in the intelligence services, this would be an important subject to explore further.

To conclude, imagine that several members of your church are engaged in intelligence work, whether you know it or not. Should the church's position towards their profession be one of *live and let spy*? In our brief excursus into the theology of Thomas Aquinas, it is evident that his framework affords considerable help in evaluating the appropriateness of Christian engagement in intelligence work, upholding and qualifying their participation. Aquinas's perspective offers several important ways that churches can effectively pastor Christian intelligence officers as they navigate the particular complexities of their work for the Lord.

¹¹³ For an example of the emphasis on necessity and proportionality, see HMG, "Explanatory Notes: Investigatory Powers Act 2016"; https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/25/pdfs/ukpgaen_20160025_en.pdf.

¹¹⁴ Aquinas argued, "disturbing such a [tyrannical] government has not the nature of sedition, unless perhaps the disturbance be so excessive that the people suffer more from it than from the tyrannical regime." Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II q.42 a.2, resp. ad. 3.

¹¹⁵ Gvosdev, "Espionage and the Ecclesia," 817.

What Christians Need to Know About “Legalized” Marijuana

— Melvin L. Otey —

Melvin L. Otey is a professor of Law at Faulkner University's Jones School of Law and a PhD student in Faulkner University's Kearley Graduate School of Theology.

Abstract: As states continue to decriminalize marijuana and usage escalates in American culture, Christians must increasingly navigate their associations with the drug. The various implications of marijuana use are much discussed, but the true legal landscape is often misunderstood. Despite recent changes in individual state laws, it is still a federal crime to possess, use, or sell the drug anywhere in the United States. This article argues that—aside from unrelated social, medical, ethical, and spiritual considerations—Christians must abstain from either medical or recreational marijuana use because they are obliged as a matter of faith to obey federal authorities.

Cannabis is the most used psychoactive, or mind-altering, drug in the world.¹ In the United States, it is “by far the most commonly used illicit substance,”² and alcohol is the only regulated substance that is more widely used.³ The term “marijuana” refers to the dried leaves, seeds, and stems of cannabis plants, which people can consume in a variety of ways to achieve conscious altering effects.⁴ Inhalation through smoking is the most common method, but ingestion of marijuana-laced

¹ Angélica Meinhofer, Allison Witman, Sean M. Murphy, and Yuhua Bao, “Medical Marijuana Laws Are Associated with Increases in Substance Use Treatment Admissions by Pregnant Women,” *Addiction* 114.9 (2019): 1593.

² Daniel G. Orenstein and Stanton A. Glantz, “Cannabis Legalization in State Legislatures: Public Health Opportunity and Risk,” *Marquette Law Review* 103 (2020): 1315–16.

³ Renee M. Cloutier, Brian H. Calhoun, and Ashley N. Linden-Carmichael, “Associations of Mode of Administration on Cannabis Consumption and Subjective Intoxication in Daily Life,” *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors* 36.1 (2022): 67.

⁴ This article distinguishes marijuana from hemp and cannabidiol (CBD) oils. Marijuana and hemp are genetically and legally distinct forms of cannabis. Marijuana, cultivated and used as a psychotropic drug because of its higher concentration of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), is illegal under federal law. See Title 21 U.S.C. § 812. Hemp has comparatively low levels of THC and is legal. It is cultivated and used in a wide range of nutritional, personal care, health, clothing, paper, construction, and industrial products. CBD oils may be derived from either marijuana or hemp. CBD oils derived from hemp are legal. CBD oils derived from marijuana, though, have higher

edibles and beverages and vaporization are becoming increasingly popular.

Social attitudes regarding the consumption of marijuana have changed dramatically in recent decades.⁵ Along with this broader shift, there has been a notable increase in support among people professing Christian faith for decriminalizing marijuana.⁶ For instance, in 2012, Pat Robertson said, “I really believe we should treat marijuana the way we treat beverage alcohol.... I’ve never used marijuana and I don’t intend to, but it’s just one of those things that I think: this war on drugs just hasn’t succeeded.”⁷ This sentiment is not new, and Robertson is not alone.⁸ Americans are using marijuana more frequently than they used to, and marijuana-related industries are growing exponentially. These changes will inevitably influence Christian churches just as they influence society at large. Although sermons, Bible classes, and small groups do not frequently discuss marijuana, the conversation is long overdue given the current climate.

A comprehensive discussion of marijuana use is multi-faceted and includes, among other things, possible medical benefits, health risks, potential mental and psychological consequences, and a variety of social costs, as well as sometimes complex ethical and moral determinations. However, while people continue to research and debate these matters, they often do so without a full appreciation for the legal landscape. Yet, the legal aspects of marijuana must be a primary consideration in any responsible discussion. This is especially true for Christians, who are bound as a matter of faith to obey proper human authorities. Still, much of the current dialogue about the propriety of Christians using the drug evinces a fundamental lack of awareness about its legal status.⁹

The legal landscape surrounding marijuana has evolved rapidly, and future changes in federal regulation might afford greater liberties. If, or perhaps when, the federal government follows the several states in deregulating the drug’s possession, use, and sales, then submission to God and government

levels of THC and are not always legal. See Janice Selekman and Joan Edelstein, “Cannabis vs. Marijuana, THC vs. CBD—The State of the Science,” *Pediatric Nursing* 47.2 (2021): 59–65; Lawrence J. Trautman, Paul Seaborn, Adam Sulkowski, Donald Mayer, and Robert T. Luttrell III, “Cannabis at the Crossroads: A Transdisciplinary Analysis and Policy Prescription,” *Oklahoma City University Law Review* 45.2 (2021): 131; Karen Hande, “Cannabidiol: The Need for More Information about Its Potential Benefits and Side Effects,” *Clinical Journal of Oncology Nursing* 23.2 (2019): 131–34; Renee Johnson, Cong. Research Serv., R44742, “Defining Hemp: A Fact Sheet” (Mar. 22, 2019), at 1, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R44742.pdf>.

⁵ “At the state level, rhetoric and practice around the use of marijuana has shifted considerably. This shift is driven by a variety of changes in attitudes as public perceptions of marijuana use nationally have moved significantly toward legalization.” Don Stemen, “Beyond the War: The Evolving Nature of the U.S. Approach to Drugs,” *Harvard Law and Policy Review Online* (2017): 416. “Most state medical and recreational cannabis laws originated as ballot initiatives, rather than legislation. Of the eleven state recreational laws, all but Vermont’s and Illinois’s were initiatives, as were eighteen of the thirty-three state medical laws.” Orenstein and Glantz, “Cannabis Legalization,” 1323.

⁶ See Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Christians Torn About Legal Marijuana,” *ChrCent* 131.5 (2014): 14–15; Hunter Beckelhymer, “Grams and Damns,” *ChrCent* 87.9 (1970): 267. In this context, decriminalization refers to removing criminal sanctions for possessing small amounts of marijuana. J. M. Pedini and Cassidy Crockett-Verba, “First in the South: Cannabis Legalization in Marijuana,” *Richmond Public Interest Law Review* 25 (2022): 149.

⁷ Jesse McKinley, “Pat Robertson Says Marijuana Use Should be Legal,” *New York Times*, 7 March 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/08/us/pat-robertson-backs-legalizing-marijuana.html>.

⁸ “Some recommend that we legalize marijuana, then control it the way we control alcohol.” Beckelhymer, “Grams and Damns,” 267.

⁹ See, e.g., Andy Crouch, “A Chance to Grow,” *Christianity Today* 58.2 (2014): 21–22.

may look different than it does right now. At that time, the intricate complex of medical, mental, and moral considerations typically emphasized in contemporary discussion may well become dispositive. However, the benefits and detriments of marijuana are secondary or tertiary concerns for Christians and all law-abiding residents in the United States since federal law currently precludes them from having, consuming, or distributing marijuana for either recreational or medicinal purposes.

This article briefly discusses the biblical ethic of Christian respect for human authorities, the American system of dual sovereignty, and changes in simultaneous federal and state regulation of marijuana. It then concludes that Christians are not currently free to possess, use, or supply marijuana because any such conduct constitutes a federal offense.

1. The New Testament Ethic of Submission to Government

A person's decision to consume marijuana will be influenced, in some part, by the person's appreciation—or lack of appreciation—for human government. Christians' respect for political authorities and the rules they promulgate is informed by a New Testament ethic of support for, and submission to, government. The apostle Paul repeatedly reminds readers of this duty. For instance, in 1 Timothy 2:1–2, he says, “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.”¹⁰ In Paul's estimation, the rules and restrictions issued by government are a necessary part of ordering society for the general welfare, and the authorities are to be supported, among other ways, with prayers.

The Christian's duty, though, involves more than prayers for human rulers. Paul directs his readers to obey government authorities. In Titus 3:1, he instructs Titus, “Remind [the Cretans] to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work.” In the apostle's most extended discussion on the matter, he urges,

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer (Rom 13:1–4).

Hence, Paul teaches that Christians are generally required to submit to government authority because it is ordained by God and intended for their benefit. Governments can curtail individual freedoms, at least to some extent, and Christians are expected to submit to such restrictions and support the authorities who promulgate them.

Peter agrees with Paul and describes submission to human rulers as “the will of God” (1 Pet 2:13–14). Of course, this duty of submission is not absolute; it has limits.¹¹ For instance, Paul assumes that

¹⁰ Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

¹¹ “To assume that in 13:1–7 Paul is presenting in full-blown form a Christian theology regarding ‘Christians and the state’ (as has been often argued)—or that here in 13:3–4 he is justifying the existence of all human

the authorities are “not a terror to good conduct” and that they punish those whom God recognizes as wrongdoers. The government Paul expects his audience to submit to does not punish law-abiding, morally upright people. Jesus himself demonstrates that challenges to human authorities are sometimes appropriate. In John 18, he resists initial Jewish efforts to adjudicate his guilt. He appears before Annas, the High Priest *emeritus*, before he is taken to Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. During this late-night proceeding, Jesus objects both to Annas examining him and to the officer striking him for questioning Annas’s methods (John 18:19–23).¹²

2. Dual Sovereignty in the United States

In light of New Testament admonitions to respect and submit to legal authorities, Christians need to know that everyone in the United States lives under a system of dual sovereignty, simultaneously subject to both federal and state regulations. According to the Supreme Court, “Every citizen of the United States is also a citizen of a state or territory. He may be said to owe allegiance to two sovereigns, and may be liable to punishment for an infraction of the laws of either. The same act may be an offence or transgression of the laws of both.”¹³ Consequently, a person who respects and submits to human authorities in the United States is not free to pick and choose which laws to follow. Instead, the person is duty-bound to obey the laws of both sovereigns.

Simultaneously obeying the laws of both federal and state authorities usually is not difficult because their regulations are often complementary. In some instances, federal and state laws simultaneously regulate essentially the same conduct. When this happens, a single act or course of conduct might subject one to punishment by both federal and state governments. Robbing a bank, for instance, likely violates federal statutes as well as state statutes in the jurisdiction where the bank is located. Consequently, a bank robber can be prosecuted and punished by either or both sovereigns. Where federal and state laws regulate the same conduct by adding cumulative burdens or restrictions, one may be more restrictive than the other. In that case, a person is expected to satisfy both by complying with whichever is more restrictive.

Federal and state laws are also complementary when they supplement one another by adding cumulative burdens or restrictions. When this occurs, the authorities regulate a wider swath of conduct together than either would individually. The network of laws addressing traffic safety on public thoroughfares is but one example. Federal authorities produce motor vehicle safety standards that control the design and function of automobiles. State authorities have additional criteria for licensing vehicles and drivers within their borders. Where federal and state regulations supplement one another, a person can satisfy both authorities, but each imposes additional burdens that the other does not.

governments and the actions of all their officials (as has also sometimes been asserted)—is not only to ignore, but also to misrepresent, the purpose and particularity of his hortatory statements in these passages.” Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 963. “The proviso is that one should submit to the government as and when it is doing what God set the government up to do. Paul is saying that Christians should not resist the *legitimate* demands of the government.” Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 312.

¹² Melvin L. Otey, “Jesus’s Objections During His Preliminary Examination and Modern Notions of Due Process,” *Regent University Law Review* 35 (2022): 121–24.

¹³ *Moore v. Illinois*, 55 U.S. 13, 20 (1852).

While federal and state laws are often complementary, they sometimes conflict. The Framers of the Constitution anticipated inconsistencies between the regulatory schemes of federal and state sovereigns and provided for their resolution. Article VI, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution states, in part, that the Constitution and the laws of the United States “shall be the supreme Law of the Land.” According to the Supreme Court, this Supremacy Clause “unambiguously provides that if there is any conflict between federal and state law, federal law shall prevail.”¹⁴

Christians are familiar with the necessity of reconciling conflicting authorities. For instance, in Matt 23:1–2, Jesus tells his disciples to obey the scribes and Pharisees because they sit in Moses’s seat (Matt 23:1–2). Given his admonition, the apostles are presumably disposed to submit to human authorities. Yet, when the Jerusalem Sanhedrin warns them not to teach in Jesus’s name in Acts 5—after Jesus commands them to do that very thing (see, e.g., Matt 28:18–20)—they answer, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). They perceive a conflict between the requirements of God and the Sanhedrin and conclude that they are bound to follow God’s command. Recognition that God’s authority is greater than the authority of the Sanhedrin is implied in their retort. As one author explains, “God is the ultimate authority, not human leaders or governments. This means that the authority of all rulers, all governments, is provisional and limited.”¹⁵

Similarly, state authority has bounds because federal law is the highest law in the United States. If there is a conflict in an area where federal and state authorities share the right of regulation, people in the United States must obey the federal law. The analogy between conflicting laws among human authorities and conflicting laws between divine and human authorities is admittedly limited. For instance, the Bible presents God as the ultimate source of all authority, and he delegates authority to human governments.¹⁶ Consequently, there are no domains in which human governments have greater authority than God. On the other hand, federal and state governments ultimately have a common source of authority—the U.S. Constitution—and there are spheres where the Constitution does not empower the federal government to restrict state governments. Still, despite the example’s limitations, the basic principle of submission to the higher authority is the same in either case.

3. Meandering Approaches to Marijuana Regulation

Most people witnessing—and perhaps decrying—marijuana’s growing social acceptance probably do not realize that it was lawful to cultivate and consume the substance in the United States until the early twentieth century.¹⁷ At that time, individual states began criminalizing its possession and use.¹⁸

¹⁴ *Gonzales v. Raich*, 125 S. Ct. 2195, 2212 (2005).

¹⁵ Luke Wesley, “Church-State Relations: Lessons from China,” *Them* 47.2 (2022): 368.

¹⁶ “We must never forget that the role and the authority of the state is limited and comes from God.” Wesley, “Church-State Relations,” 369.

¹⁷ Armikka R. Bryant, “Taxing Marijuana: Earmarking Tax Revenue from Legalized Marijuana,” *Georgia State University Law Journal* 33 (2017): 663.

¹⁸ Even though rates of marijuana use are roughly equal among white, black, and Hispanic peoples, rates of enforcement and punishment are traditionally much higher among minority groups and disfavored sub-cultures. Scholars largely agree that this push toward criminalization was “rooted in racial animus toward Mexican immigrants and African-Americans.” Orenstein and Glantz, “Cannabis Legalization,” 1320. According to Armikka R. Bryant, “Racism and xenophobia played a central role in marijuana’s criminalization because it was associated

Before that, though, marijuana was commonly prescribed and used for medicinal purposes. The federal government only began regulating the drug in 1937 with passage of the Marijuana Tax Act. The Act did not criminalize marijuana possession and use, *per se*, but it placed onerous restrictions and taxes on importation, cultivation, and distribution.

Marijuana possession and use did not become a federal crime until 1970, when Congress enacted the Controlled Substances Act (hereinafter “the CSA”). The CSA classified marijuana as a Schedule 1 hallucinogenic drug. This categorization reflects a high potential for abuse, a lack of accepted medical use, and a lack of accepted safety for use under medical supervision.¹⁹ In short, the CSA designates marijuana as contraband for any purpose, and the lone exception is its use during research studies preapproved by the Food and Drug Administration.²⁰ The CSA can be amended, but marijuana—like heroin, LSD, and ecstasy—is currently a Schedule 1 drug.

Before the early 1900s, federal and state authorities were consistent in declining to regulate marijuana consumption and production. Once states began criminalizing the drug, they made independent decisions for half a century while federal authorities declined to join them. When the federal government passed the CSA, though, marijuana became illegal throughout the United States. Consequently, from 1970 until recent decades, federal and state authorities were once again aligned in marijuana regulations. Possession, use, and distribution simultaneously violated state and federal laws.

Since individual states began criminalizing marijuana in the early 1900s, they have had the primary responsibility for enforcement.²¹ This was true even after passage of the CSA because the federal government traditionally deferred to the states for low-level users and distributors while it pursued larger-scale, higher-profile traffickers. Beginning in the 1990’s, though, states have increasingly decriminalized—or removed criminal penalties for—medical and recreational marijuana use.²² States that decriminalize are essentially opting out of what has been a joint system of enforcement with federal authorities. In so doing, they have fundamentally altered their traditional and complementary role

with migrant workers of African and Latin descent.” Bryant, “Taxing Marijuana,” 663. J. M. Pedini and Cassidy Crockett-Verba explain, “‘Marihuana’ was a term that was used to create a negative connotation with cannabis and link the substance to Mexicans, Black people, and jazz music.” Pedini and Crockett-Verba, “First in the South,” 146.

¹⁹ See Title 21 U.S.C. § 812.

²⁰ “Not many studies exist on medical marijuana in the United States, mainly due to restrictions imposed by the federal government. Obtaining permission from federal agencies to conduct clinical trials remains difficult for medical marijuana, a scheduled drug. Large-scale randomized control trials require approval from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).” Muni Rubens, “Political and Medical Views on Medical Marijuana and Its Future,” *Social Work in Public Health* 29.2 (2014): 122.

²¹ Jonathan H. Adler, “Federal Power and the States,” *Case Western Law Review* 65 (2015): 506–7.

²² Daniel G. Orenstein and Stanton A. Glantz report that, “between 1996 and June 2019, thirty-three U.S. states, the District of Columbia, and the territories of Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands legalized use of cannabis for medical purposes, and eleven states, D.C., Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands legalized recreational or ‘adult use’ of the drug.” Orenstein and Glantz, “Cannabis Legalization,” 1316. Bryant avers that “Marijuana policy at the state level began shifting towards legalization in the mid-1990s.” Bryant, “Taxing Marijuana,” 668. Kreit explains that “throughout the 2000s, more and more states passed medical marijuana laws and marijuana stores started opening faster than the federal government could shut them down.” Alex Kreit, “Marijuana Legalization and Nosy Neighbor States,” *Boston College Law Review* 58 (2017): 1060.

and begun to profit through taxation and increased industry from conduct the federal government prohibits.²³

4. Clarifying Marijuana’s Current Legal Status

Decriminalization in various states has created a regulatory vacuum for lower-level marijuana crimes because, as a practical matter, federal authorities lack the resources to prosecute them without the states’ traditional cooperation.²⁴ In states where decriminalization has occurred, the resulting vacuum allows people to believe that having, using, and selling marijuana is legal since state authorities sanction their behavior and federal authorities are unlikely to punish them. In this new environment, access to marijuana is increasing, and increased access presumably leads to increased consumption.²⁵

As social acceptance grows, criminal enforcement declines, and usage rates increase, Christians, in particular, need to know that “legalized marijuana” is a dangerous misnomer. Neither decreased regulation nor decreased enforcement is the same thing as legalization. No matter what an individual state’s laws may say, anyone who has or consumes marijuana in the United States is committing a federal crime. The United States Circuit Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit—one of the thirteen appellate courts just below the United States Supreme Court—says this:

Anyone in any state who possesses, distributes, or manufactures marijuana for medical or recreational purposes (or attempts or conspires to do so) is committing a federal crime. The federal government can prosecute such offenses for up to five years after they occur. *See* 18 U.S.C. § 3282. Congress currently restricts the government from spending certain funds to prosecute certain individuals. But Congress could restore funding tomorrow, a year from now, or four years from now, and the government could then prosecute individuals who committed offenses while the government lacked funding.²⁶

A first conviction for possessing even a small amount of marijuana is punishable by imprisonment for up to one year and a minimum fine of \$1,000, and the penalties increase with either larger quantities or subsequent convictions.²⁷

As the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals noted, marijuana use is a federal crime, even if the use is ostensibly for medicinal purposes. The United States Supreme Court made this abundantly clear

²³ “Some states, fueled by the lure of an untapped and lucrative tax base, have gone so far as to decriminalize marijuana and impose excise taxes and retail sales taxes on its sale.” Bryant, “Taxing Marijuana,” 661.

²⁴ Robert A. Mikos, “On the Limits of Supremacy: Medical Marijuana and the States’ Overlooked Power to Legalize Federal Crime,” *Vanderbilt Law Review* 62 (2009): 1424.

²⁵ “My results indicate a 10–15 percent increase in marijuana use, likely on both the intensive and extensive margins, after the passage of medical marijuana laws.” Yu-Wei Luke Chu, “Do Medical Marijuana Laws Increase Hard-Drug Use?,” *Journal of Law & Economics* 58.2 (2015): 511. “Marijuana legalization lowers the price and increases access to marijuana: the expectation under classical economic theory is that this will lead to increased consumption.” H. Justin Pace, “The ‘Free Market’ for Marijuana: A Sober, Clear-Eyed Analysis of Marijuana Policy,” *Lewis & Clark Law Review* 24 (2020): 1225.

²⁶ *United States v. McIntosh*, 833 F.3d 1163, 1179 n.5 (9th Cir. 2016).

²⁷ 21 U.S.C. § 844.

in *Gonzales v. Raich*.²⁸ California voters passed the first modern medical marijuana ballot measure—the Compassionate Use Act of 1996—allowing seriously ill residents access to marijuana for medical purposes. Severe or chronic pain is among the most common needs cited by medical marijuana patients, and the Act exempted physicians, caregivers, and patients from criminal prosecution for possessing or cultivating marijuana for medical treatment with a physician’s recommendation or approval.

In *Gonzales*, a California resident who suffered from a variety of serious medical ailments used marijuana to manage her pain after conventional medicines failed to alleviate her symptoms. She grew her own marijuana and ingested it by smoking and using a vaporizer. California authorities concluded that her actions were permissible under California law, but federal Drug Enforcement Administration agents seized and destroyed her cannabis plants. The woman sought relief in the courts and argued that enforcing the federal CSA was unconstitutional. However, the Supreme Court held that Congress has the power under the Commerce Clause to regulate medicinal substances and that the federal government can prosecute marijuana users even if they comply with state laws.

Because federal and state marijuana laws do not complement one another the way they used to—and the way other drug laws still do—many people will inevitably be confused about marijuana’s legal status. Simply stated, it is illegal. Anyone who possesses or uses or shares marijuana for any reason is violating federal law.²⁹

5. Concluding Observations

The normalization of marijuana use in American culture will impact society in a variety of ways. Some consequences are predictable and others are not, but Christians need to think and talk about how these changes will impact their churches. Is it permissible for a Christian to use marijuana in any form to ameliorate severe pain based on a physician’s recommendation? Is it appropriate for a Christian to smoke a marijuana cigarette in order to help him relax when he feels anxious? Should a Christian accept employment as a cashier in a “marijuana bar?” Is it okay for a Christian to sell marijuana-laced deserts at her bakery shop?

The drug’s legal status must be a principal consideration in answering questions of this kind. Paul and Peter affirm that Christians are expected to submit to governing authorities (Rom 13:1–4; 1 Pet 2:13–14). Despite changing state laws, marijuana possession, use, and distribution are still crimes, and the New Testament ethic of submission to human government precludes Christians from committing criminal acts. This is true no matter how popular or socially acceptable the acts become.

It is possible—perhaps even likely—that federal laws will change.³⁰ After all, the federal authorities’ approach to regulating marijuana has belatedly followed the states. The states have gone from no

²⁸ 125 S. Ct. 2195 (2005).

²⁹ “In this case, to resolve the question presented, we need only recognize that a medical necessity exception for marijuana is at odds with the terms of the Controlled Substances Act. The statute, to be sure, does not explicitly abrogate the defense. But its provisions leave no doubt that the defense is unavailable.” *United States v. Oakland Cannabis Buyers’ Coop.*, 532 U.S. 483, 491 (2001). “Because the use of marijuana is unlawful for any purpose under federal law, neither states nor the Court have authority to permit a defendant to use medical marijuana during his or her supervised release.” *United States v. Jackson*, 388 F. Supp. 3d 505, 510 (E.D. Pa. 2019).

³⁰ “Recent polls indicate strong public support for legalization—fifty-nine percent of citizens believe recreational marijuana use should be legal; there is also strong public opposition to the enforcement of federal laws

regulation to criminalization and are now increasingly moving toward decriminalization. The federal government currently follows a policy of non-enforcement, and decriminalization may well be the next logical step. If, or when, marijuana is decriminalized by the federal government, Christians will presumably be free to analyze the propriety of consuming marijuana or being involved in marijuana-related industries just as they currently analyze the propriety of being involved with or consuming other legal intoxicants, like amphetamines and beverage alcohol.

For now, though, alcohol and marijuana are not analogous. Marijuana today is more like alcohol during Prohibition; it is available, but it is illegal. Christians, therefore, have a duty to avoid it. This needs to be understood and communicated clearly within communities of faith because people of faith will increasingly face opportunities—or temptations—to become associated with the drug in one way or another. If the federal laws never change, then this posture of complete abstinence should continue indefinitely.

Whether the laws change or not, though, experts will continue studying the potential benefits and risks of marijuana use.³¹ Meanwhile, Christians should carefully study and discuss whether the drug might eventually be consumed under specific circumstances and in specific ways that are consistent with their theology and faith.³² If it is ever legalized in the United States, legalization alone will not determine whether or when it is helpful and wise to use it (1 Cor 6:12; 10:23). Robust engagement is needed so that, if the federal government decriminalizes marijuana, Christians will be prepared to make responsible decisions regarding their potential associations with yet another mind-altering drug.

against marijuana in states that have legalized recreation or medical marijuana—seventy-one percent of citizens are against federal enforcement in such instances.” Stemen, “Beyond the War,” 406.

³¹ “The gaps in our understanding of the health effects and safety of daily marijuana use are extensive, and the public may be underestimating its long-term risks. These national data underscore the need to invest in further research to better understand both the health effects of marijuana use and the public health investment necessary to better communicate potential health risks to the public.” Salomeh Keyhani, Stacey Steigerwald, Julie Ishida, Marzieh Vali, Magdalena Cerdá, Deborah Hasin, Camille Dollinger, Sodahm R. Yoo, and Beth E. Cohen, “Risks and Benefits of Marijuana Use: A National Survey of U.S. Adults,” *Annals of Internal Medicine* 169.5 (2018): 288. See, e.g., Mahmoud A. ElSohly, Zlatko Mehmedic, Susan Foster, Chandrani Gon, Suman Chandra, James C. Church, “Changes in Cannabis Potency Over the Last 2 Decades (1995–2014): Analysis of Current Data in the United States,” *Biological Psychiatry* 79.7 (2016): 613–19; Muni Rubens, “Political and Medical Views on Medical Marijuana and Its Future,” *Social Work in Public Health* 29.2 (2014): 121–31.

³² The following volumes are helpful contributions to the dialogue: Todd Miles, *Cannabis and the Christian: What the Bible Says about Marijuana* (Nashville: B&H, 2021); Tom Breeden and Mark L. Ward Jr., *Can I Smoke Pot? Marijuana in Light of Scripture* (Adelphi, MD: Cruciform, 2016).

Technology and Its Fruits: Digital Technology's *Imago Dei* Deformation and Sabbath as Re-Formation

— Josh Rothschild —

Josh Rothschild is Pastor of Spiritual Formation at Sojourn Church Midtown in Louisville, Kentucky and a PhD student at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Abstract: The serpent promised that the fruit in the garden would make Adam and Eve more like God. While the fruit reduced the capability gap between God and humanity, it widened the character gap. This article aims to demonstrate that digital technology parallels the fruit in both its promise to grant us God-like abilities while also deforming God's character in us. I use current psychological and sociological research to demonstrate that high digital technology use steadily deforms God's character in humanity. I conclude by suggesting that weekly Sabbath practice counters this deforming technological pressure and creates space for God to re-form his image in us.

“Take the fruit, and you will be like God,” the serpent whispers in Eve's ear. The reality was that Eve was already like God; humans uniquely reflect and represent God's image. And though Adam and Eve were created like God, this was not enough. A desire to extend the boundaries of their God-likeness consumed them, leading them to bite the fruit that the serpent promised would make them even more like God. The irony is that the serpent was both telling the truth and a lie. The fruit opened Adam and Eve's eyes, allowing them to access knowledge that previously only God held—and yet taking the fruit on their own terms twisted the image in them, making them less like God than before.

The information age's digital revolution parallels the serpent's deceptive promises in the garden.¹ With just a few keystrokes, Google allows anyone to access almost any knowledge known to man. Alexa enables us to illuminate our homes with just a word. Social media grants us the ability to be present

¹ The parallel that this article follows was inspired by Jonathan Haidt, “Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid,” *The Atlantic*, May 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/05/social-media-democracy-trust-babel/629369/>.

to everyone all the time. And now with the proliferation of ChatGPT and other AI applications, the upper limits of human productivity have never been so high. One might even say technology makes us gods.² These abilities are doubtlessly used for pure ends, but might these expanded abilities be similar to the serpent's god-like temptation in the garden? Do these technologies simultaneously reduce the gap between God's abilities and our own while also widening the gap between God's character and our own? Like Adam and Eve, the irony of technology is that in becoming more like God, his image is becoming less clear in us. God desires we resemble him, but we desire to rival God.³ And just like Adam and Eve couldn't undo the bite they had taken, the technological genie has left the bottle. Is it wrong for a surgeon to consult a global medical community for wisdom on treating a patient with a rare disease? Is it wrong to use FaceTime to maintain connection with elderly shut-ins during a pandemic?⁴

This article aims to demonstrate that the digital revolution allows us to act more like God and yet has a steady deforming pressure that moves our character away from God's. Like a car in drive on level pavement, creeping forward unless proactively and thoughtfully impeded, digital technology steadily bends our character away from God in our unconscious and uncritical use of it. To proactively fight against digital technology's deforming pressure, I argue that observing the ancient practice of the Sabbath both counteracts the lie that we can ever truly rival God's power while also providing the ingredients and space for God's character to be deeply formed in us. Thus, the Sabbath allows us to use our digital tools with humility and wisdom and keep us in the position of masters over our tools rather than our tools mastering us.

My argument unfolds in three broad sections. In the first section, I unpack the assertion that the fruit in the garden came from a temptation to make Adam and Eve more like God on their own terms. Additionally, I trace the plot line of God restoring and forming his image in his people despite its distortion in the garden. In the second section, I demonstrate how digital technology parallels the temptation to inch closer to God's power while practically deforming his character in us. The final section explores how the practice of Sabbath observance offers us space to cooperate with God's forming his character in us while also causing us to delight in the reality that God's incommunicable attributes are utterly foreign.

1. Imago Dei in Humanity

This section first explores the *imago Dei* from a biblical-theological lens, demonstrating that it was always God's desire for mankind to be like God in significant and unique ways. This "likeness" was distorted by Adam and Eve's discontent with the boundaries of this likeness. Yet, God remains committed to this *imago Dei* vision of humanity despite the damage that had been done. In unpacking this trajectory, I examine four movements: (1) God desired humanity to reflect him; (2) the serpent

² This is the argument of Yuval N. Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017). This article expands on Harari's argument below.

³ Jen Wilkins, *None Like Him: 10 Ways God is Different from Us (and Why That's a Good Thing)* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 23.

⁴ Tony Reinke traces a similar theme from Genesis 4: God has providentially ordained men to launch new technologies that would be used as great blessing for humanity, yet they would remain under the curse and have the potential to be used for great evil. Tony Reinke, *God, Technology, and the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 73, 88–94.

promised greater godlikeness on their own terms; (3) the result of listening to the serpent was becoming less like God; and (4) God is redeeming his image in his people, and the fruit of the Spirit is one of the clearest examples of this in the New Testament.

1.1. Godlikeness Granted

The serpent's deception is that God was never threatened by Adam and Eve (Gen 3:6). The Creator always intended for Adam and Eve to resemble him, but by striving to become more like God, the two humans became less like him. Genesis teaches that humanity is unique from all other creation in that they alone are created in God's image.⁵ This is no accident; God chooses under no compulsion or fear of competition to form humanity in His image (Gen 1:27). Each of the previous creatures is made "according to its own kind" (Gen 2:11–12; 21, 24–25), but only Adam and Eve are created "in [God's] image" (Gen 2:26–27).⁶ To be image-bearers means humanity both *reflects* God and *represents* God.⁷ In reflecting God, we ought to see a similarity to God when we look at humanity. In representing God, we ought to function similarly to God in his place.⁸ Unlike any other creature, God wanted Adam and Eve to be like him. So what exactly did it mean for Adam and Eve to reflect and represent God?

This question must be answered with humility as the text does not explicitly give us an answer.⁹ Theologians throughout church history have provided varying, sometimes contradictory, answers on what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God.¹⁰ Though absolute agreement is allusive, many see the *image Dei* reflected in man's character.¹¹ This may not be directly evident in the creation passage, but John Calvin argued that only in reading ahead to the New Testament could one fully

⁵ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 11.

⁶ John H. Sailhamer, "Genesis," in *Genesis–Leviticus*, revised ed., EBC 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 69.

⁷ Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 67.

⁸ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 235.

⁹ Kenneth Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, NAC 1A (Nashville: B&H, 1996), 164.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 93.

¹¹ Adam and Eve's reflection and representation include more than God's character, though for the scope of this paper, we will limit our focus. Two other important and related categories are community and rulership. First, humans are like God in that they reflect and represent the eternal intra-Trinitarian community. The creation narrative places extra weight in the fact that humans are created distinct in gender (Sailhamer, "Genesis," 69) which Barth prompts us to ponder how distinct genders becoming one may be true in the Creator (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956], 195). Indeed, the poem in Genesis 1:27 hints that both men and women are needed to reflect God's image (Mathews, *Genesis 1:11–26*, 164). and the commentary on marriage in Genesis 2:24 further showcases how marital unity amidst gender diversity provides a flesh and blood representation of the Trinity (Philip Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012], 37). An implication of God's weaving the divine community into humanity's reflection and representation of him is that "God can enter into personal relationships with him, speak to him, and make covenants with him" (Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1 [Waco, TX: Word, 1987], 31). Therefore, one way that God intended humanity to be like himself was in the way we treat one another and pursue unity amidst their distinctiveness. A second way God designed humans to be like himself was in their role as rulers over his creation. Luther makes the case that mankind's dominion is an essential component of the *imago Dei* (Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis 1–5*, LW 1 [St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1958], 64). The verse following the Gen 1:27 *imago Dei* poem make this clear in the directive to rule. Both man and woman are created in the image of God,

understand the *imago Dei* of Genesis 2.¹² In other words, only by looking at how the image is restored in believers through the Spirit and displayed in Christ can we fully understand how Adam and Eve imaged God in the garden.

1.2. Greater Godlikeness Tempted

Genesis 3 details the moment Adam and Eve first sinned against God and were thus expelled from God's presence in the garden. The serpent's deception finds its strength in enflaming Eve's pride; his half-truths extend the possibility of divinity by offering the possibility that Adam and Eve could truly achieve equality with God's divine glory.¹³ And who wouldn't want this glory? Who wouldn't want the happiness that comes from divine knowledge?¹⁴ And thus, the serpent suggests that the Creator is not the type of God he lets on. Adam and Eve's limitations must come from a place of fear that Adam and Eve would become like him¹⁵ because he must be the type of God who withholds what is truly good.¹⁶

The tragic irony is that Adam and Eve were already "like God; they had been created in his image."¹⁷ More than that, God had filled the earth with all kinds of good things (Gen 1:3, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31; 2:9), and he remedied the only thing that was lacking by blessing Adam with a wife (Gen 2:18). This insidiousness of the lie, however, is not found in its false premises but rather in the complete inverse of its result. Instead of the knowledge moving them closer to God's equal, it creates a greater division between humankind and their Creator.¹⁸

1.3. Godlikeness Diminished

The type of knowledge that promised to make Adam and Eve like God ended up making them less like him. It undid part of the miracle of bearing God's image. The image was not lost completely¹⁹ but diminished. Augustine writes, though they desire to be like gods:

in fact, they would have been better able to be like gods if they had in obedience adhered to the supreme and real ground of their being, if they had not in pride and made themselves their own ground.... By aiming at more, a man is diminished, when he elects to be self-sufficient and defects from the one who is really sufficient for him.²⁰

and as his representatives, they are granted the responsibility to rule over the terrestrial world (Gen 1:28; Ps 8:6–7) (Mathews, *Genesis 1:11–26*, 164).

¹² Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses*, 94–95.

¹³ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses*, 151.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses*, 151.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses*, 150.

¹⁶ Johannnes Oecolampadius, quoted in John L. Thompson, Timothy George, and Scott. M. Mantesch, eds., *Genesis 1–11*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture 1 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 119.

¹⁷ Sailhamer, "Genesis," 86.

¹⁸ Sailhamer, "Genesis," 86–87.

¹⁹ This is contrary to some Protestant streams, most predominantly in the Wesleyan tradition. Melvin E. Dieter, "The Wesleyan Perspective," in *Five Views on Sanctification*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 22.

²⁰ St. Augustine, *City of God* 14.13, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003), 573.

Reformer Wolfgang Musculus agrees with Augustine: “Satan promised divinity if they would eat of the forbidden tree’s fruit. They ate, and they were so far from acquiring the glory of divinity that they became more like vile and subhuman beasts than like God.”²¹ Here we see a crucial insight into the nature of Adam and Eve’s sin. Pride promises to make us more like God but always does the opposite. Pride pledges to bridge the gap to God’s abilities but always ends in greater separation from him. Pride first manifested itself in taking the fruit in the garden, but every human has made the same choice: our prideful desires remain discontent merely bearing God’s image rather than being self-sufficient, all-knowing, and all-powerful.

1.4. The Image’s Redemption

Though sin had deformed and distorted God’s image in humanity, God had not given up on his original intentions. Though this meta-theme is sweeping in scope, for the parameters of this paper, I focus on only two aspects: Jesus as the perfect image of God and the Spirit’s role in redeeming the image in us.

1.4.1. Christ, the True Image

The New Testament presents a portrait of Jesus as both fully human and fully divine, which the Nicene Creed summarizes.²² By implication of Jesus’s divinity, he lives a perfect, sinless life.²³ This means that when we read about Jesus, we see both a portrait of what God is like, and we also see what a human, unstained by sin, is supposed to be like. Jesus, therefore, is the perfect image of God, the one by whom we compare all other claims of what it means to be like God and become more like God as a human.²⁴

1.4.2. Formation of Christlikeness

There are many places in the Bible we can look for a catalog of Christ-like character qualities, though none may be as famous as Galatians 5:22–26, where Paul lists nine character qualities: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This is not a list of do’s and don’ts of the Christian life but rather the Spirit forming the Christian’s character to resemble Christ’s.²⁵ This is the character manifestation of what Paul, a chapter earlier, says is “Christ [being] formed in you” (Gal 4:19). Where Adam and Eve took the fruit to become more like God on their own terms, the Spirit produces the fruit that makes us more like Christ, the perfect image of God.

²¹ Wolfgang Musculus, quoted in Thompson, George, and Mantesch, *Genesis 1–11*, 119.

²² “For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and was made human.” The Editors of the Encyclopedia of Britannica, “Nicene Creed,” *Britannica*, September 3, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nicene-Creed>.

²³ Hebrews 5:15: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

²⁴ Hebrews 1:3: “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”

²⁵ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit: Growing in Christlikeness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 10.

2. The Deforming Power of Digital Technology

Thus far, we have established that the harder humanity strives to become more like God on their own terms, the less like God they become. Conversely, the more they submit to the Lord's will, the more they are transformed into his image. We should not be surprised when our prideful hearts utilize tools for the same end. If Adam and Eve took the fruit to become equal with God, we should expect modern man's same tendency to utilize digital technology to the same end. In this section, we first explore how the promise of digital technology mirrors the temptation of the garden, followed by how this may likewise prove to be our character's undoing.

2.1. Digital Technology's Divine Promise

The concept that technology can turn humans into gods is not new, though it may not have been present at such a large-scale popular level as Yuval Harari's 2017 *New York Times* bestselling *Homo Deus*. In over 400 pages, Harari predicts that the gurus of Silicon Valley will serve as prophets and priests in transforming humans from *Homo sapiens* into *Homo deus* through technological advancement.²⁶ These future technologies will allow vastly increased mental processing power that transcends our current comprehension. Our new divine state allows us to know everything, do anything, achieve constant bliss, and even have eternal life. "You could buy for yourself the strength of Hercules, the sensuality of Aphrodite, the wisdom of Athena, or the madness of Dionysus."²⁷ Harari views death as a technical problem with technological solutions: "We don't need to wait for the Second Coming in order to overcome death. A couple of geeks in a lab can do it. If traditional death was the specialty of priests and theologians, now the engineers are taking over."²⁸

Harari represents a growing number of scientists, mathematicians, and computer engineers who believe technology will be humanity's salvation.²⁹ But the technological dream is not simply salvation, but glorification into God-like beings whose abilities are enhanced to rival any other god. Might this godlike promise come with the same strings attached as the fruit in the garden? If, in our pursuit of God-like ability, do we actually become less like Jesus and more like extremely powerful beasts?

2.2. Digital Technology's Deforming Power

Research is becoming increasingly clear that we not only act on the world with our technology, but our technology ends up acting on us. Technology is never neutral,³⁰ and when we use our tools, in the end, our tools act upon us.³¹ Before we consider how digital technology shapes our character, it must be acknowledged that it alters our brains' physiology. Because of our neuroplasticity, digital technology

²⁶ Harari, *Homo Deus*, 375.

²⁷ Harari, *Homo Deus*, 43.

²⁸ Harari, *Homo Deus*, 23.

²⁹ Harari, *Homo Deus*, 24e.

³⁰ Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 76.

³¹ François Osiurak, Jorand Navarro, and Emanuelle Reynaud, "How Our Cognition Shapes and Is Shaped by Technology: A Common Framework for Understanding Human Tool-Use Interactions in the Past, Present, and Future," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9.293 (March 2018): 3, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00293/full>.

is “so effective at altering the nervous system because they both work in similar ways and are basically compatible and easily linked.”³²

When Adam and Eve took the forbidden fruit to become like God, the result was that they were deformed away from his likeness. If, as we saw in the previous section, technology holds out a similar promise to make us more like the divine, might there be a similar consequence for our prideful ambitions?

This section explores how technology has the power to distort and deform the image of God in our character. Galatians 5:22–23 represents eight dimensions of how God’s character manifests in humanity. I present research that suggests that digital technology does indeed have the capacity to deform the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

Some inverse character categories and the corresponding research are more easily clustered together. Therefore, this section is not intended to make a theological argument on what the opposite of each of the fruits is; rather, it is intended to give a general picture of research demonstrating how digital technology accelerates our character deformation.

2.2.1. Deformed Love and Kindness: Polarization, Anger, and Outrage

God’s love and kindness are displayed through his disposition and actions towards sinful man.³³ There seems to be an attitude of warmth and compassion towards the “other” implicit in God’s love and kindness. But digital media and social media’s algorithms neither favor kind content nor form love in our souls.

During a 2021 Senate hearing on social media algorithms, a former Google design ethicist stated, “[Google’s] business model is to create a society that is addicted, outraged, polarized, performative, and disinformed.”³⁴ Facebook has also been called “one of the world’s most polarizing corporations,” whose “business model is optimized to keep people scrolling their Facebook feeds, amplifying divisive and inflammatory content and exaggerating political divisions in society.”³⁵ This has contributed to the polarization of the United States marked by less trust and reduced democratic norms.³⁶ Our moral

³² Norman Doidge, *The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 311. One simple example is how the internet has changed how we retain and recall information; instead of memorizing information, we now recall where we can access the information in the future. Betsy Sparrow, Jenny Liu, and Daniel M. Wegner, “Google Effects on Memory: Cognitive Consequences of Having Information at Our Fingertips,” *Science* 333 (July 2011): 776–78.

³³ Titus 3:4: “But when the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind appeared, he saved us—not by works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy—through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”

³⁴ “Senate Hearing on Social Media Algorithms Full Transcript April 27,” April 27, 2021, <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/senate-hearing-on-social-media-algorithms-full-transcript-april-27>.

³⁵ Adam Satariano and Cecilia Kang, “British Political Veteran Steers Facebook’s Trump Decision,” *The New York Times*, 5 May 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/4u9vbtjw>.

³⁶ Paul M. Barrett, Justin Hendrix, and J. Grant Sims, “Fueling the Fire: How Social Media Intensifies U.S. Political Polarization—And What Can Be Done About It,” *NYU Stern Center for Business and Humans Rights*, September 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2p93ydyyp>.

outrage is stoked,³⁷ and we've become more rude³⁸ and angry.³⁹ In all this, digital media's coverage of these phenomena creates an ecosystem where trolling, conspiracy theories, and antagonism can flourish.⁴⁰

The websites we use and the media we consume every day have the capacity to deform our kindness and love and generate the fruit of polarization, anger, and outrage.

2.2.2. *Deformed Joy and Peace: Depression and Anxiety*

Numerous studies have connected high digital technology use with the manifestation of depression and anxiety. Rates of unhappiness, depression, and suicide are strongly tied to high digital technology use.⁴¹ High internet use is also linked with insomnia, stress, and low self-esteem.⁴² One study found that high internet use during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the exposure to misinformation that came with it, was a significant cause of depression.⁴³ Expansive evidence exists in the literature that social media use is correlated with anxiety⁴⁴ and contributes to the fear of missing out.⁴⁵

Digital technology can benefit its users, but left unchecked, it can rob us of joy and form us into anxious and empty people.

2.2.3. *Deformed Patience: Impatience and Compulsion*

We can all remember the impatience rising in our chest as we heard the modem beeps while AOL loaded at a snail's pace in the early 2000s. One might expect that, with computing and internet speed lightyears from where they started, impatience would never have the chance to well up inside us, yet we

³⁷ William J. Brady, et al., "How Social Learning Amplifies Moral Outrage Expression in Online Social Networks," *Science Advances* 7.33 (August 2021): 1–14.

³⁸ Natalie Wolchover, "What Is Everyone on the Internet So Angry?" *Scientific America*, 25 July 2012, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-is-everyone-on-the-internet-so-angry/>.

³⁹ Luke Munn, "Angry by Design: Toxic Communication and Technical Architectures," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communities* 7.53 (July 2020): 1–11.

⁴⁰ Whitney Phillips, "The Oxygen of Amplification: Better Practices for Reporting Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators Online," *Data & Society Institute*, May 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/5e6j9v97>.

⁴¹ Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, "Media Use Is Linked to Lower Psychological Well-Being: Evidence from Three Datasets," *Psychiatric Quarterly* 90 (2019): 311–31.

⁴² C. M. Morrison and H. Gore, "The Relationship Between Excessive Internet Use and Depression: A Questionnaire-Based Study of 1,319 Young People and Adults," *Psychopathology* 43 (2010): 121–26, <https://www.karger.com/Article/Abstract/277001>; Farah Younes, et al., "Internet Addiction and Relationships with Insomnia, Anxiety, Depression, Stress and Self-Esteem in University Students: A Cross-Sectional Designed Study," *Plos One* 11.9 (2016): 1–2, <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0161126>.

⁴³ Bryan Andrián Priego-Parra, et al., "Anxiety, Depression, Attitudes, and Internet Addiction During the Initial Phase of the 2019 Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Epidemic: A Cross-Sectional Study in México," *medRxiv* (2020): 3, <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.05.10.20095844v1>.

⁴⁴ Faazila Fathima, V. Vishnu Priya, R. Gayathri, "Social Media and Anxiety—A Survey," *Drug Intervention Today* 12.9 (2019): 1841–44.

⁴⁵ Roz Boustead and Mal Flack, "Moderated-Mediation Analysis of Problematic Social Networking Use: The Role of Anxious Attachment Orientation, Fear of Missing Out and Satisfaction with Life," *Addictive Behaviors* 119 (August 2021), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0306460321001234>.

find the opposite.⁴⁶ This increased impatience expresses itself in using cell phones to “provide for [our] needs as soon as possible” which can result in increased irritability and financial difficulties.⁴⁷

The root of our impatience may be linked with deeper neurological changes facilitated by increased digital media consumption. Microsoft found that between 2000 and 2013, human attention span had dwindled from twelve seconds to eight seconds (as a reference, the attention span of a goldfish is nine seconds).⁴⁸ “The division of attention demanded by the internet strains our cognitive abilities and diminishes our learning and understanding.”⁴⁹

If God is characterized as patient, longsuffering, and committed for the long haul, the instant gratification and distraction of digital media distort this aspect of God’s image in us at a neurological level.

2.2.4. Deformed Gentleness: Violence

If God’s gentleness towards his image-bearers is marked by dealing with us in a way that does not bring harm, then the opposite manifestation in human character would be violence or intentionally trying to harm someone. Emotional violence in the form of cyberbullying is one way this manifests itself in digital media users. Increased internet use results in increased moral disengagement (which the following section discusses more), increasing the likelihood of cyberbullying.⁵⁰

But this online aggression can spill over to real-world violence. A Public Religion Research Institute poll found that 15% of Americans (or 50 million people) believe that “because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country.”⁵¹ This fruit is directly connected to the same technological root from which deformed love and kindness grow, as referenced above. Online forums contributed to the radicalization of domestic terrorists such as Dylan Roof⁵² and Payton Gendron.⁵³ Sharon Martinez, a former white-power skinhead who now works for Free Radicals Project, a group that helps individuals leave extremist groups, notes, “there’s a lot of romanticization of violence among the far-right online, and there aren’t consequences to that In the

⁴⁶ Elias Aboujaoude, “An Ugly Toll of Technology: Impatience and Forgetfulness,” *The New York Times*, June 6, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/07/technology/07brainside.html>.

⁴⁷ Joël Billieux, Martial Van Der Linden, and Lucien Rochet, “The Role of Impulsivity in Actual and Problematic Use of the Mobile Phone,” *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 22 (January 2008): 1206.

⁴⁸ Microsoft, *Attention Span: Customer Insights*, Microsoft Canada (Spring 2015), 6, <https://dl.motamem.org/microsoft-attention-spans-research-report.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Mark Ellingsen, “Social Media and the Cost of Distraction: Neurobiological Perspectives on the Quality of Life,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 33 (2021): 45.

⁵⁰ Taylor R. Nocera, et al., “Moral Disengagement Mechanisms Predict Cyber Aggression among Emerging Adults,” *Cyberpsychology* 16.1 (2022): 1–17.

⁵¹ Public Religion Research Institute, “Understanding QAnon’s Connection to American Politics, Religion, and Media Consumption,” last modified May 27, 2021, <https://www.prri.org/research/qanon-conspiracy-american-politics-report/>.

⁵² Mark Berman, “Prosecutors Say Dylann Roof ‘Self-Radicalized’ Online, Wrote Another Manifesto in Jail,” *Washington Post*, 22 August 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2016/08/22/prosecutors-say-accused-charleston-church-gunman-self-radicalized-online/>.

⁵³ Shayan Sardarizadeh, “Buffalo Shooting: How Far-Right Killers Are Radicalised Online,” *BBC*, 17 May 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-61460468>.

physical world, if you're standing in front of someone and you say something abhorrent, there's a chance they'll punch you. Online, you don't have that, and you escalate into further physical violence without a threat to yourself."⁵⁴

Not everyone who uses the internet will commit acts of violence, but the animosity it creates pulls people in that direction and creates safe havens for violent fantasies to fester.

2.2.5. Deformed Goodness and Faithfulness: Moral Ambiguity

There are several ways the inverse of goodness and faithfulness might be categorized, but I have chosen to put them in the same category and call the inverse "moral ambiguity." If goodness is concerned with knowing and loving what is true and good, then faithfulness is acting in accord with what is true and good.

Many of the previous categories overlap with this section. The anger, hostility, and violence directed at fellow image-bearers are anything but good and faithful. Additionally, moral disengagement is defined as "a cognitive predisposition that individuals reinterpret their immoral behaviors" and has been linked with compulsive internet use⁵⁵ and violent video game use.⁵⁶ Online anonymity and the perceived lack of consequence create an atmosphere that facilitates disinhibition and cyber aggression.⁵⁷

Just like the formation of every other bad fruit, digital technology use does not automatically distort one's sense of goodness and faithfulness to these moral standards, but it does provide the environment where the dark desires of the heart can bloom.

2.2.6. Deformed Self Control: Addiction

If God never makes a rash decision, speaks anything he will later regret, or takes any action outside of his control, then humans reflect this aspect of God through manifesting self-control. The final bad fruit of digital technology is addiction: the inability to control its use or consumption. Uninhibited technological use takes control out of our hands and begins controlling us.

Why is this so addictive? Kaitlin Wooley of Cornell University and Marissa Sharif of the University of Pennsylvania have researched why social media is so enticing and found that it is because

they offer bite-sized content that makes it easy to quickly consume several videos or posts in a row, they often automatically suggest similar content, and many of them even automatically start playing similar videos, reducing the potential for interruptions....

⁵⁴ Rachel Hatzipanagos, "How Online Hate Turns into Real-Life Violence," *The Washington Post*, 30 November 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/11/30/how-online-hate-speech-is-fueling-real-life-violence/>.

⁵⁵ Alexandra Maftei, Andrei-Corneliu Holman, and Ioan-Alex Merlici, "Using Fake News as Means of Cyber-Bullying: The Link with Compulsive Internet Use and Online Moral Disengagement," *Computers in Human Behavior* 127 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.107032>.

⁵⁶ Mengyun et. al, "Violent Video Games," 663.

⁵⁷ Michelle F. Wright, "The Relationship between Young Adults' Beliefs about Anonymity and Subsequent Cyber Aggression," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 16 (2013): 858–62; Michelle F. Wright, "Predictors of Anonymous Cyber Aggression: The Role of Adolescents' Beliefs about Anonymity, Aggression, and the Permanency of Digital Content," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 17 (2014): 431–38.

The accessibility of this media is exactly what makes it so hard for users to break free from the rabbit hole and get back to whatever they were working on.⁵⁸

The dark reality is that addiction is a feature, not a bug: “tech companies encourage behavioral addiction [through] intermittent positive reinforcement and the drive for social approval”⁵⁹ and actively develop and deploy addictive features to enslave people to their devices to increase their bottom line.⁶⁰ “Many Internet companies are learning what the tobacco industry has long known—addiction is good for business.”⁶¹ And once addiction has been formed, breaking the habits can be extremely difficult. Quitting the internet causes withdrawal effects “similar to those noted after termination of many depressant substances such as alcohol, cannabis, and opiate-based drugs.”⁶²

2.3. Summary of Digital Technology’s Deforming Power

The deforming power of digital technology has been demonstrated by study after study. It is important to note that digital technology can deform us, but this is not automatic. In conjunction with the psychological effects of long-term digital technology use, our fallen desires can bend us inwards, just like Adam and Eve. The question becomes whether or not we should avoid digital technology altogether, and if not, how we might set boundaries to ensure we master our tools, not the other way around.

3. Sabbath as Re-Formation

In a world constantly connected to digital technology, what hope do we have to swim against its deforming current? “There is a silver lining in the way technology has clouded our lives with nonstop toil and leisure—it gives us an amazingly simple way to bring everything to a beautiful halt. We can turn our devices off.”⁶³ In this final section, I propose that the ancient practice of weekly Sabbath observance is an excellent way to fight against the deforming power of digital technology and cultivate Christlikeness in us.

3.1. What Is the Sabbath?

The charge to remember the Sabbath and keep this special day holy is the fourth of the Ten Commandments,⁶⁴ where Israel observed a full day of rest (from sundown on Friday to sundown on

⁵⁸ Kaitlin Woolley and Marissa A. Sharif, “The Psychology of Your Scrolling Addiction,” *Harvard Business Review*, 31 January 2022, <https://hbr.org/2022/01/the-psychology-of-your-scrolling-addiction>.

⁵⁹ Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* (New York: Portfolio, 2019), 17.

⁶⁰ Hilary Andersson, “Social Media Apps Are ‘Deliberately’ Addictive to Users,” *BBC*, 4 July 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-44640959>.

⁶¹ Bill Davidow, “Exploiting the Neuroscience of Internet Addiction,” *The Atlantic*, 18 July 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2012/07/exploiting-the-neuroscience-of-internet-addiction/259820/>.

⁶² Phil Reed et. al, “Differential Physiological Changes Following Internet Exposure in Higher and Lower Problematic Internet Users,” *Plos One* (2017): 1–11.

⁶³ Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 94.

⁶⁴ The Sabbath is commanded in Exod 20:8–11 and Deut 5:12–15, though with slight variation in the grounds for Sabbath observance. The Exodus passage is based on following God’s work/rest pattern in creation while the

Saturday). Sabbath observance was expected through the time of Jesus⁶⁵ and was continued by the early church. “The church in the early, medieval, reformation, post-reformation, and modern eras contains prominent leaders who either (1) teach explicitly that God’s creation-week rest is normative, or (2) teach in a way that would not contradict such an interpretation.”⁶⁶ Evangelicals have various convictions regarding Sabbath observance, ranging from viewing the fourth commandment as morally binding to new covenant Christians no longer needing to observe the Sabbath.⁶⁷ The purpose of this concluding section is not to venture into the fray of the Sabbatarian debate. I do not argue that believers *must* observe the Sabbath but rather that they *should* observe it because of the wisdom and benefits it gives. That is, modern Sabbath observance is a re-formatioal practice⁶⁸ that both creates space for the renewal of the *imago Dei* and counteracts the deformative impacts of digital technology.

3.2. Disconnect: Turning Off Our Screens

When we practice the Sabbath and thus turn off our screens, close our laptops, and put away our smartphones for a full day every week, we create a healthy distance between us and the ever-present digital world. By turning away from digital technology, “the Sabbath invites us to a healthy posture of criticism towards normative technologies.”⁶⁹ When we unplug, we remember that the good life is not contingent on constant connectivity. We create a rhythm that buffers our families and detoxes our souls from the deformative pressure of digital technology.

Digital technology’s temptation to make us more like God is laid bare for what they are. Like our parents in the garden, our insatiable need for knowledge is made to wait as the “Sabbath questions our commitment to information as a means to salvation.”⁷⁰ The Sabbath forces us to accept the reality of our creatureliness; we are finite, bound by space and time, limited in our abilities, and dependent on our Creator for provision. Until we turn off the white noise of technology and sit in Sabbath silence, we will find it difficult to fully know these sacred realities.

3.3. Disconnect to Connect; Connect to be Renewed

Removing digital technology once a week may be good, but if that is all it is, it is merely slowing the inevitable. But the Sabbath promises more than mere retreat—it extends the possibility of renewal:

Deuteronomy commandment cites Israel’s redemption from Egypt as the motivation. Israel was also instructed to observe the Sabbath before they received the Ten Commandments as they were to collect manna for six days and rest on the seventh (Exod 16).

⁶⁵ Though Sabbath observance was normative, Israel often failed to obey the fourth commandment, which the prophets spoke out against (e.g., see Isa 58:13–14).

⁶⁶ Jon English Lee, “There Remains a Sabbath Rest for the People of God: A Biblical, Theological, and Historical Defense of Sabbath Rest as a Creation Ordinance” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018), 6–7.

⁶⁷ Christopher John Donato, ed., *Perspectives on the Sabbath: 4 Views* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011).

⁶⁸ I got this phrase from Melissa Davis, “Sabbath as a Counter-Formational Practice in a Culture of Busyness,” *JETS* 64 (2021): 563–81.

⁶⁹ A. J. Swoboda, *Subversive Sabbath: The Surprising Power of Rest in a Nonstop World* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2018), 91.

⁷⁰ Swoboda, *Subversive Sabbath*, 98.

Sabbath disconnects our technologies so that we might reconnect to our Creator. “Being connected” is not a metaphor new to our technological society—Jesus utilized the metaphor quite powerfully. In John 15 he says we are to be “connected” to the vine.... In our technological society, being connected to the internet often distracts us from opportune times to be connected to Christ in relationship. We surround ourselves with devices that help us connect with other people and websites anywhere and at any time. We keep up with the Kardashians better than we do the Holy Spirit.⁷¹

And thus, by creating space away from digital technology, we create space to connect to Christ in deeper, less distracted ways.

Just as the deformation away from God’s image through the effects of digital technology is empirically recognizable, so also is the renewal facilitated by the Sabbath:

Spiritual and psychological growth are enhanced when people have the freedom of time and space to be open and receptive to the healing, loving presence of the Spirit. As a regular, weekly time involving 24 hours of rest and renewal, the practice of Sabbath-keeping provides them with this necessary time for entering the important mode of disengagement.⁷²

Additionally, Sabbath-keeping has been demonstrated to benefit us through “(1) enhanced self-awareness, (2) improved self-care, (3) enriched relationships, (4) developed spirituality, (5) [and it] positively affected the rest of [our] weeks.”⁷³ In another study, “Sabbath-keeping was strongly significantly related to better spiritual well-being of both ... experiencing the presence and power of God in daily life as well as feeling the presence and power of God in ministry.”⁷⁴

4. Conclusion

The serpent tempted Adam and Eve to become more like God on their own terms, yet this tragically resulted in them becoming less like God. Digital technology extends a similar promise to make humans more like God on their terms and has a deforming effect on our minds, bodies, and souls. Weekly Sabbath observance is a re-formational practice that not only creates distance between us and the deforming power of digital technology but also creates the possibility of renewal through undistracted connection to Christ through the Spirit.

⁷¹ Swoboda, *Subversive Sabbath*, 99.

⁷² Joyce E. Earickson, “The Religious Practice of the Sabbath: A Framework for Psychological Health and Spiritual Well-Being” (PhD diss., Alliant International University, 2004), 120.

⁷³ Barbara Baker Speedling, “Celebrating Sabbath as a Holistic Health Practice: The Transformative Power of a Sanctuary in Time,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 58 (2019): 1398.

⁷⁴ Holly Hough et al., “Relationships between Sabbath Observance and Mental, Physical, and Spiritual Health in Clergy,” *Pastoral Psychology* 68 (2019): 189.

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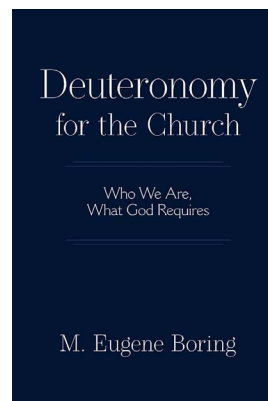
M. Eugene Boring. *Deuteronomy for the Church: Who We Are, What God Requires*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2022. xii + 327 pp. £24.99/\$36.00.

Deuteronomy is arguably the most theologically and ethically rich book in the entire Old Testament. Indeed, it has been said that Deuteronomy stands at the very center of Old Testament theology (Gerhard von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy*, trans. David Stalker [London: SCM, 1953], 37). Yet Deuteronomy has proved particularly challenging for readers to appropriate as Christian scripture. *Deuteronomy for the Church* is an attempt to help Christians, especially pastors and teachers, hear, interpret, and mediate the message of Deuteronomy for the church.

Before retiring, M. Eugene Boring was the I. Wylie and Elizabeth M. Briscoe Professor of New Testament at Brite Divinity School. Boring's expertise in New Testament studies has both positive and negative effects on the book. On the positive side, Boring provides extensive discussions of New Testament texts that appropriate passages from Deuteronomy, are influenced by its theology, or orient readers hermeneutically to hear and understand the message of Deuteronomy. Concerning this final point, Boring includes a helpful discussion of New Testament texts that speak of Christians being incorporated into Israel (ch. 11). Hermeneutically, this widens the perspective of the identity of the "all Israel" to whom Deuteronomy is addressed (p. 178). On the negative side, it sometimes leads to discussions that are insufficiently informed by scholarship on Deuteronomy. One example is his attribution of the typical elements present in Hittite treaties, which are commonly said to be shared by Deuteronomy, to Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty (EST) despite the fact that EST lacks a historical prologue, blessings, instructions about recitation, and instructions about the deposit of the tablet (p. 226). Another example is his discussion of the terminology used for law in Deuteronomy (pp. 274–78), which fails to identify the crucial role these terms play in connecting the stipulations of the Deuteronomistic Code to Moses's encounter with YHWH at Horeb.

A key theme that weaves its way throughout this book is Boring's identification of Deuteronomy as a "strange but true story" (pp. 25–26). This identification of Deuteronomy as a story is, perhaps, the key contribution of Boring's book. According to Boring, the story depicted in Deuteronomy extends from creation, through the history of Israel as God's people, to Deuteronomy's version of the consummation (pp. 74–86). The identification of Deuteronomy as a story has important implications for how Deuteronomy is read by the church. As readers with their own unique stories encounter the story of Deuteronomy, Deuteronomy's story challenges and transforms their story (p. 59). Like later generations of Israelites who did not experience God's acts of deliverance in Egypt, Christians are challenged to make this story their own (pp. 24, 221).

Viewing Deuteronomy as a story also has important implications for how the central law section of Deuteronomy (Deut 12–26)—the Deuteronomistic Code—should be understood. Boring notes that the Deuteronomistic Code is preceded by an extensive sermon (Deut 4–11) that situates these stipulations in the context of Israel's story (p. 26). This context transforms these stipulations from the category of law to the category of ethics (p. 64). For Boring, the ethical teaching of Deuteronomy is not received



by treating these stipulations as law but by living within the story of Deuteronomy (pp. 278–79). A person who lives within this story, for example, will not ignore their neighbor’s wandering ox even if no punishment is tied to the stipulation in Deuteronomy 22:1. Rather, a person who lives within this story cannot see their neighbor’s wandering ox and take no action (p. 279). As readers are shaped by this story, they develop discernment and can “improvise” what it means to be obedient to God in the ever-changing situations they find themselves in (p. 280).

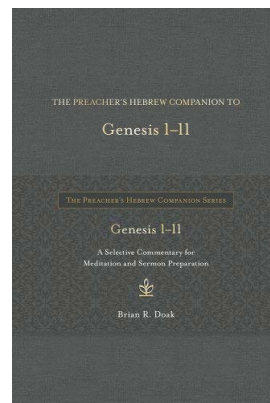
A key emphasis for Boring is the importance of interpreting Deuteronomy through the lens of historical criticism (pp. xi, 87–88). In chapters 5–8, Boring carefully distinguishes the narrative world of Deuteronomy from the history of Israel as it can be reconstructed by historians, the history of how Deuteronomy was composed, and the process by which Deuteronomy became canonical scripture. He maintains that the narrative world created by Deuteronomy differs sharply from these stories. According to Boring, although “Moses was not a fictional character” (p. 111), he did not deliver the speeches in Deuteronomy, which were written centuries later (p. 97) and reached their canonical form towards the end of the exile (p. 105). The rules about **מלחמה** warfare, which entailed the complete annihilation of the Canaanites, were not delivered by God (p. 202), were never carried out (p. 203), and were written at a time when the inhabitants of Canaan no longer existed (p. 202). He asserts that Deuteronomy can be said to have “Mosaic authority” and “a historical core that goes back to the exodus period and to Moses himself” but only in the sense that Deuteronomy developed from a tradition that had the figure of Moses and the events of the exodus at its foundation (p. 97). As a result, his analysis at times focuses on the narrative world of Deuteronomy while at other times focuses on the message of Deuteronomy for its readers in exile. Needless to say, this approach will prove problematic to readers who hold to a traditional understanding of biblical inerrancy and the composition of Deuteronomy. Nonetheless, Boring’s presentation provides an excellent window into how non-traditionalist readers can appropriate Deuteronomy as Scripture.

Mark Steven Francois
Calvary Gospel Church
Blind River, Ontario, Canada

Brian R. Doak. *Genesis 1–11: A Selective Commentary for Meditation and Sermon Preparation*. The Preacher’s Hebrew Companion Series. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2023. ISBN: 978-1-68307-344-4. xx + 280 pp. £46.50/\$49.95.

Brian R. Doak’s commentary marks one of the first entries in an exciting new line-up of original-language resources. According to the series editors, Jonathan G. Kline and Sean McDonough, the aim of the series is to support busy preachers by providing guidance through the Hebrew text. Their approach empowers preachers “to integrate original-language exegesis and homiletics” (p. xi). To say things differently, this series aims to help students, clergy, and other readers bridge the gap from introductory language study to fluent reading of the biblical text—which is where the real payoff and enjoyment come. Incontrovertibly, they succeed in this endeavor.

The book consists of ten sections, each comprised of a select set of verses accompanied by lexical and grammatical information. Each passage ends with



a brief section titled “From Text to Sermon,” in which the author highlights particular insights. The specific passages include “The First Acts of Creation” (Gen 1:1–5), “The Creation of Humans” (1:26–31), “The Sabbath” (2:1–3), “The Man, The Animals, and the Woman” (2:18–25), “Man, Woman, And Serpent” (3:1–7), “Consequences in the Garden” (3:14–21), “Brother Murders Brother” (4:1–16), “God Decides to Flood the Earth” (6:1–22), “God Restores the Earth After the Flood” (8:20–9:7), and “The Tower of Confusion” (11:1–9). Doak is to be commended on his fine selection of texts as they represent some of the most important events of this pericope of Scripture from the perspective of biblical history, theology, and exegesis.

After a brief introduction to each main passage, the Hebrew text is presented in an interlinear format. This includes parsing information, contextual glosses, and a transliteration of the passage as a pronunciation help for those whose Hebrew is at a rudimentary level. That said, given the technical nature of the transliteration, it is regrettable that there is no accompanying sigla guide.

With respect to glosses, it was a prudent decision to intentionally err on the “literal” end of the spectrum (see p. xiv). However, in some cases, more nuance or texture could have been added. For instance, to include “basket” as a *contextual* gloss for “ark” in Gen 6:14 borders on the ludicrous, particularly when the canonical connection to the papyrus vessel of Moses is well-established in the comments (see pp. 192–92). Additionally, there is strong linguistic evidence to support the assertion that “reeds” is not only an acceptable alternative to “nests/rooms” but also a better rendering of the Hebrew term קָנִים (Gen 6:14). Unfortunately, Doak fails to note this. Finally, the “sweet” aspect of the “smell” of Noah’s sacrifice, i.e., רִיחַ הַנִּיחָח (Gen 8:21), is not mentioned in Doak’s analysis of the flood (pp. 172–245), despite “sweet” being the most “literal” gloss.

One might argue that it would have been prudent for the author to consistently use precise nomenclature (*waqatal/yiqtol*) for the prefix/suffix conjugations, rather than “perfect/imperfect” (cf. p. xxi). As Doak himself maintains: “Hebrew does not function strictly on a tense system in terms of past, present, and future” (p. 147). In light of this, why use such imprecise terminology at all?

Syntactically speaking, Doak’s attention to detail is exceptional, despite there being no references to the standard Hebrew reference grammars. For instance, in his discussion of humanity “ruling over” the earth (Gen 1:28), Doak judiciously states:

Translators must ... be careful to avoid ... “illegitimate totality transfer” ... we would not want to rush to assume that because [these] verbs ... describe slavery in some contexts, they must be understood with explicit reference to slavery here. (p. 29)

Elsewhere, Doak rightly maintains that while the translation of the conjunction כִּי in Gen 8:21 as “even though” rather than “for,” “since,” or “because” may, perhaps, be “stretching” the normal definition of the term, the conjunction here must be rendered as either a concessive or emphatic to best “understand the sense of the text. The theological and ethical question at stake here concerns why God decided to flood the earth upon seeing the utter wickedness of humanity (Gen 6:5–7) and yet here vows never to do this again—even while he observes that humans are essentially in the same moral mess as before” (p. 224). Such fastidious attention is most impressive.

One also appreciates Doak’s concern for literary sensitivity. For example, in translating Genesis 1:2, Doak renders תְּהוֹ וְבָהוּ as “chaos and chaotic,” elegantly capturing the sound repetition of the original language (cf. Robert Alter’s “welter and waste”; noted by Doak, p. 8).

When it comes to preaching, Doak's comments are consistent with the ecumenical beliefs stated in the Apostles' Creed and will benefit most evangelicals (see pp. xvi–xvii). One example should suffice to illustrate this viewpoint. Doak opines:

As we think about how to illustrate the themes of Gen 9 ... the rich world of film again comes to mind, especially the many cinematic plotlines that deal with the reciprocity of justice (either fulfilled or denied) ... [both] *The Revenant* (2015) and *True Grit* (the original 1969 version or the 2010 remake), depict wounded characters in search of blood-for-blood justice. Viewers of films like these can consider how the search for justice either can turn into (unholy) vengeance or can rightly fulfill the demands of ethical reciprocity (p. 245).

Visually speaking, things are beyond beautiful! The typeface for the Hebrew font is superb (all diacritical marks for MT pointing are clear) and the effective use of white space, special shading, and ornate, intricate designs neatly divide the text and catch the eye. The opaqueness of the pages also prevents the facing text being obscured by that on the next page.

One critique is that the absence of “Author” and “Extrabiblical References” indices reduces the user-friendliness of the book. Also, since only two commentaries are noted in the “works cited” section—E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) and Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) —most users would have benefited from an annotated “for further reading” list. Lastly, a “ribbon marker” bookmark would also have been a nice touch.

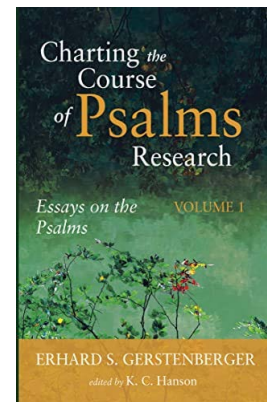
This book will be of immense assistance to students in Bible colleges, Christian universities, and seminaries, pastors, and laypeople who are curious about biblical studies. I highly recommended it!

Dustin Burlet
Millar College of the Bible
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

Erhard S. Gerstenberger. *Charting the Course of Psalms Research: Essays on the Psalms, Volume 1*. Edited by K. C. Hanson. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022. 203 pp. £25.00/\$29.00.

Research in the Psalms has a long and storied history, and Erhard Gerstenberger is an important scholar on the Psalms in the tradition of Gunkel and Mowinckel. In this collection, K. C. Hanson has brought together key essays and articles from the last fifty years to highlight Gerstenberger's contributions and his focus on the *Sitz im Leben* from which the Psalms arose.

There are eight essays in this collection, ranging in date from 1974–2014, and still to come are two more volumes slated for release in this series over the next few years. One constant throughout this volume and evidently Gerstenberger's most enduring contribution is his four-fold understanding of the sources behind the psalms, namely The Family, The Village or Town, The Monarchy, and The Post-Exilic Community (pp. 75–82). Naturally, such approaches rely on various levels of conjecture and speculation, as well as appropriating insights from the psalmody of the ancient



Near East. His reliance on this is seen in his acceptance of Mowinckel's festival model, which assigns 80 out of 150 psalms to such festivals held to be in analogue to other known festivals (p. 80).

He shows how this plays out, as psalms naturally flow out of their various spheres. For example, Psalm 92 is a psalm from a cult context ("For the Sabbath") and Psalm 102 is a more personal or family psalm ("A prayer of the afflicted one") (p. 129). He points also to the "marked religious speech in profane settings" such as the prayers offered from bed (Pss 6:7; 63:7), from the field (Ps 65:10–14) or in the military (e.g., Ps 68), all of which suggest a dynamic movement between the individual and official use of the psalms (pp. 132, 135).

These reflections are constructive approaches to the concept of *Sitz im Leben*, an often-difficult concept for the psalms because they are by their nature and use largely detached units with little traces of their origin(s). Perhaps then this is Gerstenberger's greatest gift, in making this discipline more approachable to readers of the psalms.

Regardless of their origin, Gerstenberger wants readers to consider that the psalms can be fruitfully considered a form of communication expressing distance. Laments are necessary because the object of help is so far off, and is not nearby to help; praise on the other hand is understood as the response to a distant but generous king who is lauded for his gracious gifts (p. 120). This distance is even greater when it comes to wisdom or didactic psalms, where God is no longer interacted with directly, but instead through his inscripturated word. While not all would agree with this reading, and can think of counterexamples of psalms which express and give thanks for nearness, at the very least this is a reminder to consider what distance is being expressed in any given psalm, and perhaps whether this changes within a psalm and by what means.

There are some stimulating essays in this collection. His article from *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms* (2014) is engrossing, his final essay against canonical readings is challenging, and his general ground-up theology is illuminating, even if not all readers will follow him all the way.

Nonetheless, there are issues with such a collection. The jumpy chronology is a little disorienting (the order is 1985, 1974, 2007, 2005, 2012, 2003, 2014, 1994), and some of the older essays stand at odds with some points in later ones, while the predictions of future directions in psalms research in the first essay have not all aged well. There is also a certain degree of repetition that a more judicious selection may have been able to eliminate.

Moreover, there were several areas in which I disagreed with Gerstenberger. Some are because of our difference in "school," while others are more fundamental. In his third essay, he suggests that the psalms are not so much God's word to us as our words to God (p. 86). I would hope that one would say both: the psalms are not only people speaking to God, but are also God's gracious word to us, revealing himself, his character, and his purposes. However, in his fourth essay he clarifies his perspective by describing the book as "a treasury of early Jewish theologies," which, rather than being instances of applying a pre-existing religious conviction (i.e., worship of YHWH) to circumstances, are instead examples of the "needs of congregations and their theological solutions" (p. 102). While I understand his push-back against a rigid biblical theology, I would suggest our biblical theology should be flexible enough to admit new information, to be shaped by what we learn of God in his self-revelatory word, rather than being rigid and blind to the nuances of the Scriptures. His stereotyping may thus be appropriate criticism against some roughshod approaches to Scripture, but as Christian listeners, we should all be willing to be challenged and have our understanding of God shaped by God's word.

Another area which will no doubt provoke consternation from some readers is his rejection of canonical readings of the Psalter as a book. This approach has become mainstream since the work of Brevard Childs (“Reflections on the Modern Study of the Psalms,” in *Magnalia Dei, the Mighty Acts of God: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright*, ed. Frank Moore Cross et al. [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976], 377–88) and Gerald Wilson (Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, SBLDS 76 [Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985]), and more recently in authors such as Nancy deClaissé-Walford (“The Canonical Approach to Scripture and The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter,” in *The Shape and Shaping of the Book of Psalms: The Current State of Scholarship*, ed. Nancy L. DeClaissé-Walford [Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014], 1–11). His final (but third oldest) essay unequivocally rebuts such approaches: “As nice as it sounds when a transparent ordering principle of the Psalter is presented, there is a great danger precisely in the theological uniformity it claims” (p. 164). As mentioned, his “school” is form criticism, which focuses on the importance of *Sitz im Leben*, and therefore his primary interest is the original forms which lie behind our text, and what is revealed about life and culture and tradition when the words in the Book of Psalms were first uttered. Although he admits to some shaping, he is adamant that “The Psalter is not a ‘book’ in our sense, certainly not a theological textbook with progressively unfolding statements about God; according to its nature it cannot be” (p. 162). This final essay challenges readers to (re)consider the validity of such approaches. This is not to say we must not read the psalms in this way; he even suggests we may, but we do so with a consciousness that we as readers bring this to the text and it may not flow out as axiomatically as we might have previously thought.

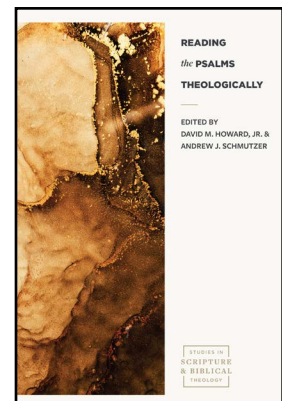
Overall, this collection of essays is certainly a wonderful primer to Gerstenberger’s work as a figurehead of form-criticism. It will be interesting to see what lies around the corner in the future volumes.

Douglas R. Fyfe
Carlingford, NSW, Australia

David M. Howard Jr. and Andrew J. Schmutzer, eds. *Reading the Psalms Theologically*. Studies in Scripture & Biblical Theology. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2023. xxi + 355 pp. £24.11/\$29.99.

The Psalms, oft-called the “anatomy of the soul,” have long been a favorite portion of Scripture for many Bible readers. Individually, psalms are read, memorized, and treasured. Yet, in recent years, scholars and pastors have grown to appreciate the Psalms in a new way—as a product of collection and organization that tells a story and teaches a theological message. In other words, the Psalms appear to have been consciously organized into a “canonical shape.” They are not only ad-hoc songs providing isolated inspiration. Each psalm is, in effect, a chapter which contributes to the message of a whole book. *Reading the Psalms Theologically* summarizes and furthers research on reading the Psalms in this way.

Reading the Psalms Theologically consists of essays by eighteen scholars from a variety of backgrounds and academic experiences. The volume also covers a wide range of topics. The opening chapter by David Howard and Michael Searly covers recent trends in Psalms scholarship, highlighting the issue of “canonical shaping.” The next five chapters apply



in various ways the method of reading the Psalms as a shaped collection. Five more chapters address the issue of lament, the next three study the role of the nations in Psalms, and the final four essays relate to God's sovereignty.

Like most works made up of essays, this volume has some essays that are more useful than others. May Young's essay "The Art of Lament in Lamentations" (pp. 141–55) is only tangentially related to the Psalms. I am unsure why it was included in this work. Hassell Bullock's essay on the verb נָשַׁן (pp. 127–40) was interesting, but may have been the least theological of the essays. The essay was more like a word study. Another essay on ecology by J. Clinton McCann Jr. (pp. 246–56) was out of place and weak in its scholarship. The argument contained unpersuasive exegesis from the Psalms and large claims with little evidence. For example, McCann states that Earth is amidst a sixth great extinction spasm after the dinosaurs were wiped out by the fifth spasm sixty-five million years ago (p. 249). He cites no evidence for this claim. The book's most useful essays include the first six chapters as well as the final chapter on Psalm 110. The most convincing essays were chapters 2 (by Peter Ho) and 4 (by David Gundersen), which both examined the Psalter in light of the Davidic covenant and/or the Messiah. In short, they argue that the Psalms tell a story beginning with God's Messiah (Pss 1–2), who faces enemies (Books I and II) yet still reigns (Ps 72), followed by the breakdown of the covenant beginning in Book III, which book ends with rejection (Pss 88–89). Yet as Book IV begins, the great prophet Moses "intercedes" and the covenant carries forward with YHWH reigning (e.g., Ps 93). The "seams" between books IV and V (Pss 104–107) tell of God's regathering his people in salvation, and then book V ends with praise to YHWH as King (Pss 145–150). As Gundersen writes, "What then is the Psalter? The Psalter is a carefully crafted postexilic anthology with a narrative structure reflecting Israel's historical hope for the restoration of the Davidic kingdom whose establishment would consummate the purposes and promises embedded in God's covenants with Abraham, Israel, and David" (p. 95).

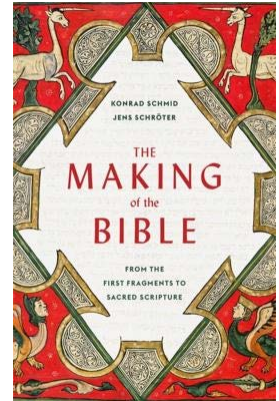
All of the essays come from a generally evangelical perspective, an important point when one seeks to read the Psalms *theologically*. One theological point that may give pause to some readers is Philip Johnston's examination of Sheol in the Old Testament (pp. 174–77). Johnston argues that Sheol is the place of the dead for all, God's people or otherwise. One wishes he would have used a more systematic approach to integrate the Psalms' portrayals of Sheol with the rest of Scripture. He could also have interacted with theologians on the question. Also, Johnston draws conclusions based on select psalms (e.g., Ps 6) while dismissing others that point to redemption from Sheol (e.g., Psalms 16, 23, 73; see pp. 177–82). He may be begging the question, that is, believing that there is no redemption from Sheol in Psalms, and therefore focusing his study on those Psalms which appear to point that way. Why not attempt to show how all of these Psalms about Sheol fit together to paint a coherent picture of the afterlife?

This volume serves as a wonderful summary and introduction to recent evangelical scholarship on the Psalms. No other work will provide the *state of the art* in Psalms studies and advancement in the discussion of how to interpret the Psalms as a collective. The work has helped me to understand various details of the Psalms, including the importance of the superscriptions. Studying this work will bring a richness to preaching the Psalms *together* as Christian Scripture.

Drew N. Grumbles
Albany Baptist Church
Albany, New York, USA

Konrad Schmid and Jens Schröter. *The Making of the Bible: From the First Fragments to Sacred Scripture*. Translated by Peter Lewis. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. 440 pp. £28.95/\$35.00.

Konrad Schmid and Jens Schröter have written an engaging and informed book on the origins and canonization of Scripture from a critical perspective. The first chapter suggests that “the Bible” can refer to different translations in different languages, as well as different collections of books, and even different arrangements of those books. For instance, Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants disagree on the books included in the Bible. According to the authors, biblical books were not written as canonical texts, and this led to dissimilar canons. The critical presuppositions of the authors become evident with statements such as the “authorship [of Deuteronomy] has no more to do with Moses than does ... [a] pseudepigraphic text dating from the first century CE” (p. 38). Without argument, they state that “some of the letters of Paul are pseudonymous, as are the letters bearing the names of Peter, John, James, and Jude” (p. 39).



The second chapter introduces Israelite scribal culture. The authors explain the history of writing in Israel, the development of scribal schools, and show how the emergence of written prophets accords with archaeological evidence. The chapter also introduces how critical scholars understand the emergence and compilation of biblical traditions. For readers unaware of critical scholarship from the past few decades, the chapter presents theories of biblical origins according to the latest research among critical scholars. The authors repeat throughout the book that the Bible required constant updating as new situations in Israel caused scribes to reflect upon older traditions. They suggest that the constant updating of biblical texts mitigated against canon formation until at least the Persian empire.

The third and fourth chapters suggest that forms of Judaism arose during and after the Babylonian exile. These groups slowly began to view the Pentateuch as normative. This led to a more stable form of the Pentateuch, as well as the Prophets, although textual updating continued. Divergent forms of the books and religious practice persisted as evidenced by the Samaritan Pentateuch, LXX, Qumran and Elephantine literature. The authors also note that pseudepigraphic and rewritten biblical texts, such as 1 Enoch and Jubilees, flourished after the exile. They maintain that no concept of a set canon formed during this period.

The fifth chapter considers early Christian acceptance of Jewish literature. The authors argue that the earliest Christians had no concept of canon, but still read Israel's Scriptures as authoritative. However, they read Israel's Scriptures as prophetic and centered on God's work in history “through the agency of Jesus Christ” (p. 212). Christians further claimed that Gentiles could unite with God's people, and this allowed for the reception of Israel's Scripture beyond Jewish communities.

The sixth and seventh chapters discuss the formation of the New Testament among Christians and the emergence of rabbinic literature among Jews. The authors emphasize that the Scriptures of Christians and Jews arose in dialogue and debate with one another. They also argue that the Christian canon remained fluid for centuries and could have taken a different form. Despite prioritizing evidence that suggests diversity in the early church, they avoid sensationalist claims. For instance, they state definitively that the New Testament Gospels were written first, widely accepted, and viewed as authoritative from an early date. Christians and Jews had distinct reasons for developing their canons of Scripture. Thus, the Jewish canon became standardized by the early 2nd century AD, whereas Christian

canon lists disagreed on the inclusion of certain books and forms of those books into the 4th and 5th centuries.

The book's closing chapter presents the historical influence of the Bible on art, music, and literature. The Bible has significantly influenced history and become the "book of books." Throughout, the authors contend that, "although the impression has been created, since the invention of printing that 'the Bible' is a precisely defined body of scriptures, this impression is soon dispelled when one looks at how the Bible came into being" (p. 279). They even hope that "the increasing use of texts in digital form will help us move away from the image of a defined corpus of scriptures set in stone and toward one that is more flexible" (p. 279).

The authors are accomplished and informed experts on a wide range of topics. At times, they present plausible arguments in support of their claims. At other times, they privilege data that problematizes the uniformity of Jewish and Christian traditions.

The book could have said more about the development and influence of Scripture outside of the West. Although the book briefly mentions the Ethiopian canon, more could have been said about the influence of the Bible on art, music, and literature in Africa, the Middle East, South and East Asia.

Students and seminary professors will find the book valuable as a summary of up-to-date critical scholarship on the origins of Scripture. Too often evangelical students are introduced to forms of critical scholarship that have not been prominent for decades. This book would remedy the problem.

Pastors and theological students should look elsewhere for guidance on these topics. The same topics are considered from an evangelical perspective in John D. Meade and Peter J. Gurry, *Scribes & Scripture: The Amazing Story of How We Got the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022) and Ched Spellman, *One Holy Book: A Primer on How the Bible Came to Be and Why It Matters* (Cedarville, OH: Codex, 2021). Pastors will find these books more profitable for their ministry.

G. Kyle Essary

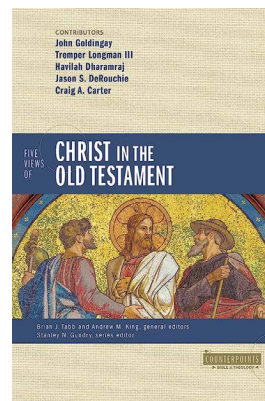
Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Brian J. Tabb and Andrew M. King, eds. *Five Views of Christ in the Old Testament: Genre, Authorial Intent, and the Nature of Scripture*. Counterpoints. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022. 322 pp. £18.99/\$26.99.

This book is brilliant. By now most *Themelios* readers will be familiar with the Counterpoints series from Zondervan. Each contributor presents their argument in 25–30 pages, with those arguments followed by a response of four or five pages each from the other contributors, before a final rejoinder of a few pages. It is a helpful and stimulating format. On this particular volume, Tabb and King have done a great job.

In examining the question of "how should Christians today read the Old Testament in light of Christ?" (p. 16), Tabb and King offer John Goldingay reading the Old Testament apart from the New in his First Testament Priority View, Tremper Longman III arguing for two readings of the Old Testament in his Christotelic View, Havilah Dharamraj presenting a reader-focused Reception-



Centered Intertextual View, Jason S. DeRouchie proposing that the Old Testament be read through Jesus via the Redemptive-Historical Christocentric View, and Craig A. Carter advocating reading the Old Testament with the Patristic theologians in the Premodern View.

There is much that I wish to praise in this volume. First, the lineup consists of five excellent scholars who are careful and serious in their work. Even when disagreeing with their conclusions I was appreciative of their serious engagement with the task at hand. There is an admirable attempt to include as much breadth and diversity in approach as possible within a broadly confessional Christian framework. Furthermore, it is particularly pleasing to see scholars outside of the US involved in the project, although more could have been done on that front. Nonetheless, the ensemble is high caliber. Second, the format provides an excellent example of disagreeing with civility—this is especially appreciated and pertinent in our social media driven cancel culture. We need to learn how to disagree respectfully, and for the most part the contributors demonstrated such. Third, in an increasingly biblically illiterate age it is vitally important that Christian leaders fight to reclaim the Old Testament as Christian Scripture. We cannot let the Old Testament become untethered from the New, becoming a book of ancient tales from the Jewish faith. *Five Views of Christ in the Old Testament* is a promising contribution to that conversation and forces the reader to wrestle with holding the Old and New Testaments together. Fourth, requiring the contributors to work out their methodologies on the same three case studies was extremely helpful. The similarities and differences between approaches were readily evident in the worked case studies of Genesis 22:1–19, Proverbs 8:22–31 and Isaiah 42:1–4.

A single quibble arose while reading the volume: the inclusion of Craig A. Carter as a contributor. I have nothing against him, but I found it curious that the other four contributors specialize in Old Testament while Carter's expertise is systematic and patristic theology. I later discovered that he is working on a three-volume commentary on Isaiah for the *International Theological Commentary* series published by T&T Clark, which helps explain his inclusion. Nonetheless, to my mind the volume would work best with five Old Testament scholars providing their views or else five scholars from different disciplines presenting their approaches (i.e., OT scholar, NT scholar, biblical theologian, systematic theologian, and church historian). But that this was my only quibble simply underscores the excellence of the volume.

In sum, *Five Views of Christ in the Old Testament* is a great introduction to Christological hermeneutics of the Old Testament. Any pastor or seminary student would benefit from reading it and I can easily envisage it forming a basis for class discussion and debate in a seminary course. Tabb and King write in the conclusion: "The goal, however, is not to adopt a particular label, but rather, to develop a faithful and robust approach to Scripture that is self-aware of our presuppositions and methodology" (p. 293). This they achieve with the able help of the contributors.

S. D. Ellison
Irish Baptist College
Moir, Northern Ireland, UK

— NEW TESTAMENT —

Chrys C. Caragounis. *New Testament Investigations: A Diachronic Approach*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 487. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022. xiii + 402 pp. £141.70/\$187.

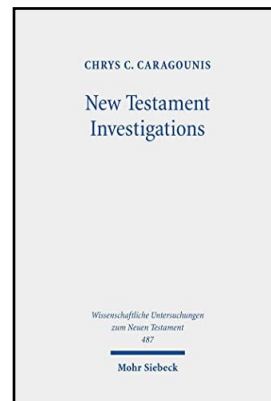
With this collection of essays, Chrys Caragounis, professor emeritus of biblical studies at Lund University in Sweden, has offered the reader serious investigations into “exegetical problems in the synoptics, in John, and especially in Paul” (p. viii).

The first, introductory chapter discusses his diachronic approach to Greek. He argues, in departure from such scholars as Friedrich Blass, that there is significant continuity between “Modern Hellenic,” which he dates from AD 600 to present day, and “Ancient Hellenic” (p. 7). To support this, he states that “54.71%” of Homeric words have been preserved in Neo-Hellenic Greek and, even more strikingly, he asserts that “92.78% of the vocabulary of the New Testament is either spoken or understood in Neohellenic” (p. 15). With John 15:1–6 as a test case, drawing from such works as Aesop’s Fables, he argues that by the middle of the third century BC ἄμπελος carried the sense of “vineyard” rather than “vine” and thus the sense of John 15:2 is that Jesus is the vineyard and believers are vines in the vineyard.

The remainder of the book is divided into four parts. The first part (chapters 2–5) discusses linguistic issues. The second part (chapters 6–7) gives attention to background studies. The third part (chapters 8–10) explores Johannine writings and, finally, the fourth and longest part discusses Paul’s writings.

A few highlights ought to give the reader a sense of Caragounis’s contributions. Inquiring into the meaning of Ἐταῖρε, ἐφ’ ὃ πάρει in Matthew 26:50, Caragounis argues that ἑταῖρος does not connote friendliness but is rather “a mere word of address” (p. 54). Thus, one could read this sentence as “Friend, [keep yourself] to the point” (p. 54), i.e., Jesus is telling Judas to get on with betraying him. Caragounis makes the case—drawing from the medical vocabulary used by Luke in Luke 14:2 and Acts 3:2–8 and astronomical words used in Matthew 24:29 and Mark 13:24 when paraphrasing the LXX—that the worldview current in New Testament times and assumed by New Testament authors was the Hellenic worldview. In addition, the author pushes against the use of the term “Greco-Roman” since it fails to recognize the differences that exist between Hellenic and Latin authors and their respective cultures.

Fascinatingly, the author argues that the background for John 1:1 is not Jewish but rather Stoic and Heraclitean and thus λόγος designates not “word” but “a Divine Person” (p. 120); as such, John 1:1–13 would garner the agreement and the ear of John’s intended audience—the Stoics and Heracliteans of Ephesus—giving them opportunity to hear the gospel (cf. John 1:14). He provides a thorough analysis and critique of social science approaches to the setting of Corinth. Here, he pushes against reconstructions that “the Corinthian Church’s situation reflected the Roman stratification as well as the Roman patron-client institution” and “consisted of a very small group of believers” (p. 196), arguing instead that the Corinthian church was large and belonging to all strata of society except “the highest level” (p. 195). Caragounis, then, gives us his perspective on the vexing question of the New Perspective on Paul. He argues that both Sanders and Dunn have missed the mark since the former “has not given a reliable



picture of the many-faceted Judaism” and the latter has “mistranslated and misinterpreted the Hellenic text of Gal 2:15–16” (p. 226).

There are a number of reasons to commend this book. To begin with, Caragounis’s arguments for a diachronic approach to the Greek language are a significant contribution to scholarship. Though not all may agree that the Greek language has been relatively stable from its beginnings to the present, the evidence that Caragounis offers at the very least invites further exploration into this question. Additionally, he pushes against an overreliance on Jewish approaches to the New Testament. Clearly, the New Testament, as written mainly by Jewish authors, does draw from Jewish thinking, but Caragounis reminds us that this ought not obscure the fact that Hellenism also exerted culture pressures on the thought-world of NT authors. Lastly, the essays are stimulating, well researched and well argued.

Two weaknesses must be mentioned as well. First, while Caragounis’s critique of the New Perspective on Paul is welcomed, one wishes he had dialogued with post-New Perspective exegetes such as John M. G. Barclay to provide a more well-rounded assessment of current scholarship. Second, in the penultimate chapter of the book he argues that Paul did not teach the resurrection of the body in 1 Corinthians 15; rather, Paul presented the immortality of the soul in Jewish garb. However, this fails to account for the logic of Paul’s argument, which connects the resurrection of believers with the bodily resurrection of Jesus (cf. 1 Cor 15:1–20). Also, his reading of 1 Corinthians 15 does not agree with other Pauline texts on the resurrection such as Romans 8:18–24 and it renders unintelligible Paul’s discussion of the resurrection and the responses of his audience, as recounted by Luke in Acts 17:22–32 and 23:1–11. Caragounis, then, appears to have allowed the pendulum to swing too widely with an overreliance on Hellenistic sources.

Despite the aforementioned weaknesses, this is a truly a remarkable book. By putting his decades of study into these essays, Caragounis, a senior NT scholar, has demonstrated the need for returning to Hellenistic sources contemporaneous with the NT, reminded the reader of the need to reevaluate trends in linguistics, sociology, and history, and stimulated further avenues of exegetical exploration. Due to the technical nature of his discussions and the use of (often) untranslated texts of Greek, this book will be most useful for a serious student of the New Testament or NT scholar.

Thomas Haviland-Pabst
Montreat College
Asheville, North Carolina, USA

Matthew Pawlak. *Sarcasm in Paul's Letters*. Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 182. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023. xvi + 276 pp. £75.00/\$99.99.

Pawlak, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Tübingen, offers a unique glimpse into Paul's undisputed letters with his exploration of the use of sarcasm. Pawlak states that his intention is not only to fill a lacuna in scholarship but also "to determine systematically when Paul engages in sarcasm ... and how the presence of sarcasm influences the interpretation of each passage" (p. 1).

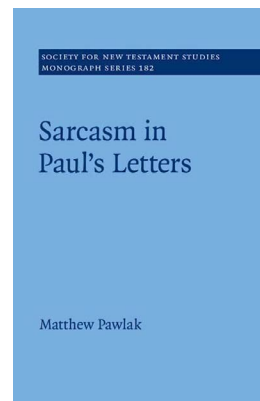
This monograph is divided into two parts. In the first part, Pawlak seeks to define and give parameters as to how the reader can recognize the use of sarcasm. In the second part, he gives attention to sarcasm in Galatians (ch. 4), Romans (ch. 5), 1 and 2 Corinthians (chs. 6–7) and offers a concluding chapter synthesizing his findings and providing suggestions for further research.

In his survey of ancient discussions of irony and sarcasm in the first chapter, Pawlak notes that "there remains a clear connection between irony, sarcasm, and other speech acts" such as "self-deprecating irony," "negation," and "mockery" (p. 14). Moreover, a link is made between sarcasm and mockery, with delivery being the distinguishing mark between sarcasm and other forms of mockery. Pawlak turns to modern research on verbal irony in order to define sarcasm more precisely as "a subset of verbal irony in which an utterance that would normally communicate a positive attitude or evaluation implies a negative attitude or evaluation" (p. 32).

Pawlak surveys irony and sarcasm in Pauline scholarship. He concludes that approaches to irony and sarcasm in Pauline studies thus far have been largely inconsistent and lacking clarity. In the second chapter, he explores the use of sarcasm in the Septuagint. Pawlak discovers that "sarcasm normally functions as an implicit challenge to what the speaker perceives as a claim to some positive quality made by another party" (p. 58). Job's friends sarcastically challenge Job's innocence; Job sarcastically challenges their wisdom and God's justice; and God sarcastically challenges "Job to display divine intelligence," effectively exposing his "ignorance" and thus inability "to call God to account" (p. 58).

After looking at the use of sarcasm in other Greek texts (ch. 3), such as Lucian's *The Passing of Peregrinus*, Pawlak concludes the first part of the book by answering two questions: "How is sarcasm expressed?" (p. 108) and "What does sarcasm do?" (p. 109). With the former question, he notes various cues, such as "repetition" (p. 108), "exaggerated politeness," and following a sarcastic remark with "a literal negative evaluation" (p. 109). With the latter question, sarcasm serves to implicitly challenge a positive claim made by another person, usually directed at someone of lesser social rank though not always.

Some highlights of his exegesis of the Pauline texts in view will give the reader a sense of Pawlak's insights. Pawlak describes Paul's tone in Galatians 1:6 and 5:12, addressing the congregation and the opponents, respectively, as admitting of two possible readings given the ambiguity of language: (1) direct rebuke or (2) rebuke with hints of sarcasm. Due to Paul's "tendentious tone" (p. 128), it is difficult for Pawlak to decide with certainty. He distinguishes Paul's description of the Jerusalem apostles in Galatians 2:2, 6, and 9 from Galatians 1:6 and 5:12, arguing that the "polyvalent language" used in Galatians 2 reflects "the complicated nature of his relationship with the Jerusalem apostles" (p. 129). Here, we see Pawlak commendably exercise caution by not imposing a sarcastic tone on Paul that may not be present.



Pawlak goes on to discuss such passages as Romans 2:17–19; 3:8; and 11:19–20. He argues that the rhetorical questions found throughout the letter ought to be considered sarcastic, with Paul citing “someone else’s sarcastic criticism of his position” (p. 159). According to Pawlak, Paul employs sarcasm in 2:17–20 and 11:19–20 to direct the reader’s attention to the arrogance of his interlocutors. Discussing 1 Corinthians, he describes Paul’s use of sarcasm as “varied in both form and function” (p. 191), with Paul dismissing Greek “rhetoric and ‘wisdom,’” on the one hand, and more “tendentious” (p. 192) in his use of sarcasm in 1 Cor 8:1, 9–11, on the other hand.

Pawlak’s monograph proves to be a significant contribution to our understanding of Paul’s undisputed letters. By paying careful attention to tone as he is searching for clues of sarcasm, Pawlak has offered us ways to understand Paul’s intention more accurately. For example, in his discussion of Romans, Pawlak makes the compelling case that Paul’s interaction with other voices in Rom 3:1–9 signals a “diatribe” rather than a “dialogue” (p. 133). With a diatribe, the voices remain Paul’s since the interlocutors are hypothetical rather than real.

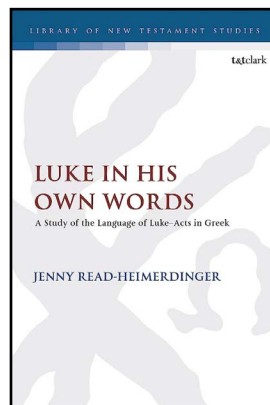
Moreover, Pawlak discerns two rhetorical devices distinct from sarcasm in 1 Corinthians. First, commenting on 4:9–13, he characterizes the tone of the paragraph as “guiltive” (p. 171), which, although approximating sarcasm, differs in its lack of pretense. Second, commenting on 11:19, Pawlak makes a strong case for a “facetious” reading of the verse (p. 189). Unlike sarcasm, facetiousness pretends to assume the validity of the premise (i.e., division is necessary) in order to challenge the premise.

In summary, Pawlak’s monograph is groundbreaking as his precise and thorough analysis of the functions of sarcasm in Paul’s undisputed letters demonstrates a sensitivity to Paul’s overall tone. His approach has much exegetical promise and this monograph will be highly useful for any serious student or scholar of Paul’s letters.

Thomas Haviland-Pabst
Montreat College
Asheville, North Carolina, USA

Jenny Read-Heimerdinger. *Luke in His Own Words: A Study of the Language of Luke-Acts in Greek*. Library of New Testament Studies 672. London: T&T Clark, 2022. x + 248 pp. £85.00/\$115.00.

Dr Jenny Read-Heimerdinger is known for her application of discourse analysis to Luke-Acts, and particularly to the text found in Codex Bezae—her four-volume commentary on Acts in Codex Bezae with Josep Rius-Camps is an outstanding piece of detailed work in this regard. In this volume she brings together essays and chapters published elsewhere; but this is no mere ‘collected essays’ volume—Dr Read-Heimerdinger has organised and to some extent rewritten the material to form a flowing overall discussion. Her overall aim is to examine Luke’s use of Greek using the tools of discourse analysis. To do that, she eschews the use of a reconstructed critical text, such as that in the Nestlé-Aland/UBS Greek NT, and works with three major manuscripts: Codices Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, and Bezae (respectively, \aleph 01, B03, and D05). The latter two are her main foci of study, with \aleph 01 drawn in where it has other variants to offer. This allows her to look at the actual use of Greek by particular scribes, and she is



meticulous in doing so—I am in awe of her careful, highly detailed engagement with these manuscripts, and particularly so when recognising that much of this research must have been done before searchable electronic editions of them were available.

Dr Read-Heimerdinger is one of a small but significant group of scholars who believe D05 to represent a more ancient text than that of $\aleph 01$ /B03 in Acts, and in a number of places in this book she observes where she considers the manuscript evidence of actual Greek usage to point that way. Not everyone will be persuaded by her claims, including this reviewer, but all will learn from her deep scholarship and careful observation of the evidence.

Discourse analysis focuses on language in actual use, rather than what a grammarian would consider ‘correct’ use. One of the more amusing features of C. K. Barrett’s major commentary on Acts is the way he periodically reprimands Luke for what Barrett considers his poor syntax or grammar; this is the very opposite of Dr Read-Heimerdinger’s approach. In particular, she engages with the way Luke’s Greek is organised, and her study of each discourse feature generally begins with considering that feature in the text shared by her chosen manuscripts, before turning to consider where there are variant readings affecting the feature in the different manuscripts. She adopts the widespread axiom among grammarians that choice implies meaning, i.e., that differences in usage reflect differences in meaning, rather than merely being “stylistic” in an aesthetic sense. In particular, she studies where a feature has a default usage (often, but not always, most of its uses) and there are also other usages, regarding these as (respectively) unmarked and marked uses. An author/scribe using a marked form is drawing readers’ attention to it, and she seeks to ask why in sentence after sentence. Discourse analysis also considers features which help us, as modern readers and non-native speakers of Koiné Greek, to recognise how the author is guiding us to read, including how the text is structured and organised at micro and macro levels.

The features studied are the article before proper names (ch. 2), sentence connectives (ch. 3), word order (ch. 4), expressions for the Holy Spirit (ch. 5), the tracking of participants (ch. 6), parallel terms (ch. 7), and the overall structure of Luke’s two books (ch. 8). A conclusion draws the threads together, followed by a bibliography, and a welcome Scripture index, which enables readers easily to find relevant discussions when studying particular passages in Luke-Acts. This book, then, covers quite a lot of ground, and I shall pick out some specific studies to indicate how the argument works.

Concerning the use of the article with proper names, of both people and places, that Luke regularly introduces them without an article and subsequently refers to them with an anaphoric article has long been recognised. Dr Read-Heimerdinger increases our understanding by arguing cogently that the presence of the article is Luke’s norm, and the marked use, without an article, indicates that the person or place is salient in the passage, i.e., the role they or it play is crucial.

Connectives identify division of Acts into episodes (or not). In particular, $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$ and $\omicron\upsilon\nu$ mark discontinuity, a new development or section or an aside, whereas $\kappa\alpha\iota$ marks continuity within an episode, as does $\tau\epsilon$. Dr Read-Heimerdinger notes a number of places where variant readings indicate a different perspective on the way a story, or cluster of stories, develop, rather than merely a stylistic preference of the scribe.

When it comes to the structure of Luke and Acts, Dr Read-Heimerdinger gives us a careful analysis of the use of connectives within Acts, noting which come at the beginning, middle and end of units within the text. She also highlights that ancient narrative texts do not have sharp boundaries between units; rather, overlap happens through sentences which link two units together, and which make decisions

about where one unit ends and the new unit begins less straightforward (cf. Bruce Longenecker's work on chain-link transitions in the NT, although she does not cite it). She then progressively works from larger units to smaller, putting the major division of Acts in D05 at 13:1, where the main transition from Peter to Paul takes place (the same appears to me to be true in $\aleph 01/B03$). She argues that locations are key to the next level of subdivision, with Acts 1–5 located in Jerusalem and Judaea, and 6–12 in Samaria and other parts of Israel (I note however, that at least 6:1–8:1a; 9:26–29; 11:1–18 and the whole of 12 are set in Jerusalem), with 6:1–7 as a bridge between the two. Because of the gaps in D05, it is harder to make a clear division of Acts 13–28, but she argues for a change at 18:24 from evangelising the nations to Paul's journey to Rome via Ephesus. Her overall chart (p. 221) then breaks these divisions down further. Much here is debatable, of course.

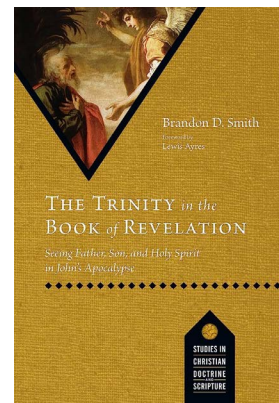
This is a book which requires solid competence in Greek, since much is untranslated, and persistence with detailed argument, so it's not bedtime reading. It represents fine, careful work which is indispensable to future studies of the Greek text of Luke and Acts. It illuminates features of Luke's writing, whatever one's view of the relationship of the texts found in different manuscripts. Libraries will certainly want to have this on their shelves, and others will look forward to the paperback. Dr Read-Heimerdinger has put us in her debt.

Steve Walton
Trinity College
Bristol, England, UK

Brandon D. Smith. *The Trinity in the Book of Revelation: Seeing Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in John's Apocalypse*. Studies in Christian Doctrine and Scripture. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022. 221 pp. £27.38/\$35.00.

"Doing theology is a holy act that should not be undertaken by the proud or belligerent" (p. 1). So begins this fine exploration of trinitarian theology in Revelation, a revised Ridley College PhD dissertation by Brandon Smith of Cedarville University. He aims "to contemplate and grow in our understanding of the triune God, whom we worship and stake our lives on" (p. 1). He accomplishes this trinitarian reading of the Apocalypse by appropriating "the early church's classic trinitarian reading strategies and conceptual categories" and carefully analyzing select texts (p. 4). This is a worthy addition to the Studies in Christian Doctrine and Scripture series and should interest New Testament scholars, theologians, and academically minded pastors.

Following a brief yet stirring introduction, Smith's study unfolds in five chapters. In chapter 1, "Toward a Trinitarian Reading of Revelation," Smith sets forth his presuppositions and methodology and defines key terms to lay the groundwork for the remainder of the study. For Smith, "A trinitarian reading observes the way in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are of the same divine nature (e.g., a singular will, power, and authority) and yet are also distinct persons in Revelation" (p. 16). He employs a "pro-Nicene toolkit" for this theological project with particular attention to the eternal, ordered relations and the inseparable operations of the Trinity (pp. 19–20). For example, he frequently employs the concept of "redoublement"—speaking about biblical references for God twice over to attend to oneness and threeness of the triune God (p. 20). Smith adopts a "theological-canonical



approach” to interpreting Revelation, writing as “primarily a systematic historical theologian who loves the Scriptures and seeks to understand them faithfully and rigorously” (pp. 34–35).

Chapter 2 examines God the Father, whose “boundless majesty and power are on full display in Revelation as he sits on the throne as the perfectly good, wise, and sovereign creator of all that was, is, and will be” (p. 37). Smith overviews patristic conceptions of the Father and then examines three key passages that depict “the Father as the locus of divine activity and his relationship with Jesus and the Spirit” (p. 48): Revelation 1:1–8; 4:1–11; and 11:15–19. Somewhat surprisingly, this chapter does not give much attention to any of the Apocalypse’s five references to God as *πατήρ* (1:6; 2:27; 3:5, 21; 14:1) or the climactic pronouncement from the one seated on the throne in 21:5–8.

Chapter 3 devotes seventy pages to God the Son, who is “the central figure in John’s vision” (p. 69). Smith writes, “John marries together his visionary experiences with a scripturally soaked imagination to communicate through marvel, metaphor, and midrash the Son’s participation in what is uniquely true of YHWH while also underscoring his divine commission from God and communion with his church” (p. 107). After extensively discussing “Christology in context” and patristic notions of the Son, Smith eventually turns to interpreting key texts that reveal Jesus’s divine nature and relationship to the other divine persons. For example, commenting on 1:1, Smith states that this revelation “is both from and about Jesus, albeit initiated by God” (p. 93). He asserts that “I am the first and the last” (1:17) recalls John 8:58 (“Before Abraham was, I am”) because of the shared phrase *ἐγώ εἰμι*, though this passage more likely alludes to Yahweh’s assertions in Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; and 48:12. Smith extensively discusses the controversial son of man title and rightly insists that Revelation presents Jesus as a divine being, not an angelic figure, appealing to patristic concepts of redoublement and partitive exegesis. The doctrine of inseparable operations explains Christ’s description as eschatological judge (Rev 2:18; 6:15–17) and as the one who “has the seven spirits of God” (3:1). Curiously, in the book’s longest chapter Smith does not explicitly discuss Christ’s parousia, despite repeated references to his “coming” at key points in the Apocalypse (1:7; 22:7, 12, 20; etc.).

Chapter 4 considers the Holy Spirit, “The Revealer to John and Speaker to the Churches.” Smith vividly presents the Spirit as “the marvelous gatekeeper to God’s throne room, the one who opens John’s eyes to the wonders of heaven, and speaks alongside the Son as the promised comforter” (p. 138). He devotes significant attention to the seven spirits in 1:4, John’s vision *ἐν πνεύματι* (1:10), and the Spirit’s messages to the churches in Revelation 2–3. While his theological and exegetical conclusions are consistently sound, I would have liked to see Smith expound further on the seven spirits’ location before the divine throne (1:4). Moreover, he sometimes makes claims without providing much supporting evidence, as when he calls Isaiah 11 “a structural key in Revelation 5” (p. 155). He does not discuss the christological title “root of David” (5:5; 22:16), which alludes to Isaiah 11:1 and would have strengthened his argument.

The book’s final chapter offers “a constructive account of how a trinitarian reading of Revelation ultimately contributes to trinitarian theology and exegesis today” (p. 173). He prefers “pro-Nicene” language such as redoublement over modern categories such as “high” and “low” Christology and quibbles with binitarian models that do not adequately address the divine Spirit. Smith concludes by showing how a trinitarian reading of Scripture informs Christian confession, ecclesial reception, eschatology, and the canonical shape of the Scriptures (pp. 190–93). The brief paragraph on eschatology is underdeveloped, with no explicit mention of Christ’s return, the final judgment, or the new heavens and earth.

In sum, Smith's study offers a fine example of theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS) that is informed by patristic readings, attentive to contemporary scholarship, and sensitive to the biblical text. Smith not only provides careful analysis of Revelation's portrayal of the triune God but also offers a methodological proposal for blending systematic theology and exegesis informed by patristic retrieval. Readers would profitably examine Smith's contribution alongside studies such as Thomas Schreiner's *The Joy of Hearing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), my *All Things New* (Downers Grove, IL: 2019), and Richard Bauckham's *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Each of these theologies of Revelation includes chapters on the Father, Son, and Spirit, and they make many of the same theological judgments as Smith while employing somewhat different methodologies and connecting Revelation's portrayal of the triune God with other key biblical theological themes developed in the book. Overall, I am grateful for Smith's fresh and faithful approach to trinitarian reflection on the Apocalypse and commend it to serious students who seek to hear the book's urgent message and "worship God" (Rev 22:9).

Brian J. Tabb
Bethlehem College and Seminary
Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

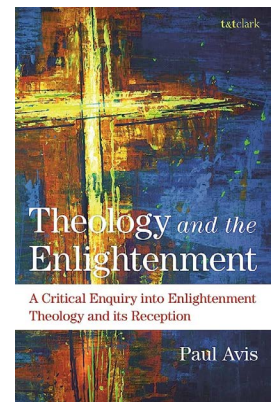
— HISTORY AND HISTORICAL THEOLOGY —

Paul Avis. *Theology and the Enlightenment: A Critical Enquiry into Enlightenment Theology and Its Reception*. London: T&T Clark, 2023. 404 pp. £28.99/\$39.95.

When students engage the Enlightenment in-depth for the first time, they might be surprised. Indeed, much common knowledge does not match the primary sources nor the current state of research. In contrast, Paul Avis offers a broader perspective. The prolific Anglican theologian is Honorary Professor of Divinity (University of Edinburgh), as well as Honorary Research Fellow of Theology and Religion (University of Exeter). He combines high expertise with great personal interest "to examine the Enlightenment's theological dimension and its reception and interpretation" (p. 273).

In chapter 1 ("Engaging the Enlightenment"), Avis provides a framework by highlighting the lasting cultural significance of that epoch while discussing divergent valuations of modern thinkers (Horkheimer, Adorno, Gadamer, MacIntyre, et al.). Considering its ambiguities, Avis argues for a nuanced interpretation and a critical appreciation and appropriation of the Enlightenment: It "lit up many dark corners of eighteenth-century European and American civilization" (p. 7).

In chapter 2 ("Scapegoating the Enlightenment"), the author turns to several writers and theologians who hold a more critical view. Avis finds their argumentations often misleading or lacking in differentiation. Therefore, chapter 3 ("A Virtuous Enlightenment") presents some rather conservative protagonists of the Enlightenment – they strove for the advancement of science, the improvement of the people's living conditions, more tolerance, and freedom of speech.



After that, Avis examines the worldview, religion, and religiosity of some leading Enlightenment thinkers (Kant, Voltaire, Spinoza, Bayle, Rousseau, Hume, et al.). Many remained in an ecclesiastical setting. Others searched for a reasonable, ethical faith and were reluctant towards a confessional standpoint due to the misuse of parochial power and widespread superstition. Thus, the author's outlook in chapter 4 is a more sympathetic one, namely "that religious faith of one kind and degree or another, but usually Christian, permeated and dominated almost all aspects of the Enlightenment" (p. 149).

In chapter 5 ("The Anglican Enlightenment"), Avis focuses on his own tradition. Building on a renaissance of research, the theologian traces back the convergence of heart-felt religion and Enlightenment ideas, not least in the wake of early Evangelicalism. In his view, for example, John Wesley "reveals himself to be an Enlightenment intellectual in his appeal to reasoned argument, his empiricism in epistemology, his intellectual curiosity and his investigative cast of mind" (p. 228). After a critical discussion on British Deism and on the cultural significance of the early English novel, Avis concludes, "Unlike the situation in France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, Enlightenment principles are treated in a non-polemical way and are not presented as a cause of conflict and division. In the Church of England the Enlightenment appears to have been more seamlessly integrated than elsewhere" (p. 271).

In turn, chapter 6 ("Enlightenment History and the Bible") reviews the new approach to history and humanity that many Enlightenment thinkers tried to reconcile with the cultural imaginary of Christendom. Although their historiography differed according to their own philosophical axioms, they all held to (1) the idea of progress, (2) an organic view of society and a greater appreciation of civil history, and (3) a uniform understanding of human culture and nature. These factors informed varied movements of biblical criticism, which still today seem ineluctable to many. At that point, Avis's assessment tends towards a more aesthetic, communal, and functional understanding of the Christian gospel and tradition: "While mere historical events alone, as fallibly reported but with whatever wealth of circumstantial detail, cannot either help or harm us, the divine revelation that shines through them to the eyes of faith, addressed to the human imagination and responded to by the whole person within the community of faith, is transformative and live-giving" (p. 334).

In chapter 7 ("The Enlightenment in the Frame of Christian Theology"), the author compares the "coming of age" motifs in the writings of Kant, the apostle Paul, and the German anti-Nazi dissident Dietrich Bonhoeffer. After that, Avis describes the idea of light and Enlightenment as a universal spiritual metaphor, which is visible in the Bible, Christian history, and liturgy. Accordingly, his final plea is that the church should never be complacent or hostile towards its critics but always open to knowledge, truth, and reform. The book closes with an extensive bibliography and an index of names. Unfortunately, there is no subject index.

Undoubtedly, the book has many strengths. Using a multidisciplinary methodology, Paul Avis depicts a complex and realistic vision of the European Enlightenments and their "not-so-atheistic" concerns. His discussion of modern Enlightenment research and reception is extensive and stimulating. At the same time, he includes other important topics relevant to his study; he also gives adequate space to the Enlightenment thinkers and their original voices.

Given the breadth of Avis's train of thought, some readers will struggle to follow the many threads and themes in the book. An analytical outline or a detailed table of contents would have been helpful. Historical theologians will find some remarks tendentious, at least on a methodical level, for instance: "Orthodoxy and heterodoxy are not fixed quantities in the theological lexicon and have always been

slippery notions. They do not place anyone on the broad and shifting spectrum of theological conviction and opinion” (p. 233).

Sometimes the author’s leitmotif seems redundant when he underlines that many thinkers have misunderstood the Enlightenment, which oddly enough seems to be the case each time, when he refers to conservative Christians. At these points, the author’s continuous call for ideological restraint and differentiation takes on a normative undertone. Especially in the final chapter, Avis tries to convince the inclined reader to reject a pre-modern attitude and embrace a more winning Christian Enlightenment mindset. This may reveal more about the author’s premises than it does about critical perspectives; for example, from a conservative theological point of view toward certain traits and trends of the Enlightenment, beyond a rather functional perspective.

However, *Theology and the Enlightenment* is an interesting study, especially for those who do research in the field of Enlightenment reception history and history of ideas. Students and academics, in general, will be challenged to reconsider their own cultural and ecclesial imprint, wrestle with the church’s past shortcomings, investigate fairly the author’s arguments and presuppositions—and go back to work on the primary sources.

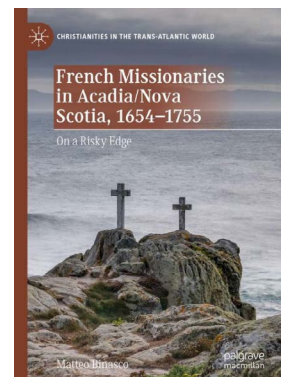
Daniel Vullriede
Bibelseminar Bonn
Bornheim, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany

Matteo Binasco. *French Missionaries in Acadia/Nova Scotia, 1654–1755: On a Risky Edge*. Christianities in the Trans-Atlantic World. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022. 230 pp. £99.99/\$109.99.

This book began as Italian-born Binasco’s MA thesis (2004) in the Department of History at Saint Mary’s University, Halifax, Nova Scotia. Since then, he has returned to Europe, where he is currently an adjunct at Foreigners’ University of Siena, Italy, and principal investigator for the project “The Anglo-Irish communities in the Spanish Caribbean during the early-modern period” at Universidad Pablo de Olavide, Seville, Spain. Binasco clearly brings a wealth of linguistic ability to his research and has traversed both sides of the Atlantic for sources at a most admirable level in France, Canada, and Vatican City.

The thesis of the book is “to investigate the activities and role played by the French missionaries in Acadia/Nova Scotia from 1654, the end of the second Capuchin mission in Acadia, to 1755, the beginning of the great Acadian deportation” (p. 1). The study is thus set within the context of the Anglo-French imperial wars, which had enormous implications for Acadia. Binasco argues that during this time, the Catholic missionaries experienced many changes which affected their strategies for both the indigenous/native peoples and the Acadian settlers.

This work is a regional study of Catholic missionary activity in Acadia in the defined period. We are introduced to the Jesuits, Capuchins, Franciscans, Seculars, Spiritans, Sulpicians, and Recollects. (There are five tables on these categories within appendix 1, “List of Missionaries Active in Acadia/Nova Scotia from 1654 till 1768” (pp. 187–200). The length of the full list (150) certainly makes a statement of the number of Catholic missionaries that spent some time in Acadia—despite one of the conclusions



of the book being that the region was understaffed and thus often unable to really advance the mission work.

One area of weakness, especially considering those reading this work who may not be familiar with the various classifications of orders and certain terms (e.g., apostolate) in the Roman Catholic Church, is the limited background on each that could have been woven into the respective chapters. The author very cursorily does this in his introduction, but I suspect elaboration on these orders and terms would widen the appeal of the book. Then again, it does highlight the reality that the work is a specialized monograph and will not be used in popular reading, so understanding the market is key.

The author does allow us to see many complexities which are not always recalled, such as the Abenaki raids with French privateers against New England settlers (pp. 82–83)—the complexities of mission alliances. One will also come away clearly sensing the divisions and competitiveness amongst the various Catholic mission entities. There's nothing new under the sun, and sadly such strains are often found among Protestants as well.

Though a regional historical study, it takes up themes that cross over into missiology and which are repeated in many contexts globally. For example, the matter of translation of native languages and reducing them to a written form is not unique to this book—though regional, there is also the universal. The author is clearly emphasizing the religious and political history, yet the missiological cannot be ignored or downplayed. In this regard, I would prefer a more interdisciplinary approach, and I think this would create a fuller-canvased conclusion. More specific detail could have been given, which would help the reader to explore areas such as liturgy, translation, syncretism, and conversion. What was the real nature of discipleship in the indigenous communities? Are there indigenous names that could be given more prominence in this period? However, such themes do not seem to be the real focus of this study; another study would be needed as a second volume to deal with the fuller missiological aspects historically.

The book does fill a gap for English readers concerning Acadia, will be of great value for those teaching Canadian church history and history, and no doubt will be added to bibliographies for such courses. It expands this often-ill-considered area of history and will be a helpful supplement to the surveys currently popular by Mark Noll (*A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992]) or Terrence Murphy and Roberto Perin (*A Concise History of Christianity in Canada* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996]). This book should be taken alongside Binasco's helpful article, "Few, Uncooperative, and Endangered: The Troubled Activity of the Roman Catholic Missionaries in Acadia, 1610–1710" (*Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* 10 [2007]: 147–62), a sort of prelude piece to this present work. Binasco also displays great interest in Irish Catholicism and missions amongst his research interests and was an editor for another work, *Rome and Irish Catholicism in the Atlantic World, 1622–1908*, in this same series, *Christianities in the Trans-Atlantic*.

I must say, personally, I was delighted to review this book as someone who has lived in, preached to, or visited many of the communities mentioned in the book; it had a particular fascination as a "road trip" in history. In that regard, the map in appendix 2 (p. 201) was disappointing as it was very difficult to read in the shaded areas.

I have only used one or two other books in this series. It appears the series began in 2013 and has since expanded its timeframe (formerly limited to 1500–1800 but now includes subjects into the twentieth century). The series shows much diversity of subject matter; for example, it deals with Samuel

Prideaux Tregelles, Quakers, Ulster Presbyterians, Catholicism and missions, and debates about what constitutes Reformed identity. The two editors are worthy scholars for the series.

J. C. Whytock
Haddington House Trust
Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Canada

Cory C. Brock and N. Gray Sutanto. *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022. 322 pp. £29.33/\$36.99.

Neo-Calvinism is experiencing a resurgence. There are major translation and publication projects both completed and ongoing for the works of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, neo-Calvinism's major thinkers, making primary source material widely available to the English-speaking theological world. Top quality scholarly biographies of both figures are now available. And the influence of neo-Calvinist thought, whether drawn directly from Kuyper and Bavinck or learned from one of their modern-day disciples, is widespread on the evangelical landscape.

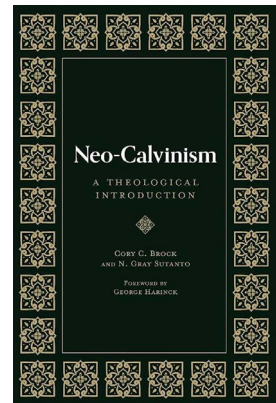
What has been lacking in this resurgence, however, is a careful theological assessment of what neo-Calvinism actually *is* as a theological project. Too often theological retrieval can fall victim to an error akin to what historian Herbert Butterfield called the “Whig interpretation” of history—a selective reading designed to reenforce one’s preexistent conclusions. At its worst, “neo-Calvinism” can come to mean something like “anything I can justify with a Kuyper quote.” This kind of pseudo-retrieval fails to do the hard work of historical analysis, and its contemporary applications are correspondingly shallow. Far better to do the deep work necessary in the original sources to understand what neo-Calvinism’s founding fathers thought of their system as a coherent project. Enter Cory Brock and N. Gray Sutanto’s *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction*.

Brock and Sutanto bring considerable expertise to their topic and provide a detailed yet clear assessment of Bavinck and Kuyper’s distinctive contributions to seven major theological loci. In doing so they provide a volume of interest to both specialists and general readers.

The introduction orients the reader to Brock and Sutanto’s distinctive goals, summarizing the current state of neo-Calvinist studies and arguing for the need for “a theological introduction to the unique dogmatic contributions of the first-generation neo-Calvinists, especially Kuyper and Bavinck” (p. 2). The remaining nine chapters are devoted to this task.

Chapter 2 covers the “Calvinism” in neo-Calvinism: how did Kuyper and Bavinck see themselves especially in relation to Calvin’s theology? While each thinker had distinct nuances, both generally looked to Calvin as signaling the “holistic implications” of Reformed theology and thus providing a platform to engage the results of contemporary science (pp. 40–41). Here Brock and Sutanto demonstrate that, while Kuyper and Bavinck are pursuing something like “worldview thinking,” their own sense of the term is much deeper than its typical current deployment.

Chapter 3 considers the topic of the church as both catholic and modern, a topic which challenged both Kuyper and Bavinck to distinguish between an unhelpful theological conservatism and genuine



theological preservation. Both thinkers employed something like an organic, unity-in-diversity motif to explain why “every generation requires new forms of the same confession” (p. 68).

Chapter 4 focuses primarily on Bavinck and his account of general revelation, which provides an opening to the larger question of the relationship between revelation and reason. General revelation engages man on more than a merely rational level, but instead also includes affective dimensions. The content of general revelation, though it includes cognitive knowledge of God, also includes a pre-rational, personal awareness of God which must be taken into account in a theological anthropology.

Chapter 5 turns to the doctrine of Scripture, a subject to which both Kuyper and Bavinck devoted extensive time and theological effort. Their specific contributions focus on the relationship between Scripture and the other sciences, and the nature of inspiration (p. 99).

In chapter 6 one finds the theological loci that develops the neo-Calvinist axiom “grace restores nature.” Brock and Sutanto expand this doctrine more broadly to include the entire relationship between creation and re-creation, suggesting that “the continuity of God’s work in the nature-grace relation is the key insight of neo-Calvinism” (p. 134). Again: “at the heart of neo-Calvinism is God’s action of recreation as the essence of Christianity and the meaning of world history.” This chapter is the longest in the volume, providing a robust survey of both Kuyper and Bavinck’s thought.

Chapter 7 is titled “Image and Fall.” The authors highlight a distinct, neo-Calvinist perspective on those two words by looking at a corporate understanding of humanity as an organic unity-in-diversity, and then exploring various ethical and social implications.

Chapter 8 again addresses the familiar neo-Calvinist topic of common grace and its relationship to the gospel. As with the creation-recreation chapter, Brock and Sutanto’s contribution here is to set the topic of common grace in Bavinck and Kuyper’s larger theological framework. Kuyper’s thought is especially important here, since he considered the topic to be “a distinct loci of dogmatic logic” (p. 216), but both theologians carefully addressed the topic of common grace and its relationship to other doctrines such as special revelation, sin, election, and salvation.

The final expositional chapter, chapter 9, discusses the church and the world. The theme of the organic nature of the church reappears here, much as an organic understanding of humanity functions in Chapters 3 and 7. Brock and Sutanto discuss Kuyper’s famous two-fold “organism and institution” definition of the church with care, tracing the idea through his theological development and considering it in relation to Kuyper’s other systematic writings, especially his concept of sphere sovereignty. The book then closes with a summary chapter that presents “16 Theses” of neo-Calvinist theology that serve as a reprisal of the main themes of the work.

Throughout their work, Brock and Sutanto are careful to present Kuyper and Bavinck on their own terms. From this reviewer’s perspective, they have done that work exceptionally well. The clarity with which they discuss their theology does allow for critical evaluation of Kuyper and Bavinck’s theological projects themselves. For instance, the questions raised by Kuyper and Bavinck about the relationship between Scripture and science (especially the burgeoning natural sciences of the early 20th century) are helpful, but their “form-content” or “center-periphery” distinctions do not fully resolve these questions. Brock and Sutanto’s work also makes it possible to evaluate certain forms of modern neo-Calvinism in light of their theological ancestors. On this front, the robust ecclesiology of chapter 9, especially its relationship to eschatology, was refreshing. I’m not sure all contemporary advocates of neo-Calvinism are as clear that Kuyper and Bavinck were not “ushering in the kingdom” with their project but instead calling Christians to holiness in all spheres of life (p. 287). That crucial nuance can sometimes be

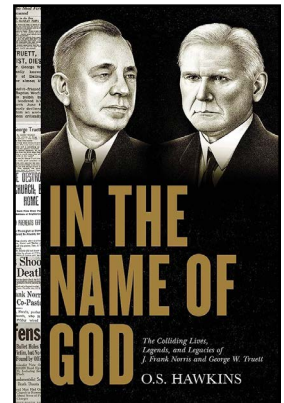
lost in contemporary discourse – all of which points to the gift this book is for evaluating and rightly appropriating Kuyper and Bavinck.

In *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction*, Brock and Sutanto deliver on the promise of their subtitle. Rather than discussing contemporary neo-Calvinist applications, this book challenges the reader to consider neo-Calvinism as a coherent theological project. This in turn allows for more fruitful theological retrieval as well as more salient theological critique. By presenting Kuyper and Bavinck on their own, comprehensive terms, Brock and Sutanto have done the contemporary heirs of Kuyper and Bavinck a great service.

Josh Blount
Living Faith Church
Franklin, West Virginia, USA

O. S. Hawkins. *In the Name of God: The Colliding Lives, Legends, and Legacies of J. Frank Norris and George W. Truett*. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2021. £29.99/\$29.99.

O. S. Hawkins has faithfully and significantly served Southern Baptists in several meaningful roles during his lifetime of ministry as a pastor, author, and recently retired president of Guidestone Financial Resources. His newest book is a retelling of a fascinating portion of Southern Baptist history in a rousing form. Southern Baptists have not been good at telling our history, and as a result, many of our people have little sense of rootedness, leading some to look elsewhere to find roots. So, we are indebted to him for an engagingly written account of the basic ministries of two towering figures in SBC life in the early 20th century. I hope coming generations who barely know Criswell and Rogers will, as a result of this book, gather awareness of and appreciation for George Truett and J. Frank Norris.



Hawkins tells the story of each man, dubbing Norris “the Texas Tornado” and Truett “The Eternal Optimist.” He devotes a chapter to the overall story of each and then a chapter specifically on the conflict between them. The sad reality is that far too often, Bible-believing leaders end up in bitter conflict with one another. Hawkins does not shy away from this sad reality and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of both men.

Hawkins is absolutely right that this story is rich with connections to and lessons for today. However, my concern with the book is in the lessons it draws. These deductions are the focus of chapter 5 but can be found sprinkled throughout earlier parts of the book. It becomes clear that one aim of the book is the rehabilitation of J. Frank Norris. This is understandable since Hawkins notes in the introduction that his family’s “spiritual roots” are in the ministry of Norris, including the fact that his father was converted under Norris. We should always be alert to evidence of grace among fellow believers, even those with whom we disagree or who ultimately made a mess of things. So, since Norris has typically been demonized, it is appropriate that we be reminded of the positive contributions he made. However, I think Hawkins goes too far in his rehabilitation. He is correct that Norris shaped quite a bit within the Southern Baptist denomination, but perhaps not as helpfully as Hawkins suggested.

The book takes particular aim at the claim of historian Leon McBeth that Norris made “no contribution to Southern Baptist ministries in this [twentieth] century.” Despite McBeth, Hawkins suggests seven specific ways Norris shaped Southern Baptist life and practice: Sunday School, Cooperative Program, Baptist Faith and Message, Conservative Resurgence, Preaching, Eschatology, and Evangelism and Church Growth. To disprove McBeth, all that is needed is to demonstrate any level of influence, which is a fairly low bar. Still, it seems the book overstates the evidence in several places.

The book’s argument is not so much that Norris led Southern Baptists to do certain things but that the things he did are now the most common methods or ideas in SBC life. Often no real causal connection is made. A more general—and less verifiable—“influence” is what is argued. The strongest argument is Sunday School. It was fascinating to learn that Arthur Flake, architect of the influential Sunday School growth approach, got his start at FBC Fort Worth under Norris. Flake’s method did indeed make a profound contribution to SBC work in the 20th century. Flake’s influence on ministry thinking has largely disappeared today, though. The book’s weakest argument is for Norris’s influence on the Cooperative Program, where its main point seems to be that the failure of the Seventy-five Million Campaign is more the fault of Truett than Norris, even though Norris opposed the campaign, which was a precursor of the Cooperative Program.

Hawkins argues Norris’s relentless challenge to doctrinal slide within the SBC helped prompt leaders to adopt a statement of faith, *The Baptist Faith and Message*, in 1925. That makes sense. Hawkins also points out that the popularity of expository preaching, often preaching through books, in the SBC today is much more like Norris’s preaching than Truett’s. That seems to be true, though it is interesting that the argument for Norris making a contribution is cast in terms of Norris vs. Truett. It is not argued that Norris caused the move toward more expository preaching, but merely that there is a resemblance.

In eschatology, Hawkins points out that the majority of Southern Baptists today hold to a dispensational premillennial view of eschatology, like Norris, unlike the postmillennialism of Truett. This is true, though how much Norris has to do with this is not shown. It is odd the book goes on to argue that postmillennialism is what led Truett to “his limited use of reproof,” and Norris’s premillennial dispensationalism led to his more polemical approach. While postmillennialists do claim a more optimistic view (history is headed to the fullness of the kingdom of God before Christ returns), they argue this will come about due to vigorous kingdom work, including preaching. And, as in the Sunday School discussion, it must be noted the dominance of dispensational thought in the SBC has been waning for some time.

The book also argues that Norris contributed to the Conservative Resurgence because its leaders learned from his failure in addressing theological slide in the 1920s. Specifically, Paige Patterson and Paul Pressler “learned what to do and what not to do” from Norris (p. 122). They learned, it says, not to leave the denomination like Norris did but to work from the inside. Positively, they learned to follow Norris’s example in taking the issues to the laypeople. Thus, according to the book, the Conservative Resurgence was the “extension of the methodology” as well as “the ministerial vision” of J. Frank Norris (p. 125). The people I know who were at the center of the Conservative Resurgence repudiate any close connection with Norris and are appalled at the suggestion. The populist impulse is in the DNA of SBC life, even if some oppose it, and cannot be attributed merely to Norris. I have no doubt there are similarities between the controversies of the 1920s and those of the 1970–1980s. But to say “Norris resurfaced ... in the very mood, methods, and manners of those who led the Conservative Resurgence” (p. 126) is a large claim. He seems to have in mind Patterson and Pressler, leaving aside many other key leaders. Perhaps

he is right that Patterson is the heir of Norris. But that raises the question of whether this is a positive thing or not. There is a darker side to the Conservative Resurgence, where people received threatening phone calls if they ran for office when certain leaders did not want them to do so. That does sound like Norris. It does not sound like the faithful men I know who sought to eschew hyperbole and character assassination, focusing rather on the important theological issues at stake.

Lastly, and related to the earlier Sunday School point, the book argues that Norris contributed to the Southern Baptist emphasis on and pursuit of evangelism and church growth. This is evidenced in the fact that Norris pioneered several methods popular today among Southern Baptists, including the megachurch model, multi-site church, the use of media, and a strong pastor-led model of church government. Norris was a pioneer in the use of media and no doubt significantly shaped Southern Baptists and others in this way. On the other three categories, I have questions. The book states, “The more modern phenomenon of megachurches in almost every city of America today has its origin in the life and ministry of J. Frank Norris” (p. 136). That is a large claim. The only thing approaching support given for the claim is the fact that FBC Fort Worth was the largest Protestant church in America at the time. But there were other very large churches, including Truett’s at FBC Dallas and Spurgeon’s in London several decades earlier.

More concerning is attributing the multisite movement to Norris. Whatever one may think of multisite today, I cannot see that one man in the 1920s could really pastor two churches of multiple thousands of people 1300 miles apart (Fort Worth and Detroit). He could preach to them, but the problem of equating that with pastoring is a topic for another essay. Given Norris’s penchant for self-promotion, this sounds more like the rise of celebrity pastors than anything positive. Connecting this with the point that Norris favored a strong pastor-led governance model can be concerning since the book notes that after one controversy, FBC Fort Worth never again had regular business meetings and that by the end of Norris’s ministry, “no official deacons served the church” (p. 31). Strong leadership is not unaccountable leadership.

This leads me to my central concern about this book. It is a nice read. And, it is right to look for evidence of grace in any brother. But do we really want to hold up J. Frank Norris as a model for pastors? Whether intended or not, the book can be interpreted as a rehabilitation project. If the goal is to acknowledge there were positive outcomes from this flawed man’s life, then good. But, we must also face squarely that he embodies much of what we are still in need of shedding. The book’s portrait of Norris reveals serious problems for one who would be a pastor, even more so the pastor of more than one church, and that with practically full sway in decision-making.

The book says of Norris: “From his pen and pulpit in Fort Worth, he would swoop down out of his own dark cloud, strike with dastardly force, and *often leave the ruins of lives and even legacies in his wake*” (p. 19, emphasis added). It also notes the comment of Homer Ritchie, who followed Norris as pastor: “Dr. Norris ... could be the kindest, most loving person, but if you ever crossed him or embarrassed him, he could be as *mean as the devil himself*” (pp. 19–20, emphasis added). Later, Hawkins acknowledges, “With the exception of his decades-long associate Louis Entzminger, *Norris eventually spewed out his vitriol on everyone with whom he had been associated in ministry*” (pp. 46–47, emphasis added). We must be vigilant to guard against doctrinal error, but we must never condone or excuse this sort of behavior.

We need shepherds who are *willing* to contend for the faith, not ones who are *itching* for a fight. According to the book, “Frank Norris lived in constant fear that he was going to miss some contentious confrontation or fierce fight” (p. 32). At more length later, Hawkins states,

J. Frank Norris raised the use of exaggeration and hyperbole in the pulpits and the pens of some preachers to a higher art form. He became notorious for cutting, pasting, and doctoring the pictures of his crowds to make them appear larger than they actually were before printing them in his self-promoting tabloids. Such tactics struck at the heart of his character and insecurities. Norris biographer Ray Tatum astutely observes that “regardless of his success, the emotional hunger, the sensational craving for a larger and larger ministry was never satisfied.” His enemies constantly accused him of fabricating and grossly exaggerating his successes, and his own people just smiled and looked the other way. He lived with virtually no accountability. (p. 53)

Sadly, the example of J. Frank Norris carries on in this way far too much among us. Willingness to lie (that’s the proper word) to promote oneself, insecurity leading to a craving for a “larger and larger ministry” ceases to be Christian ministry in any meaningful sense. This sheds a different light as well on the sensationalism of Norris, which seems to be approved of in the book. At some point, such work ceases to be about the good of souls and becomes merely self-exaltation which receives Jesus’s stinging rebuke: “How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?” (John 5:44). We must not avoid controversy when thrust upon us, but we do need some of the decorum seen in Truett.

In light of this, it is surprising for Hawkins to say Norris led a life of “moral impeccability,” which he explains as staying “free from the slightest hint of scandal in the realms of money or morals” (p. 138). I imagine by “morals,” he means sexual sin, but “morality” cannot be constrained to this realm. Considering such viciousness, slander, and manipulation as something acceptable and devoid of moral weight is one of our problems today.

Hawkins tells a compelling story that deserves to be known. The book begins evenhandedly, but eventually, it becomes an argument for esteeming Norris over Truett. Both men had strengths and weaknesses. Hawkins succeeds in making his point that “Despite his self-promotion, questionable methodologies, and sometimes suspect motives, J. Frank Norris must be listed among the major figures of religious, societal, and cultural discussions of his time” (p. 151). Norris indeed had a significant impact on Southern Baptist life, and we should look to his life for important lessons. How positive that impact and those lessons are is the issue. We still wrestle with the temptation to overlook doctrinal error for the sake of denominational loyalty on the one hand or to devolve into demonizing one another using slander and misrepresentation on the other hand. Neither path is right nor God-honoring. We need faithful, firm, yet gracious guides along this difficult path, and I doubt Norris is such a helpful guide.

Ray Van Neste
Union University
Jackson, Tennessee, USA

Uwe Michael Lang. *The Roman Mass: From Early Christian Origins to Tridentine Reform*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022. xi + 445 pp. £89.99/\$120.00.

Lang is an adjunct faculty member at the Institute of Theology and Liberal Arts at St. Mary's University and a priest of the Oratory of St. Phillip Neri in London, and he has written two books on liturgical theology. With this work, he has contributed a liturgical history of the Roman Mass that draws from contemporary scholarship.

Taking a diachronic approach in his presentation of the history of the Roman Mass, Lang lays the foundation for the Mass with the New Testament teaching on the Last Supper and the Eucharist in the early church in chapters 1 and 2, respectively. Then he moves to the further development that took place in the third and fourth centuries (ch. 3), and then into the formation of the Latin liturgy (chs. 4–5), its expansion and adaption in the Carolingian age (ch. 6), and its history from the Ottonian Revival up to the Tridentine Reform (chs. 7–9).

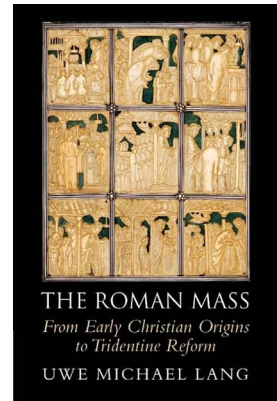
In the introduction, Lang notes his debt to earlier scholarship and his departure from it. First, although it is not his intention to replace the massive work of Josef A. Jungmann titled *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development* (New York: Benziger, 1951–1955), he is attempting “to offer a new overview of developments in the Roman Mass” that “will open up insights that can advance scholarly research and debate” (p. 2). Second, his focus is more specific to the Roman Mass than Bryan D. Sprinks’s *Do This in Remembrance of Me: The Eucharist from the Early Church to the Present Day* (London: SCM, 2013) and less theological than Helmut Hoping’s *My Body Given for You: History and Theology of the Eucharist* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2019).

Thus, Lang’s goal with this work is to provide “a new, synthetic approach” (p. 3) to the history of the Roman Mass, which draws not only from texts but also incorporates “musical, artistic, literary, social and ... religious perspectives,” resulting in a presentation of “liturgical development within the broader historical and theological context that shaped the celebration and experience of” the Roman Mass (p. 3).

Due to the length and depth of this book, I will only take up some of the main features of Lang’s work. In arguing for a normative Christianity that was already formed by the first century of the church and characterized by the three pillars of (1) a “monoepiscopacy and apostolic succession”; (2) “baptismal creed and rule of faith,” and (3) “canon of scripture” (p. 49), Lang adds a fourth pillar, namely, “the Last Supper tradition and the institution of the Eucharist” (p. 51).

He enlists the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Didache, and statements from Justin Martyr to support the concept that the Eucharist was to be understood in sacrificial terms. In his discussion of the epistle to the Hebrews, Lang suggests, following Scott Hahn, that this letter implies that the New Covenant rites effectively “perfect the conscience of the worshiper” (Heb 9:9), unlike the Old Covenant ones. However, while Catholic thinkers may be satisfied with his exegesis of Hebrews, it is uncertain that this was the intent of the author of Hebrews. With the Didache’s assertion that the breaking of the Eucharistic bread is a fulfillment of Malachi 1:11, describing the Eucharist as a sacrifice is further established. Moreover, Justin Martyr corroborates this understanding by seeing “the Eucharist as a priestly and sacrificial action” (p. 66).

Turning to material evidence for this sacrificial understanding, Lang writes, “In the Roman world, sacred objects were carried in procession, including the statues of gods. Against this background,



a portable wooden altar that was brought into a Christian meeting place for the Eucharist could nonetheless be considered an altar and be charged with sacredness" (p. 71). One wonders at this point if Lang's uncritical reliance on Martyr and Roman cultic practices betrays his lack of awareness of the former's imposing of Levitical categories on the New Testament priesthood of all believers and the possible syncretistic implications of allowing Roman cultic practices to inform one's understanding of the Eucharist.

Later, in his attempt to root the Latin Rite in the earliest traditions of the church, Lang, commenting on the *Apostolic Tradition* in his discussion of Eucharistic prayers of the fourth century, notes that "the document does not offer a complete liturgical description of the Eucharist" (p. 85) and states that if a third-century date can be reasonably attributed to the Barcelona Anaphora, then key elements "such as the institution narrative and epiclesis" can be seen as organically developing from earlier liturgy rather than a later, fourth-century "interpolation" (p. 94). The earlier "pre-Nicene" prayers, according to Lang, were enshrined in written texts rather than oral tradition following the "Constantinian settlement," which, in turn, provided the background and context for the emergence of the Latin liturgy and the "Roman Rite of Mass" (p. 103).

In his discussion of the formation of the Latin liturgy, he notes that, in contrast to the Eastern liturgy, which employed several languages, Latin was the sole language adopted by the Western church due to the "religious prestige of the Roman church and its bishop" and its attempt to evangelize "Roman culture" and attract "the influential elites of the city and the empire" (p. 109). This observation from Lang reflects his awareness of the Byzantine Rite and its departure from, as well as similarities with, the Latin Rite. At various points, Lang compares the two rites as he describes the developments of the Latin Rite. However, in his comparisons, he implies that Latin Rite is the superior one without demonstrating why this is the case.

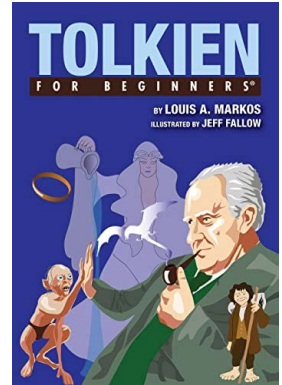
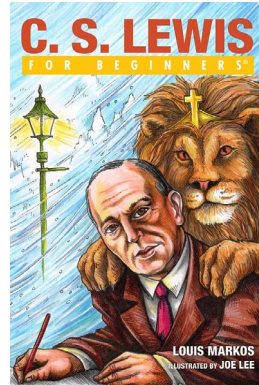
In conclusion, this is a serious work of liturgical history. Lang draws from a vast array of primary and secondary sources, some of which are works written in German, Latin, and French that remained untranslated into English. Helpfully, he provides a full Latin-English text of the Roman Missal in the appendix. Although not all will agree with the Catholic flavor of this book, this is a serious contribution to the history of the Latin liturgical tradition and is essential reading for any serious student or scholar of the same.

Thomas Haviland-Pabst
Montreat College
Asheville, North Carolina, USA

Louis Markos. *C. S. Lewis for Beginners*. Illustrated by Joe Lee. Danbury, CT: For Beginners Books, 2022. 190 pp. £11.99/\$15.95.

Louis Markos. *J. R. R. Tolkien for Beginners*. Illustrated by Jeff Fallow. Danbury, CT: For Beginners Books, 2022. 205 pp. \$15.95.

On Addison's Walk beneath the trees, there strolled Lewis and Tolkien, and in a pub called the Eagle and Child, there conversed the Inklings. Those who know the tales may feel a certain *Sehnsucht* (C. S. Lewis's favorite word for longing) to participate in a world of such reflection, friendship, and literary productivity. Like Sam and Frodo, there is a certain inseparability to the legacies of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. It seems fitting, then, that they should receive their own documentary comic books in tandem.



Louis Markos is professor of English and the Robert H. Ray Chair in Humanities at Houston Christian University. He has previously written five other works on Lewis and Tolkien, and he demonstrates his fluency in the works of the most renowned Inklings in the latest volumes of the “For Beginners” catalog. Both of these books include biographical material, but they are primarily introductions to the works of these famed authors.

Markos introduces C. S. Lewis as “a profoundly human writer who spoke to people where they are” (p. 3). In his astute analysis of Lewis’s body of writings, Markos traces Lewis’s life as a respected scholar and a writer for the people. Markos introduces each of Lewis’s major works in chronological order. He summarizes plots, traces themes, and places each book within the larger body of Lewis’s thought. Through this chronological walking tour of Lewis’s works, the reader experiences the development of his thought and the maturation of his skill in expressing great truths in accessible fiction and penetrating prose. The chronological approach also supports Markos’s argument for a publication-order reading of *The Chronicles of Narnia* rather than the current standard of Narnian chronology (see p. 106). Markos approaches the Lewis corpus with such insight and passion that readers are bound to embark on fresh readings (or re-readings) of Lewis’s books.

Whereas C. S. Lewis placed his tales in Narnia, space, heaven, hell, and the English midlands, J. R. R. Tolkien’s literary world revolved around Middle Earth. Tolkien devoted so much energy into creating a realistic world that Markos reflects, “it seems to have a reality apart from its author. The engaged reader cannot help but feel that Tolkien is less a fantasy author than a scribe or chronicler of a history he has been allowed to glimpse” (p. 28). Many a lover of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* has found the complex history, language, and mythology of Middle Earth bewildering and stalled out in *The Silmarillion* or *The Unfinished Tales*. Markos provides in *Tolkien for Beginners* an experienced guide’s introduction to Tolkien and his literary world that will enable readers to navigate the oft-confusing cast of Valar, Maiar, Elves, Men, Hobbits, and Dwarves. Furthermore, Markos demonstrates the presence of Tolkien’s faith throughout his works in insightful ways.

Markos presents C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien faithfully. They were mere men with imperfections. They shared a genuine friendship and great literary skill. Markos shows how their books flowed from

their lives. Lewis and Tolkien were modern men who drank deeply of the Medieval world. Their works were full of enchantment in spite of the fearsome modernity of the world wars era. Lewis and Tolkien were well aware that there are monsters out there. Sometimes those monsters are people, and sometimes evil is as banal as choosing a lesser good (see Markos's analysis of *The Screwtape Letters* pp. 61–68). Markos captures all of these aspects well in these introductory books.

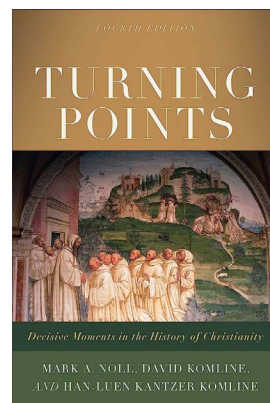
These books are marketed as “documentary comic books” meant “for beginners.” Based on the cartoonish covers, one might expect these books to be geared toward tweens, but this is not the case. These books are written at an accessible level, but mid-to-late teens would be the youngest recommended audience. The illustrations for each of the books leave something to be desired, however. Some illustrations bear little to no resemblance to Lewis or Tolkien's descriptions of characters, and others indulge in cheap visual humor that does not match the authorial tone. Overall, these documentary comic books are much more “book” than “comic.” Buyers who expect a comic book may be disappointed, but readers who expect an illustrated guidebook to the literary worlds of Lewis and Tolkien will be pleased.

Blake McKinney
Texas Baptist College
Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Mark Noll, David Komline, and Han-Luen Kantzer Komline. *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*. 4th ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022. 368 pp. £21.99/\$29.99.

Any text which reaches a fourth edition twenty-five years after its initial release must have done something well, right from the start. In 1997 (the year of the first edition's release), Mark Noll was still a faculty member at Wheaton College. Teaching inside and outside the classroom had convinced him that there was an unmet need for a broad-brush (but still well-informed) survey of the history of the church: something which could function both as an introductory textbook and/or a resource for group discussion. Evidently, his perception of that unmet need has been proven right over time. Steady demand—extending through his decade spent at Notre Dame University (2006–2016) and beyond—has warranted three further editions. Now, in its fourth iteration, Noll has been extensively assisted in the work of updating by David Komline and spouse Han-Luen Kantzer Komline, both historians at Western Seminary in Holland, Michigan.

The challenge to be faced, whether one intends to offer a compressed history of the church in one semester of classes or in discussion groups spread across a lengthier span of time, is essentially the same: what to include? Since its initial release in 1997, the book's consistent strategy for addressing that question has been to select thirteen events or crises in the unfolding life of the church and to use these as doorways into eras of importance. In this fourth edition, while some chapter titles have been tweaked (ch. 8 was formerly “A New Europe: The English Act of Supremacy (1534)”; presently it is “Church and Nation: The English Act of Supremacy (1534)” —almost certainly a change for the better), the actual text of the book is modified only sparingly. To be fair, these textual changes are customarily improvements and refinements. As well, a comparison will show that great pains have been taken to ensure that the chapter-end bibliographies are kept current (and they are!). And this latest edition is also more user-



friendly in that an appendix of Study Questions (pp. 313–28) will help both instructors and discussion leaders to spark conversations. This is all for the good.

A more striking change appears in the final chapter (13). Originally entitled simply “Further Turning Points of the Twentieth Century,” it surveyed the global growth of Pentecostalism, the impact of the Second Vatican Council, and the expanded role played by women in the global church. This chapter has been extensively reworked. And why not? Things do not stand just where they did in 1997. Now re-titled “Mobilizing for the Future,” the new final chapter is devoted to two major developments. The new chapter focuses on the world of modern Roman Catholicism (the Second Vatican Council: 1962–1965) and on the world of evangelical Protestantism (represented by the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization: 1974). This is, at best, only a qualified good.

The reviewer does not question the selection of these themes (the first is carried forward from the old concluding chapter); they were and are of deep significance. Yet he would point out that even the second and more recent of these gatherings, taking place almost a half-century ago, will leave the reader of this book asking whether *Turning Points* has not shirked the need to come closer in time to our present day. A careful reader will be strengthened in this impression by noting how many contemporary issues (five) are now alluded to in the afterword of the book (pp. 291–312). Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic communion is in disarray, with many onlookers blaming Vatican II for opening floodgates; a good number of conservative Catholics hold the current pope responsible for dereliction of office. The evangelical Protestant movement is finding that it is singed by its flying too close to the political flame in multiple countries led by authoritarian leaders. And all the Christian churches stand baffled at the effects of secularization, the defection of the young, and the growth of the proportion of the population self-described as “nones” (i.e., of no religious affiliation). The global crisis of migration of political and religious refugees is changing the face of societies in both hemispheres; the Christian movement wavers over whether to see this crisis as a menace or an opportunity.

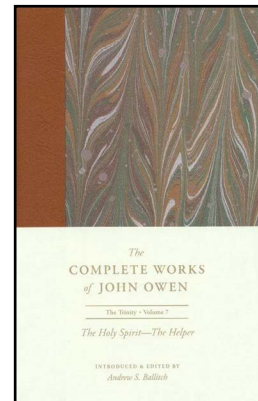
All this to say that if there is to be a fifth edition of this now-proven work, there will be reason either to augment the number of “turning points” *beyond* thirteen (an attractive number in itself as most semesters are of thirteen weeks duration) *or* to consider whether some of the existing chapters still warrant inclusion. The ongoing usefulness of *Turning Points* will lie extensively in its ability to suggest approaches to emerging questions pressing the church of the present day as well as classic questions which have surfaced in past centuries.

Kenneth J. Stewart
Covenant College
Lookout Mountain, Georgia, USA

John Owen. *The Holy Spirit—The Helper*. The Complete Works of John Owen 7. Edited by Andrew S. Ballitch. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023. x + 369 pp. £29.99/\$39.99.

John Owen (1616–1832) was a pastor, theologian, statesman, chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, and the vice-chancellor for Oxford University. He is known as the “Prince of Puritans” due to his extensive theological works and their influence during his day and centuries later. Owen taught that Christian doctrine directly influences the Christian life, and this can be seen in his teaching on the role of the Holy Spirit.

Two of Owen’s treatises dealing with the Holy Spirit, *The Reason of Faith* and *The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God*, are found in volume 7 of the new *The Complete Works of John Owen* series by Crossway publications. This volume includes a seventy-page editorial introduction, along with updating the spelling to modern American standards, making this edition more accessible compared to the traditional William H. Goold edition. Goold’s edition of Owen’s works was first published in 1855 and then later reprinted several times by The Banner of Truth Trust.



After a historical introduction to Owen’s theological context, Ballitch gives an outline and summary of each treatise included in this volume and in the next – volume 8. These editorial outlines and summaries will make Owen’s works more accessible than before. The main purpose of each treatise and each chapter is explained and summarized to help the modern reader follow Owen’s arguments. This section of the editorial introduction consists of approximately ten pages for each of these two treatises.

When considering *The Reason of Faith*, Ballitch explains the question this work seeks to address and the suggested answer. He explains, “the foremost question on his [Owen’s] mind in writing this treatise was, Why do Christians believe the Scripture to be God’s word? In short, his answer is this: The reason of faith is God’s authority and veracity revealing themselves in the Scriptures and by them” (p. 33). In William Goold’s edition of this treatise, there is only a single page given to introduce it. But Goold does state the question at hand when he explains, “[It] is occupied with an answer to the question, on what grounds, or for what reason, we believe the Scripture to be the word of God?” (*The Works of John Owen* [Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth, 2017], 4:4). However, Goold’s edition does not lay out a brief suggested answer to this section like Ballitch does in the newer edition.

The Reason of Faith contains seven chapters. In chapters 1–2, Owen introduces the topic of divine revelation and how Scripture is the infallible Word of God while also explaining how the Holy Spirit is necessary to understand it. In chapters 3–4, external arguments are examined and explained to be insufficient to prove that Scripture is God’s divine revelation. In chapters 5–7, God’s Word is established as the only foundation and reason of faith.

In the volume’s second treatise, *The Causes, Ways, and Mean*, Ballitch’s editorial notes again are helpful. He explains, “In *Causes*, Owen offers the method by which we understand the divine mind revealed in Scripture” (p. 40). In Goold’s edition of this treatise, the editorial notes are minimal, again consisting of only a single page. However, Goold’s overarching summary also concisely explains, “[This treatise] relates to the method by which we are to understand and interpret Scripture aright” (*The Works of John Owen*, 4:118). This treatise contains nine chapters. Ballitch helpfully explains, “Chapters 1–6 expound the Holy Spirit as the principal efficient cause of right interpretation, and chapters 7–9 explain

the means of proper understanding” (p. 40). In this treatise, one of Owen’s main points is that Scripture is not primarily about knowledge but transformational knowledge, and this transformation only occurs with the Holy Spirit.

Crossway has made Owen’s works more accessible in this newer series with the updated English and extensive editorial notes, while also adding new works by Owen that have never been published before: prefaces Owen wrote for others and several of his letters. This newer series, including this particular volume, has also translated all the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin words and phrases into modern English while still retaining the original languages for scholarly reference.

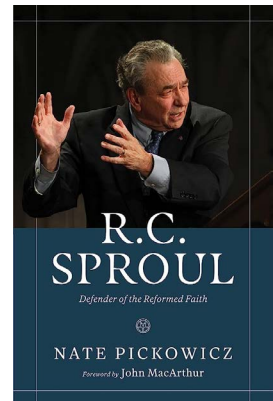
This particular volume should make every Puritan scholar and interested pastor or layperson excited for the release of the remaining volumes in the coming years. There will be random mistakes and typos (There is a typo on page 5 in this volume when it says the Barebones Parliament was in 1553 instead of 1653). Still, this new set of John Owen’s works will be invaluable for this generation and the next for Owenian scholarship and devotional reading.

Jacob Boyd
First Baptist Church of Springfield
Springfield, Virginia, USA

Nate Pickowicz. *R. C. Sproul: Defender of the Reformed Faith*. Peterborough: H&E Publishing, 2022. iii + 140 pp. \$15.99.

R. C. Sproul had a “John Calvin mind with a Billy Graham reach” (p. 125). This is biographer Nate Pickowicz’s assessment of Sproul’s impact, and it is a perceptive one. One would be hard-pressed to find a Reformed believer today for whom Sproul did not play some role in his or her growth as a Christian. Pickowicz writes, “Sproul was this generation’s champion and defender of the Reformed faith” (p. 3). This might sound like an overstatement, but who would come second to him? It is probably accurate to identify Sproul as *the* Calvinistic statesman of the past generation. If you are like the present reviewer, you may not have met him in person, but you have spent hundreds of hours gleaning knowledge and wisdom through cassette tapes, radio, or the internet. To help us get to know the man, Pickowicz has written a highly accessible biography of the late doyen of contemporary Reformed theology, and I would recommend it to all who wish to better understand Sproul and his influence.

The first two chapters of this volume tell the story of the first three decades of Sproul’s life and focus on his upbringing and education. Pickowicz then frames the remainder of the book utilizing this striking insight: over a period of fifty years, Sproul engaged in five controversies, each decade corresponding to one of the five solas of the Reformation. In the 1970s, Sproul “led the Evangelical charge for the inerrancy and authority of the Bible” (p. 2), a defense of *sola scriptura*. The 1980s saw his attention turn to *sola gratia* as he penned *The Holiness of God* and *Chosen by God*. The 1990s were the years in which he fought for the centrality of *sola fide* to the gospel—his most costly battle from a personal standpoint—combatting the ECT (Evangelicals and Catholics Together) movement. The decade of the 2000s brought him back into the pastorate (he served as an assistant pastor early in his career), during



which he contended for pure worship (*sola Christus*). The final decade of his life, truncated by his passing, was a busy season of founding a Bible college, writing books, and publishing music, all for the glory of God (*solī Deo gloria*).

The value of this book is that it is an ideal introduction to understanding Sproul's life. One can breeze through its 130 pages in a couple of sittings. Pickowicz writes well and hits the most noteworthy points of this impactful life. Given its brevity, the book limits itself to Sproul's public ministry and doctrinal battles (p. 3).

I would, however, mention a few drawbacks. First, this is not a critical biography but tends toward hagiography. There is no hint of anything negative or critical, and, ironically, Sproul would be the first to admit he was an imperfect sinner. For example, it is disappointing that Pickowicz neglected to comment on one unseemly matter concerning Sproul's credentials. Although Sproul never earned a doctorate, he nevertheless accepted the appellation "Doctor" throughout his ministry. On page 33, Pickowicz mentions that Sproul never earned the degree but does not explain why he was, and is, universally known as "Dr. R. C. Sproul." Sproul was conferred an honorary doctorate much later in life, but in academia, it is considered inappropriate to call oneself a "Doctor" after receiving an honorary degree. It is unfortunate that this hero of the Reformed faith was guilty of credential inflation. Even our heroes have warts. A sentence or two of reproof would not have been out of line.

Another shortcoming is that the author appears to have drawn almost all his information about Sproul from the latter's writings. Eighty percent of the footnotes come from Sproul's publications, and none explicitly originated from primary source interviews. In the acknowledgments section, he refers to "conversations and correspondence" (p. 131) with Sproul's wife, Vesta, and R. C. Sproul Jr., but nowhere does this material appear in the footnotes. While not fatal to a brief biography, this feature could have strengthened the book.

Stephen Nichols's superb 400-page biography of Sproul [*R. C. Sproul: A Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021)] was published as Pickowicz was writing this shorter treatment. Pickowicz's work is certainly eclipsed in comprehensiveness and magnitude by Nichols, but it is nevertheless worth your time.

N. T. Parker

Faith Presbyterian Church
Watkinsville, Georgia, USA

Lori Rogers-Stokes. *Records of Trial from Thomas Shepard's Church in Cambridge, 1638–1649: Heroic Souls*. Christianities in the Trans-Atlantic World. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. xii + 190 pp. £44.99/\$54.99.

Thomas Shepard (1605–1649) was a Puritan minister whose nonconformity led him to immigrate to Massachusetts in 1635. Upon arrival, he became pastor of a new congregational church at Cambridge and busied himself with church and civic matters, as well as Native American missions. He is best known now for his writings, including *The Parable of the Ten Virgins*, *The Sincere Convert*, and *The Sound Believer*.

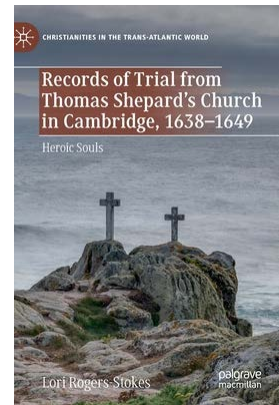
In *Records of Trial from Thomas Shepard's Church in Cambridge, 1638–1649: Heroic Souls*, independent scholar Lori Rogers-Stokes focuses on a lesser-known set of writings comprised of statements that scholars have assumed to be testimonies given before the church as the final step before full membership, otherwise known as relations of faith. Rogers-Stokes argues that what Shepard recorded are *not* relations of faith but “records of trial”—that is, testimonies of prospective members privately delivered to small groups at an earlier stage in the process.

In 1981, George Selement and Bruce C. Woolley published the transcripts of fifty-one testimonies from Shepard's church. Another sixteen were published ten years later by Mary R. McCarl. Both publications presented them as relations of faith. Unable to make sense of Shepard's compressed notes and the lack of assurance in the confessions, scholars continued to envision “a miserable people unable to understand or accurately identify or express their deepest emotions, a people controlled by their powerful minister, and in particular, miserably oppressed and inarticulate women” (p. 5).

On close investigation, Rogers-Stokes discovers that the Selement, Woolley, and McCarl transcripts grossly misrepresented Shepard's manuscripts. Shepard's writing is neat, orderly, and carefully formatted and punctuated to reveal the nuances of dialogue. Such variation is absent in the transcripts, where large blocks of text conflate speakers and include things Shepard struck out and no one said. Why the discrepancies? Rogers-Stokes presumes the “pressure of the assumption that they were records of relations” is to blame (p. 7). Studying the originals led her to believe that they were records of trial rather than relations of faith. This revised timing better explained Shepard's compact language and the absence of assurance.

Rogers-Stokes proceeds to show evidence for her view, beginning with side-by-side transcripts: Selement and Woolley versus her own. She includes numerous such comparisons with scores of personally transcribed extracts, plus over a dozen photos. She acknowledges the contributions of Selement, Woolley, and McCarl, noting the common and often helpful practice of modernizing “archaic spellings or typography” (p. 41), but then goes on to illustrate how their edits negatively impacted meaning. Between a “lack of paragraphing and stops” in Selement and Woolley and “misread or omitted words” in McCarl (p. 60), she demonstrates that the trial thesis better explains the evidence.

Shepard considered the last stage of spiritual preparation to be, not passive humiliation (an earlier step), but an impulsive leap into the arms of Christ. In other words, “to discover your assurance, you must reach for it” (p. 86). Rogers-Stokes says this concept was unique among his contemporaries (pp. 81, 82, 88). She gives little to substantiate this view, however. She cites some secondary sources but gives no direct proof for other New England pastors holding a contrary view.



Rogers-Stokes consistently paints Shepard and his view of the spiritual state of New England in dark hues. She outlines “speculative” reasons for what she calls his “dark ruminations” and “unique pessimism” (p. 103): persecution, family loss, and disappointments with fellow pastors and congregants. He was especially troubled by some parishioners’ reluctance to “close with Christ,” which he attributed to unbelief rather than scrupulosity.

Undoubtedly, Shepard was concerned for the people of Cambridge and New England, but at times one wonders about the accuracy of Rogers-Stokes’s negative framing. His anguish is arguably the fruit of love as much as law. For example, she illustrates his “dark vision” with an extract from his public fast day preparation of April 4, 1639: he “blamed himself for his flock’s unbelief,” she says (pp. 116–18). He does so, but the tone of the entry is one of abasement commensurate with public fast-day preparations.

Rogers-Stokes also spotlights the records of women, the “heroic souls” of Cambridge. Their testimonies provide remarkable glimpses into both the trial process and their spiritual journeys. Her summaries and commentary on them are helpful but tend toward editorializing. She is right to assert the importance of these women’s voices, but her emphatic—and admittedly anachronistic—use of the “modern hero” concept to accentuate their value is strained (pp. 138, 159).

In her effort to depict the women as on an “epic quest” and “struggling alone against cosmic forces, ultimately reduced to two players: the seeker and the Lord” (pp. 135, 137, 139), Rogers-Stokes reads out of the silence meanings not obviously there (pp. 136, 144–45, 149) and continually bumps up against the reality that they were not alone (pp. 6, 138, 155–57). The Cambridge women were heroic souls, but not necessarily for the individualistic reasons Rogers-Stokes emphasizes. Yes, they were “determined, passionate, informed, and individualistic” (p. 21), but not just as spiritual seekers. Their significance lay in all aspects of their identity as women integral to families, churches, and communities.

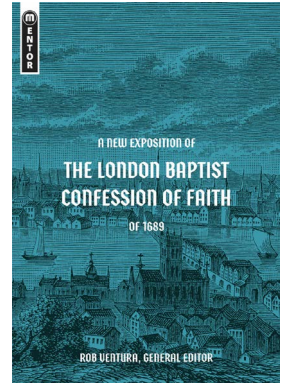
Despite these interpretive quibbles, *Records of Trial* represents a notable contribution to early New England scholarship. Against the prevailing thesis that Shepard’s notebooks contained relations of faith, Rogers-Stokes argues convincingly that they are better understood as records of trial. Her thesis is novel and well-defended. Her painstaking analysis is continually on display in her cogent writing, thorough research, citations and footnotes, original transcripts, and helpful pictures. Her work provides a fresh reminder of a foundational conviction of the historian: details matter.

Joshua D. Thomas
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Kansas City, Missouri, USA

Rob Ventura, ed. *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*. Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2022. 568 pp. £29.99/\$39.99.

Recent years have seen a growing interest in a more creedal and confessionally rooted expression of the Christian faith. Even among the Baptists, there has been a recognized need to retrieve historic Christian confessions to renew the church. Chief among the Baptist confessions is the *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1677/89* (2LBC), and a new resource for retrieving that time-tested confession is the recent Rob Ventura edited volume.

The book's organization is what you would expect if you are familiar with the 2LBC: thirty-two chapters: each chapter corresponding to a chapter in the Confession. Each chapter contains the full text of the Confession, followed by an exposition, and concludes with pastoral and practical application. Preceding the chapters is an introduction, an entry on the historical overview of the Confession, and the Letter to the Reader, included as the original preface to the 2LBC. At the end are a name index, a Scripture index, and a subject index for easy reference.



To “promote the glorious biblical faith” expressed through the 2LBC, to edify the saints, and strengthen the holiness and doctrine of churches, Ventura has gathered more than twenty men of various contexts and backgrounds to contribute chapters (p. 10). Because this is a multi-authored book, with each contributor writing multiple entries, it would prove challenging to review each author’s work individually. As Ventura points out, the men who contributed “may not agree with each other’s every ‘jot and tittle’ that he has written” (p. 10). Therefore, to fairly present the contents of this work, highlights from select chapters will be used to demonstrate the book’s strengths and weaknesses.

While this book is an exposition of the 2LBC, what you’ll walk away with more than anything else is that Scripture is supreme. This emphasis on the supremacy of God’s word is one of the strengths throughout the work. As John Rueuther, pastor of Covenant Baptist Church and author of *The Gift of the Holy Spirit*, points out in the first chapter, “In this exposition of Chapter 1, and the expositions which follow, we are examining and explaining the Confession to show that the Confession represents the teachings of Scripture” (p. 59). A shared commitment among the contributors to canonical biblical interpretation and Scriptural exposition consistently comes through in this book. As you read through this exposition, from chapter 1 to chapter 32, each section will lead you to search the Scriptures, testing every doctrine against the Word of God, as you are strengthened in the “faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

Like most books, though, this volume is not without its shortcomings. One issue present is the tendency of contributors to include interpretations of the Confession’s text rather than a modern-historical exposition. Rather than expositing the Confession, many chapters read more like interpretations, through the lens of Scripture, from a level of subscription that is distinct from both historical and full subscriptions. This issue becomes apparent as early as chapter 2 in Sam Waldron’s treatment of “God and the Holy Trinity.”

Waldron, president of Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary and author of *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1989), spends a good deal of his chapter on “God and the Holy Trinity” defending classical attributes of God, including his singularity/simplicity, aseity, and impassibility. Waldron even defends the doctrine of eternal generation against

modern theologians who deny this doctrine based on upholding the eternal subordination of the Son. However, this exposition of the third paragraph in chapter 2 of the Confession soon turns interpretative. Waldron utilizes the doctrine of eternal generation to introduce the personal subordination of the Son and Holy Spirit to the Father. He concludes his chapter by practically applying the Trinity to “how virulently anti-Christian is the foundational claim of modern feminism and egalitarianism” (p. 85). While God-ordained gender roles should be affirmed and upheld, theologically rooting such distinctions in the doctrine of the Trinity is inadequate and moves beyond the scope of the Confession. Waldron’s appeal to the Trinity as a corrective to feminism and egalitarianism moves this section from pure exposition to individual interpretation.

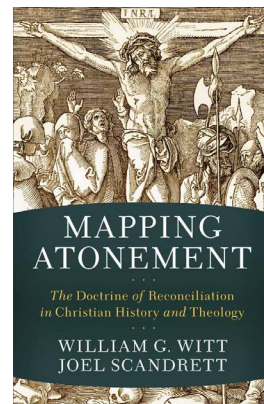
Though the book is titled, *A New Exposition...*, it might be more aptly titled, *A Scriptural Interpretation of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*. Many chapters in this book are good, and each is Scripturally saturated. However, due to the interpretive moves by a number of contributors, this work cannot be considered strictly or merely an exposition. As it is, Ventura’s volume is an imperfect yet welcome addition to confessional Baptist resources. For one looking for a contextual-historical exposition of the 2LBC, consider James Renihan’s book from Founders Press, released nearly simultaneously with this volume titled, *To the Judicious and Impartial Reader*.

Branden R. Preedy
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Kansas City, Missouri, USA

William C. Whitt and Joel Scandrett. *Mapping Atonement: The Doctrine of Reconciliation in Christian History and Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022. Xii + 240 pp. \$27.99.

The atonement is one of the central doctrines of the Christian faith. In their insightful work *Mapping Atonement: The Doctrine of Reconciliation in Christian History and Theology*, William Whitt and Joel Scandrett offer a historical and systematic introduction to the work of Christ. The authors survey several influential models of the atonement from Christian history, then offer a critique of each model’s respective strengths and weaknesses. Their perspective is broadly catholic and merely evangelical.

Whitt and Scandrett suggest there are three challenges to rightly understanding the atonement. The first is historical: there is no ecumenical consensus on the work of Christ analogous to that of the Trinity or Christology (p. 5). Hence, the authors survey different atonement models, assuming all have something to contribute to a comprehensive atonement theology. Second, they note the New Testament’s language about the atonement is varied, metaphorical, and symbolic (p. 6). Thus, the authors prefer integrated accounts of the atonement that avoid simplistic proof-texting or an over-reliance upon tight theological systems. Finally, they highlight the tension between constitutive accounts that claim Christ brings about atonement through his unique work and illustrative models that downplay the exclusivity of Christ’s saving actions (p. 10). As evangelical Protestants who teach at Trinity School for Ministry, the authors affirm the necessity of constitutive models and reject the theological coherence of illustrative views.



Mapping Atonement examines eight historical views, each with one or two case studies. The incarnational view, which emphasizes *theosis*, focuses on Irenaeus and Athanasius. The Christus Victor view, which emphasizes Christ's victory over evil, surveys several church fathers and noteworthy twentieth-century proponent Gustav Aulen. The satisfaction view looks at Anselm, while the divine love view turns attention to both Abelard (no surprise) and John Wesley (an unexpected turn). The fittingness view, arguably a variation of the satisfaction view, focuses on Thomas Aquinas. The chapter on penal substitution takes John Calvin and Charles Hodge as its representative theologians, while the moral example chapter engages with the modernist Anglican theologian Hastings Randall. A chapter on Karl Barth's "reconciliation" model closes out the historical survey. The closing chapter discusses contemporary atonement debates, holding out Thomas Torrance as a recent role model for constructive orthodox atonement theology.

The chapters are filled with insights that will challenge the sorts of readers whose knowledge of the atonement is mostly limited to surveys from evangelical systematic theology textbooks and defenses of penal substitution. One of their principal contentions is that atonement theology should be integrated, accounting for the richness of the biblical text and dialoguing with the best insights of historical theology. This leads to a more kaleidoscopic or mosaic understanding of the atonement than is common in the evangelical imagination. Along these lines, Whitt and Scandrett rightly demonstrate that many pre-modern theologians did not treat incarnational, substitutionary, and victory as fully discreet models that were isolated from one another as much as controlling motifs based upon how particular theologians understood Scripture. The authors also make a persuasive case that Abelard's view was constitutive and thus closer to the views of Anselm and Aquinas in its understanding of the atonement's objectivity than the illustrative, purely subjective moral influence view associated with modern theological liberals such as Randall.

The authors' personal preferences for one model or theologian over others shine through at various points. The heroes of the book are Aquinas and Barth, each of whom offers what Whitt and Scandrett believe to be robust, integrated accounts of the atonement. They emphasize the discontinuities between Anselm and Aquinas to such a degree that the latter is not closely identified with the satisfaction view when arguably, Aquinas simply further develops that model. Barth is portrayed as creatively avoiding the implied pitfalls of penal substitution, which, regrettably, the authors cannot commend without considerable throat-clearing and the obvious pitfalls of moral influence, which they thankfully reject outright. Many evangelical theologians find Barth's views of the atonement to be stimulating but also deficient at best and incoherent at worst. Curiously, the authors omit the governmental model from their survey entirely, even though that model has loomed large at various points in post-Reformation and evangelical theology.

Overall, *Mapping Atonement* accomplishes its goals of providing a historical and theological survey and critique of (most of) the major atonement models. The authors' critically appreciative tone is commendable, and their analysis is perceptive. However, many readers of this journal will wish the authors were less reticent to embrace penal substitution as the central motif at the center of an integrated atonement theology. For those interested in the latter, it is best to pair *Mapping Atonement*

with Joshua McNall's recent book *The Mosaic of Atonement: An Integrated Approach to Christ's Work* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019).

Nathan A. Finn
North Greenville University
Tigerville, South Carolina, USA

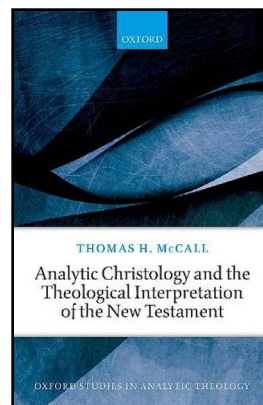
— SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY —

Thomas H. McCall. *Analytic Christology and the Theological Interpretation of the New Testament*. Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. xi + 226 pp. \$94.00.

In this insightful and stimulating book, Thomas H. McCall, who holds the Tennent Chair of Theology at Asbury Theological Seminary, applies the methods of analytic theology to debates surrounding Christology and theological interpretation of Scripture. Although analytic theology has gained traction in theological circles, the exacting procedure entailed by analytic approaches has rarely been applied to exegesis and Biblical interpretation. While McCall admits he is neither a New Testament scholar nor an analytic philosopher, he fills this gap by demonstrating the exegetical and theological fruitfulness that the analytic method brings to complex matters of debate.

McCall offers this book as an example of “soft analytic theology,” rather than “hard analytic theology.” For the former, analytic tools and emphases, such as analytical logic, clarity of expression, and insistence on plain definitions, are used to illuminate and resolve issues. This is opposed to “hard analytic theology,” which freights in modern metaphysics and presuppositions that may tilt the conversation. One may wonder how easily these two approaches remain distinct, but McCall’s awareness of the concern and his attempts to objectivity are commendable. The book breaks down into six different chapters, all of which, to varying degrees, interact with points of debate within New Testament studies and Christology. Here are the issues he addresses—Christian identity and apocalyptic readings of Paul, the issue of πίστις Χριστοῦ, Bruce McCormack’s reading of Barth and his Christology, the submission of Christ in Hebrews, the theological exegesis of Karl Barth and Thomas Aquinas, Social Trinitarianism and the logic of Christ’s incarnation. Although McCall’s expertise is in systematic theology, he shows himself to be a competent analytical thinker and New Testament exegete. Some biblical scholars may dismiss McCall’s treatment of the text because he does not emphasize the historical cultural milieu, but such dismissal would be to the detriment of biblical exegesis and New Testament studies.

McCall’s book is a wonderful example of an interdisciplinary monograph that does not overstep the parameters of its study, nor does it over-promise and under-deliver. He has not set out to revolutionize either analytic theology or biblical exegesis. His goal, as I read it, is much more modest. At the end of the day, he is simply setting out a rigorous and eloquent example of hermeneutical chastity and precision. McCall demonstrates convincingly that analytic tools can aid various fields of investigation in their findings while providing points of rapprochement between disciplines that have remained at



loggerheads. In a field such as New Testament studies, where the value of interpretations often seems to rest on their creativity and novelty, *Analytic Christology* is a help corrective.

Without detracting from the book as a whole, there are a few issues with the book worth mentioning. First, the book—at least in its digital version—contains an unfortunate number of typographical errors in the Greek and English. In general, circumflexes were excluded and other accents are often missing (ἡ πίστις τοῦ θεοῦ, rather than τοῦ θεοῦ, p. 50). There are also some misspellings (εἰς τὸν διανεκέξ, rather than διηνεκέξ, p. 87). Although these are surface-level, I found them to be extremely distracting, especially given the quality of the book's content.

The second critique concerns McCall's use of New Testament scholarship. This is clearly observed in his chapter on the πίστις Χριστοῦ debates. After laying out the different options, he puts up Morna Hooker's argument for a plenary understanding (that is, the reading that incorporates both subjective and objective aspects), but his discussion defending the plenary use is limited only to certain theological construal. He does not ask whether such a phrase makes sense grammatically. He also fails to interact with some of the more recent scholarship (for example Kevin Grasso's recent article on πίστις Χριστοῦ [*JSNT* 43 (2020): 108–44], and the work by David Downs and Benjamine Lappenga [*Faithfulness of the Risen Christ* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019)]). Although he makes some very helpful criticisms of the caricatures that the objective reading often faces, the way he uses the New Testament data and the discussion is not as up-to-date or as careful as it could have been.

Finally, although the *Analytic Christology* admirably blends analytic Christology and the interpretation of Scripture, the emphasis given to these subjects varies from one chapter to the next. The clearest example is found in the last chapter in which McCall interacts with the work of JC Beall, specifically with Beall's claims in his *The Contradictory Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). The chapter itself is well written and offers strong criticism against Beall's arguments, but there is almost no attempt to synthesize analytic Christology with theological interpretation of Scripture. The last chapter felt a bit out of place with the rest of the book, which wedded together seamlessly Scripture and theology.

These criticisms are not meant to detract readers from the significance of this monograph. Despite some weak points, McCall has provided a model of interdisciplinary scholarship and Christian scholarship. Of the various books published on the theological interpretation of Scripture, McCall's contribution to *Analytic Christology* is exemplary. While the book is geared more towards theology and analytic philosophy, New Testament—and even Old Testament—scholars will find it a stimulating read.

J. Brittain Brewer
Calvin Theological Seminary
Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA

Alister McGrath. *What's the Point of Theology: Wisdom, Wellbeing and Wonder*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022. viii + 160 pp. £10.99/\$18.99.

Alister McGrath is stranger to no topic in systematic theology. His many publications range from popular introductory texts to scholarly, academic works on all theological *loci*. His voice is valued in numerous and varied theological circles, yet he is also respected in today's public square—a venue that is often hostile to the kind of biblically faithful expression of Christianity that characterizes McGrath's writing. This position of theological authority and cultural responsibility uniquely qualifies him to tackle the content of his new book, *What's the Point of Theology?*

Recent decades have produced a refreshingly abundant number of books on theological method and theological prioritization. This is a positive step beyond the necessary but limited discussions about prolegomena in the early chapters of larger works in systematics. But all these efforts bespeak a goal that drives or should be driving, the theological project. Many resources today lack the robust and winsome focus on the precise purpose that McGrath so clearly articulates in these pages.

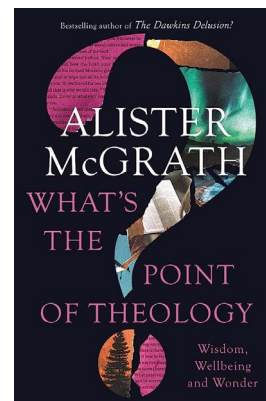
Part 1 of the book lays the groundwork for his expression of the point of theology by describing the discipline as a way of seeing the big picture of God's story (chs. 1–2), and then helpfully responding to five current and relevant criticisms of theology (ch. 3). Part 2 is the three-chambered heart of the project, claiming that the point of theology is: to lead us to wisdom that draws from the riches of the Christian tradition (ch. 4), to expose us to the truth of the meaning and value of our lives (ch. 5), and to foster a deeper sense of wonder about the mysteries of the divine (ch. 6). By understanding theology's three-fold point, we understand why it matters and what it ultimately leads to.

McGrath succinctly sums up theology's point claiming, "Theology matters because *Christianity* matters and theology aims to preserve, express, and convey its essence" (p. 130). Elsewhere he expands,

Theology thus captures and puts into words the moral, intellectual and spiritual vision that is the heartbeat of the Christian faith—a way of seeing things that delights and overwhelms us and leads us to worship and adoration rather than mere understanding. It wrestles with the question of how Christians can hope to express this defining and compelling vision in words. It helps us to explain what Christianity is fundamentally *about* and enables us to convey the difference that such an understanding makes to the way in which we comprehend our world and live within it. (p. 9)

In addition to the aforementioned positive contribution of a book-length treatment on theology's aim and end, McGrath services the church by writing in an accessible form for both pastors and laypeople, rather than merely for those in the academy. At several places throughout the book, he specifically addresses how a grasp of theology's point emboldens and gives direction to the preaching of God's Word, as well as other ways in which God's people communicate His truth to this world.

Early in the book, McGrath criticizes certain academic theologians who are so overly specialized that they become inaccessible to many of the people that theologians should serve. An aspect of his criticism is that such academic theologians are often "engaging with writers that few have ever heard of" (p. 43). A cursory perusal of the book's endnotes reveals that McGrath would be considered guilty of his own critique if it were a legitimate critique in the first place. But given the historically and academically



reflective nature of Christian theology—historical and academic reflection that characterizes so much of McGrath’s work in other areas—I think we can be thankful that he exposes readers of this book to a wide array of authors, and merely mistakes this feature of theology for a bug in the system.

When I finished reading *What’s the Point of Theology?* I jotted down a summary that I have returned to several times since. I believe it accurately reflects the truth about theology’s aim and the core of what McGrath is communicating to us: for the public, theology is informative; for the individual Christian, theology is reflective; and for the corporate Christian church, theology is visionary.

Reading this book will keep your theological fire ablaze, rekindle it if it has started to die, or maybe even ignite it if you’ve never engaged in theological thinking before.

Eric B. Oldenburg

Melbourne School of Theology

Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

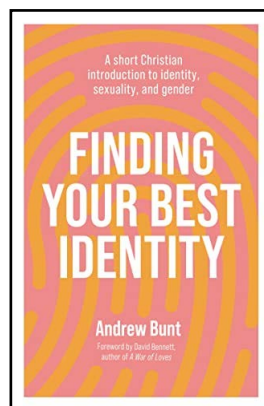
— ETHICS AND PASTORALIA —

Andrew Bunt. *Finding Your Best Identity: A Short Christian Introduction to Identity, Sexuality and Gender*. London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2022. 104 pp. £5.99/\$11.99.

Who am I? What does it mean to be human? These are core questions, explored by the human race in a variety of forms, from religion to music to art to literature. Our answers to these questions will shape our identity, or as Andrew Bunt defines, “our controlling self-understanding,” which, in turn, will shape our concepts of worth, value, emotional/mental health, actions and relationships (p. 3). In our current cultural moment, sexuality and gender have become particularly contested areas of definition. As its subtitle makes clear, Bunt’s *Finding Your Best Identity: A Short Christian Introduction to Identity, Sexuality and Gender* seeks to provide a Christian response to this situation.

Finding Your Best Identity is a book that is particularly personal and tender, helped by the fact that Bunt writes as both a pastor and a fellow disciple. (Until recently he was on staff at King’s Church and he is now the Emerging Generations Director of the UK organization Living Out.) In addition to this, he experienced gender incongruence in his youth and continues to experience attraction to the same sex. As a result, Bunt’s tone, argument and theology are wrapped in careful pastoral kindness and heartfelt conviction. Most importantly, his work reflects the Jesus he seeks to follow, who “never allowed people to think that sin was acceptable, but he also never allowed people to believe that God didn’t or couldn’t love them” (p. 17).

Unlike many attempts to engage gender and sexual identity questions, Bunt’s book guides readers to unpack the epistemology behind the question “Who am I?” by exploring the question “How do I find who I am?” (p. 4). In contested topics, starting with the presuppositions and prior experiences of how we seek knowledge and come to an understanding is essential, otherwise, writes Bunt, “we’ll be talking past each other because we’ll be talking about different topics without even realizing it and we’ll be unaware of the pain that some people are experiencing, some of which may have been caused by



Christians” (p. 5). In this sense, Bunt’s book is a piece of apologetics that seeks to redeem the nature of identity and help Christians to better follow Christ.

The apologetics lie in chapters 1–3. Here the nature of identity is explored and the question of authoritative sources is raised (ch. 1). This is followed by a critique of identity defined by others (ch. 2) and identity defined by ourselves (ch. 3). Bunt next expounds what it means for our identity to be defined by God and rooted in the work of Christ (ch. 4). Grounding our transformation in the doctrines of grace and our union with Christ (p. 42), he then shows what having a God-defined identity means for our experience of sexuality and gender (ch. 5) and Christian living (ch. 6). As Bunt expresses: “I am not my sexuality or any other feeling or desire I might find within. I am a new creation in Christ, one saved by the grace of God. I am fully known and fully loved. I am a child of God” (p. 48).

Bunt does not shy away from pointing out areas where Christians may need to repent and be challenged. These include mistaking cultural gender stereotypes for biblical gender norms and then discipling Christians to conform to them (pp. 62–64); dishonoring and disrespecting LGBTQ+ people, despite their being made equally in the image of God (p. 51); and the lack of love that some Christians, past and present, have shown towards people who claim a trans* identity or are navigating gender conflicts (p. 59). At the same time, he rejects the idea that our “internal experiences are who we are, and that they therefore need to be embraced and expressed in order to allow us to live our best life” (p. 5). The gospel has better news for us that this, as it offers us in Christ a “new, secure, life-giving identity” (p. 40).

Throughout the book, Bunt gives us insights into the difficulties experienced by those who experience attraction to the same sex and gender incongruence. Regarding his own experience, he writes, “I still sometimes hear things that imply I am not only different but somehow weird or lesser because I’m attracted to guys. But choosing to root my identity in what God says about me ... helps me to not let those words shape my view of myself” (pp. 51–52). The genuine challenges faced by those who identify as LGBTQ+—e.g., shame, peer-pressure, emotional suppression, mental health issues, etc.—are also helpfully addressed, as Bunt seeks to persuade readers that “Christian identity allows us to *engage healthily with feelings and desires* ... and to respond to them and steward them in the ways that God has revealed will be the most life-giving for us” (p. 47, italics original).

Finally, as mentioned already, a major strength of the book is its personable style. It often reads as if the author is speaking directly to the reader. Perhaps because of Bunt’s emphasis on individual identity, however, I sometimes found myself yearning for more engagement with communal aspects of identity creation and formation, and how the body of Christ can corporately be a place of Christian identity discipleship. Nonetheless, the book winsomely speaks to both believers and unbelievers alike, exhorting everyone not to be defined by their sexual desires, but to understand these desires “through the teaching of Scripture and then to choose to steward them in line with what God has revealed in his word” (p. 58). In pursuing such a path, writes Bunt, “I am not denying who I am; I am living out my best identity as a human, and therefore sexual, being, but most importantly as a child of God” (p. 58).

As someone who has ministered extensively in this space, I see this book as making a crucial contribution to the discipleship of the emerging generations.

Sam Wan
Robert Menzies College
North Ryde, New South Wales, Australia

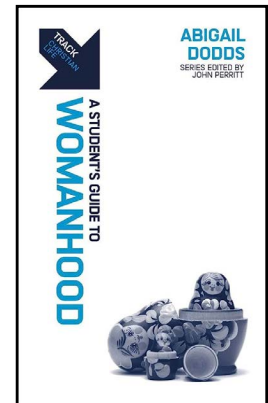
Abigail Dodds. *A Student's Guide to Womanhood*. Track Christian Life. Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2002. 112 pp. £3.99/\$4.99.

'What is a woman?' It's a question which might have been met with guffaws of laughter just twenty years ago, but (as the popularity of the eponymous Matt Walsh documentary attests) it is now one Christians need to answer. At the same time, scores of books on womanhood have been written by and for Christians since the sexual revolution. From Elizabeth Elliot's well-known *Let Me Be a Woman* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1976), to Rachel Held Evans's more controversial *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), there are a plethora of options to choose from. So why do we need another one?

Without subjecting all the current offerings to cross examination, it would be impossible to argue that the Christian world *needs* another book on womanhood, but it must be said that anyone grappling with what womanhood means today will certainly have their thoughts significantly enriched by Dodds's guide. A very small book, designed to be read in an hour or so, *A Student's Guide to Womanhood* manages to address key aspects of womanhood without quoting Proverbs 31 on every page (an impressive accomplishment if one compares it to many popular-level books on womanhood). The language is concise, easy to understand and imbued with warmth, each chapter beginning with a scene from the author's own life. Dodds handles Scripture adroitly, exegeting it with a clarity that never side-steps serious questions, but she refuses to let her readers become overwhelmed by current debates (p. 13). Her examples and applications are specific without being overly culturally bound, and each chapter concludes with a take-away statement and three questions for further reflection.

Dodds begins by addressing our cultural zeitgeist head on. She acknowledges that while second wave feminism and the transgender movement have made defining womanhood 'as complicated and extraordinary as to be almost impossible,' it is equally true that 'being a woman is simultaneously simple and complex *by God's design*' (p. 9, emphasis added). It is this emphasis on God's hand in creating womanhood which (rightly) occupies the initial chapters. For 'Womanhood matters the way the walls of the house matter.... It matters the way flowers in the garden matter. It matters because God wanted it to matter—He made it consequential' (p. 10). When humans attempt to define or create womanhood themselves apart from God, they are re-performing and participating in the ignoble sin of Genesis 3, she argues. At the same time, when Jesus came to redeem and recreate us, he provided women with an identity which is 'stuffed full of meaning and purpose and design' (p. 24). This identity is a witness to the world of God's goodness (p. 94).

A Guide to Womanhood then addresses how physical differences between men and women function to fulfil the original commission God gave humanity. Yet in a fallen world the fact that men have greater strength and speed and only women can nurture children in their womb are at best reasons for jealousy, and at worst realities to be obscured and altered. Dodds notes that women have the choice to rebel against their womanhood (maiming and damaging their bodies or cultivating them for the purpose of power and control), or to resent their womanhood (becoming bitter over singleness, infertility or disability), or to agree with what Scripture evinces and, 'despite difficulties and trials,' to 'entrust ourselves by faith in Jesus to our Sovereign God' (p. 39). Furthermore, the hope and life God brought to creation in the incarnation of his Son extends to womanhood. Life under the new covenant



does not make the Genesis commission obsolete, but it does make it incomplete. We still need men and women to marry and have children. But more than that, we need their children to be *born again* through faith in Jesus Christ. And we need both the married and unmarried alike to participate in the Great Commission given by Jesus. (pp. 40–41, emphasis original)

Thus all women, regardless of physical or intellectual ability, are able to live fruitful lives in Christ, making disciples and becoming spiritual mothers. At the same time, physicality is not eschewed, for Jesus came to die for sins done in the body, and the Holy Spirit gifts women with the self-control and power to present their bodies as ‘instruments for righteousness’ (Rom 6:14) in ways equal but distinct from men (p. 43). And all this, not through special women’s rites or rituals, but by the ordinary means of grace.

Nevertheless, God does not ignore the male-female distinction when it comes to growth in godliness. In chapter 7, Dodds offers refreshing wisdom as she discusses biblical instruction addressed specifically to women. She points out that while the gospel is able and effective in saving both sexes, this does not preclude that each sex will have its own particular challenges and temptations. Specific instructions give women much to think over. Additionally, God in his kindness also provides examples of faithful female believers in the pages of Scripture and in the church.

Dodds also provides an engaging and much needed analysis of the current cultural inclination to automatically equate womanhood with victimhood and then to make victimhood an irrefutable currency for obtaining social sympathy and status. I did struggle, however, with the summary of her own experience. She notes, ‘I knew I wasn’t a victim—I knew that whatever minor injustices I’d experienced from others were paltry when I contemplated my own assault on God’s holiness’ (pp. 76–77). It is important to note that the first half of her sentence is particular to her, the latter is true for us all. Our personal transgressions against a faultless God will always be of a totally different magnitude to sins committed against us. Nevertheless, some women’s experiences *will* still include acts of gross injustice, even if Dodds’s did not. As the chapter progresses, she does differentiate more obviously between the experience of being victimized and claiming victimhood as identity, and goes on to speak helpfully of God’s ability to see both sins committed against us and sins committed by us; the way in which victimhood as identity robs women of agency; and Jesus as the ultimate Victim-who-is-not-a-victim (p. 80).

A Student’s Guide to Womanhood finishes as it began, with a cogent appraisal of the costs of claiming that God and God alone has the right to define womanhood. Yet there is joy to be found, even as Christians battle the cultural tide of gender self-creation. The God who creates and defines also redeems and restores us in Christ. He therefore gives us a better word (Christ) to speak to our neighbours. So Dodds encourages women,

Your life, as a woman who embraces being made a woman, helps to speak this better word. Your steadfast acceptance and reception of the gift of womanhood is a testimony in our broken culture. Your being unashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ and unashamed to be called his *daughter*, is a witness to the world that God is good and He does good. (p. 94, emphasis original)

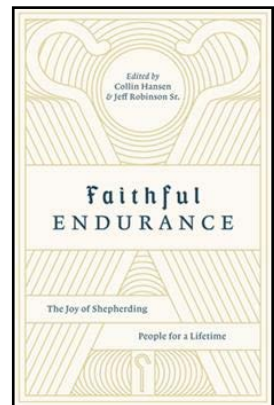
In case it's not obvious by now, Dodds's book is not only for students but for everyone who needs a short scriptural primer on what has become a focus point of our current political and cultural milieu: womanhood.

Emily J. Maurits
Marrickville Road Church
Marrickville, New South Wales, Australia

Collin Hansen and Jeff Robinson Sr., eds. *Faithful Endurance: The Joy of Shepherding People for a Lifetime*. The Gospel Coalition. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019. 160 pp. \$15.99.

The purpose of this book is to help pastors who are going through deep waters and are struggling to stay afloat in the ministry. Experienced contributors answer twelve heartfelt questions that have to do with pastoral griefs, doubts, struggles and setbacks—seeking to provide help to “finish your ministry” (2 Tim 4:5).

Each chapter “begins with a question that reflects a scenario commonly faced by pastors” (p. 12). So, the questions may be invented, but they are certainly real issues and are dealt with by men who are familiar with pastoral struggles. In fact, as someone ordained forty-three years ago, I was amazed by how many of the contributors have been through exactly the same troubles that I, and so many of my pastoral friends, have faced. That in itself may be of great comfort to readers—you are not alone in any sense.



The first question has to do with a church that has plateaued and a pastor who is listless. I expected the veteran (Tim Keller) to apply some soothing ointment and perhaps recommend a holiday. But instead, out comes the scalpel to deal with the deeper issue of pride. Keller pinpoints the dangers of knowing stuff but not appreciating it, equating yourself with your ministry and faking your faith. If this sounds tough (and I found it to be so), he then shows that the hardships come from a good God to drive us to himself. So, he deals with a deep issue—searchingly.

The second question asks if and when it is time to stop, and the answer comes from someone who has been serving in the same place for forty years (!). D. A. Carson's advice is very shrewd. If there are no clear reasons to leave—moral failure, sickness etc—then you might adjust your energy levels to a different pace in order to “tackle the remaining things with enthusiasm and gusto” (p. 24).

The third question has to do with a sense of dull preaching—surely a desperate feeling for the pastor and the congregation. Bryan Chappell's advice includes the vital reminder that preaching should not just inform but transform. Is this an easy quick-fix answer? No. But a reminder that the One who speaks is even more interested in the Word benefitting ourselves and our people than we are.

The fourth question addresses the painful topic of criticism. Dan Doriani deals with this under the headings of “the deserved, the inevitable and the undeserved” (p. 45). This brief chapter is worth reading for realistic expectations in ministry. (I remember Spurgeon saying somewhere that we should thank the Lord for the person who keeps our feet on the ground.)

Question 5 concerns taking on a church that you would never attend yourself! Tom Ascol urges us to see it as a privilege to get to work on such a place and see progress under God's kind hand. Question

6, which is answered by Juan and Jeanine Sanchez, deals with the pain of seeing one's wife and children being hurt by the church and how much to keep from them so that they aren't irreparably wounded.

Question 7 deals with the grief of having people leave and Dave Harvey very beautifully shows how Paul (and King David) experienced this long before us—and dealt with it. (How helped I have been over the years by Dick Lucas who taught me to “accept all resignations with a smile.”)

Question 8 raises the question of the “small church” and whether that means failure. This is a big issue in the city (Sydney) where I work, and Mark McCullough helpfully identifies three things that are much more important than being successful or famous: the joy knowing and being known by God, the joy of making God known and the joy of knowing others.

Question 9 has to do with the pastor who is worn out. Question 10 is for the pastor who feels that he has no answers for the ‘next stage’ of the church. Question 11 concerns the financial constraints under which the pastor serves and question 12 is for the man who now wonders if he was really called to ministry.

At the close of the book is a brief interview with John MacArthur, in which he reflects on fifty years in ministry in California. His reminders to “love your people” (p. 144) and to know that ministry is not primarily “about you” (p. 142) are great words indeed.

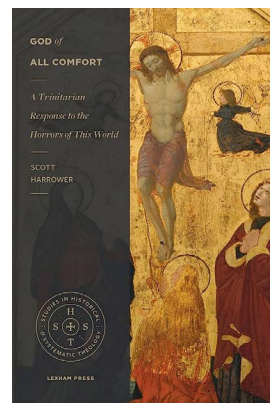
Is *Faithful Endurance* a good book to buy for a pastor? Yes! It will help the pastor to know that he faces the same challenges and privileges that have been and are being faced everywhere. It acknowledges the struggles without descending into gloom or self-pity. And it will help laypeople also gain an insight into the weird and wonderful work of a pastor.

Reflecting on this brief book as a whole, I valued the wisdom and thoughtful reflections of seasoned pastors, but I especially valued the journey into the Scriptures which some did very faithfully and movingly. Behind the heart of the biblical shepherds, like David and Paul, lies the massive heart of the Chief Shepherd, and it is his comfort and counsel that really keeps us going.

Simon Manchester
All Saints Woollahra
Woollahra, New South Wales, Australia

Scott Harrower. *God of All Comfort: A Trinitarian Response to the Horrors of This World*. Bellingham: WA: Lexham, 2019. 255 pp. £15.99/\$24.99.

Scott Harrower's *God of all Comfort: A Trinitarian Response to the Horrors of This World* is a profoundly thoughtful, empathetic, and theologically engaging work that seeks to draw together trauma studies and the self-revelation of the triune God of the Bible. Harrower's professional work in emergency medicine, ministry, and theological research and teaching places him at a helpful nexus to write on the intersection of trauma and Christian faith. The book aims to “explore how God the Trinity engages with horrors and trauma, and what people can hope for in light of this” (p. 1). This aim leads to a clear, central thesis: recovery from trauma is significantly more attainable when God in Trinity is an acknowledged and integral part of that process; that is, when the



trauma survivor is keenly aware of the triune God's knowledge of them, love for them, and presence with them by his empowering Spirit.

The book's strong structure aids this central thesis, and Harrower builds his argument carefully. Part 1, "Horrors and Skepticisms," examines horror as a theological concept. Harrower concludes that horrors are, in essence, the antithesis and absence of *shalom* and its requisite elements—flourishing, wholeness, and hope. Part 2, "Horrors and Interpretation," addresses issues raised in examining horror and responds by looking at interpretations of God's involvement in the world via two readings of Matthew's Gospel—a "horror-attuned" reading and a "blessed" reading. Finally, in Part 3, "Horrors and Trinity," Harrower works through the essential elements for recovery from trauma, as set forth in Judith Lewis Herman's seminal work *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992). (It is also worth noting that Herman is a colleague of Bessel Van Der Kolk, author of *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* [New York: Viking Penguin, 2014]). Herman's work is a foundational text in discussions about the nature of trauma and what is required for recovery to be possible. Herman identified the recovery of safety, the recovery of the survivor's story, and the recovery of community as the three essential elements for healing from trauma. Harrower takes these categories and brings the triune God into the conversation, seeking to demonstrate that God in Trinity addresses and provides for safety, story, and community, thus making it possible for God to restore a trauma survivor. Even by suggesting that recovery is possible, he diverges from some who work within the trauma space. However, Harrower argues that a person who knows the triune God is better equipped to recover from trauma, have their skepticisms about God addressed realistically, and find hope to live meaningfully in the future.

God of all Comfort makes two distinctive contributions to the discussions surrounding trauma and recovery. In part 2 of the book, Harrower recognizes that a traumatized person interacts with the world through the lens of their own trauma. All people bring different interpretive grids to the reading of literature, including the Bible. Acknowledging the reader's perspective and drawing on literary studies in the horror genre, Harrower utilizes trauma hermeneutics to first offer a horror-attuned reading of Matthew. However, the book concludes that this approach is "not sufficient to redress the pervasiveness of horrors and their traumatic and overwhelming effects, nor the skepticisms that arise" (p. 116).

Given the limitations of a horror-attuned reading and its inadequacy to assist a person moving through trauma to recovery, Harrower seeks to address the central pastoral and theological question postulated by another theologian who connects trauma and theology, Serene Jones (*Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009]). Quoting Jones, Harrower asks, "*How do people, whose hearts and minds have been wounded by violence, come to feel and know the redeeming power of God's grace?*" (p. 116, italics original). Harrower answers this question by unpacking the personal ways in which the triune God, through seen and unseen, direct and indirect means, restores people from these horrors and their accompanying trauma. To do this, he examines a counter hermeneutic, a "blessed perspective" of Matthew's Gospel—a perspective that God himself enables through the work of his Spirit which helps people understand who he is, and how he is restoring human life (pp. 117–34). For example, Peter's change of perspective in Matthew 16:13–20 suggests that God may change other people's perspectives too, "despite great internal or external resistance" (p. 123).

The second distinctive contribution is in part 3, where the book brings together Trinitarian theology and trauma studies to address a perceptively identified research gap concerning a lack of deep engagement with the nature of how the triune God and addresses safety, story, and community for

trauma survivors. Harrower argues that knowing and experiencing God in Trinity provides a fuller, more complete framework for healing from trauma. In doing so, he resists a superficial approach to trauma, and a glib, reductionistic biblical exegesis that results in “thin” theology. Instead, the book wisely accords to the areas of trauma and theology the weight they both deserve. “Trauma is complex and entails ongoing brokenness, which is precisely why we need to be reminded that *everyday and all day* our starting point is the profound assurance that we are accepted by and special to God” (p. 188, italics original).

God of All Comfort is carefully researched and engages with a wide range of scholarship, demonstrating that Harrower could easily have said much more on the issue. Some of these strands are picked up and developed in a more recent work by Joshua Cockayne, Scott Harrower, and Preston Hill (*Dawn of Sunday: The Trinity and Trauma-Safe Churches*, New Studies in Theology and Trauma [Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022]). The extensive bibliography and footnotes open a world for readers who want to delve deeper into the book’s many astute observations, critiques, and interesting rabbit holes. While it is pitched at an academic level, this is fitting given the strands of trauma studies, literary approaches, philosophy, and theology that are brought together. Moreover, as a deeply theological, trauma-informed study, what this book offers survivors of trauma and those who work with them and care for them is unique.

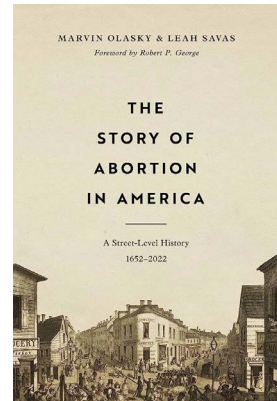
However, those who would presumably benefit most from this book—people who are seeking God’s face amid horrors—may struggle to engage with it, given that trauma can affect a person’s verbal functioning and ability to process words and information. Perhaps a follow-up book that makes this vital work more accessible to those in most need of it would be a wonderful gift to both the church and the world. In addition, a more developed response to recovery when horrors have occurred *within* Christian institutions (briefly addressed on pp. 191–92; c.f. pp. 46; 202; 213–14) would prove helpful. If, as Harrower suggests, the church can be a place of healing, then the complexities of a person recovering safety, story, and community in a similar context to where horrors occurred needs further exploration. The triune God is the starting point for recovery, however how a person integrates, or reintegrates, into a community of people in whom God’s Spirit dwells bears further reflection.

In the end, the reader will leave the pages of this book knowing that God is indeed the God of all comfort (2 Cor 1:3) who has power to heal horror-makers and trauma survivors alike. This truth offers the glinting diamond that those recovering from trauma are after—real hope for the future.

Rachel A. Ciano
Sydney Missionary & Bible College
Croydon, New South Wales, Australia

Marvin Olasky and Leah Savas. *The Story of Abortion in America: A Street-Level History 1652–2022*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023. 512 pp. £29.99/\$39.99.

Originally scheduled for publication alongside the fiftieth anniversary of the pro-abortion *Roe v. Wade* ruling (January 22, 2023), *The Story of Abortion in America* is just as significant (if not more so) in a post *Roe v. Wade* world. It adroitly straddles the political and personal in the abortion debate by providing a ‘street level’ history of the changing public sentiments in America since 1652. It is these ‘street-level’ opinions, the everyday beliefs of doctors, women, journalists, pastors, boyfriends and husbands, that influence both political and personal decisions. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the *Dobbs v. Jackson* case (key to overturning *Roe v. Wade*), where the Supreme Court stated that a ‘re-reading of American history’ was crucial in its decision (p. 2). Whether the ‘right’ of abortion was an intrinsic part of the country’s cultural past was crucial—and it remains so. The opinions of everyday people regarding abortion *matter* because, ultimately, whatever the American government (or any government) has ruled in regard to the ‘supply’ of abortion, it is the public that determines the ‘demand’ (p. 75).



For those who do not live in the USA, this history is still important. Not only for understanding how societal attitudes can change and public opinions drift but also in engendering compassion towards the victims of abortion, be they child, woman or man. This is one of the book’s greatest strengths. By seeking to offer *story* rather than strict sociology, these pages are able to capture the deepest tragedies of abortion while bypassing melodrama. Disturbing, sickening and enraging, this history leaves the reader with no doubt that abortion is a fight for human dignity and worth. There is nothing abstract in the (remarkably) restrained reports of abortionists who ‘threw the tiny corpses into their cooking stove’, making dinner from their heat in 1883, or, a hundred years later, the discovery of ‘16,500 dead, unborn children’ in a shipping container owned by the head of a pathology lab (pp. 9–10). One cannot help but feel pity for the female abortionist who embraced the ‘career’ in 1918, partly out of hatred for the man who had impregnated her, and then said, ‘He was not to blame.... What kind of a little fool had I been to be so careless?... You got yourself that way, now get yourself out of it.... How do I know I’m responsible anyways?’ (pp. 273–74). Or frustration at a society which allows a nineteenth century apprentice, recently moved to the city, to describe himself as ‘an unprotected boy without female friends to introduce me to respectable society, sent into a boarding house, where I could enter at what hour I pleased—subservient to no control after the business of the day was over’ (p. 104). This book is not pro-abortion, but neither does it fall into simplistic judgments or a “Shun the Aborting Woman” approach’ (p. 4). Rather it demonstrates that abortion can be simply wrong and inherently complex at the same time.

That said, this history is clear that the process of abortion has historically revolved around lies and obfuscation. Books in the nineteenth century claimed that undesired children ‘would be addicted to “drunkenness, to lying, to revenge,” and thus become “a miser, a warrior, a slaveholder, a robber, murderer, a pirate, or an assassin”’ (p. 129). Children born from unhappy mothers were explained to be the cause of ‘monstrous evils’ and as such it was ‘a “sinful waste” to “work for the reform of such persons”’ when their criminal careers and pitiful lives could be snuffed out pre-birth (p. 133). In a similar vein, the twentieth century saw the villainization of adoption by many who were pro-abortion, whether through the reinterpretation of adoption as a ‘class struggle’ or extreme anti-adoption short

stories, such as one published in *Playboy* in 1989. In this narrative, fictional adopted-child Anthony 'broils a puppy in the oven, rapes a fifth-grade girl, eats [himself into obesity] ... and sends [his parents] thirty-two death threats' causing them to flee their home town (pp. 336–37). A short time later, lawyer J. Stanley Rotinger was praised for his 'balanced' account of abortion in his first novel (1995), which featured a pro-lifer with 'two empty craters, the eyes of a man whose soul had already departed' and another anti-abortionist who uses his picket sign to stab the hero in the eye (p. 337). The overall message is clear: unborn children aren't worth fighting for, unwanted children aren't worth adopting, and anyone who argues otherwise is mindless and soulless. Truth?

Lest readers dismiss the above literature as over-the-top but 'understandable' propaganda, the authors ensure that the language used for the abortive process is also a recurring theme. In the 1800s abortifacients were marketed as pills to 'remove female blockages', to 'cure... stoppages of the menses' or even to prevent the 'melancholy of mind and depression of Spirits that makes existence itself but a prolongation of suffering' (p. 105). While these claims were literally true (undesired pregnancy does 'block' the womb, prevent periods and cause distress) the language was specifically designed to obscure what was really taking place. In the twenty-first century this continues with frightening (but perhaps unsurprising) similarity: women are provided with pills at Planned Parenthood clinics to help you 'get your period', leaving some women unaware that they are in fact having a chemical abortion (p. 375). They are also informed that the pills are safe, despite documented deaths (p. 377). Online websites selling abortion pills, such as Aid Access, even counsel women against full disclosure if anything goes wrong, further covering up the true number of adult victims (p. 378). When the word 'abortion' is intentionally avoided and the effects of abortions remain undocumented, it is very difficult to see how abortion rights can be claimed as a victory for bodily autonomy, an offering of free choice.

The Story of Abortion in America not only critiques pro-choice arguments, it outlines the successes and failures of the pro-life movement as well. This is valuable and admirable, as is the authors' clear determination to present, rather than analyze, the historical data. The latter, however, does mean that the recounts are at times either overly didactic, thus reducing the power inherent to 'plain' story, or leave the reader somewhat unclear as to whether certain anecdotes are arguments or interludes. A more detailed epilogue containing an analysis of the presented data, or a concluding chapter of analysis for each section, would have been beneficial. A list of historical persons and a timeline at the beginning of the book would also have helped combat the overwhelming amount of names and dates—a necessary by-product of covering such a large swathe of history. While a book co-written by a 72-year-old man and a 27-year-old woman has obvious benefits, not least in providing diversity of perspective, I can't help but think the book as a whole would have profited even more if the distribution of chapters (or even authorial involvement) had been more even (p. 4). It's not until the epilogue that Marvin Olasky admits 'Leah [Savas] has pointed out to me that women who have abortions aren't victims in the same way unborn children are ... [they] can choose not to give in' (p. 442). This would have been a helpful perspective to have brought to the first forty chapters (written by Olasky), which give the impression that men are mostly, if not solely, responsible for the abortion statistics. To this end, allowing the sexual revolution to go unreferenced is surely a regrettable oversight.

Nevertheless, *A History of Abortion in America* presents a compelling and harrowing account of both the evil of abortion and the good of fighting it. It is worth reading, particularly if the subject matter has only ever felt like a distant social issue or polarising political tool. Finally, while it is not itself prophecy, this book is certainly a *tool* for the church's prophetic task. For thanks to Olasky and Savas's

labors, no one can rightfully claim ignorance about ‘what a world without *Roe v. Wade*’ looked like (p. 439). That world is written in these pages, and with it Christians can be better equipped to face the future.

Emily J. Maurits
Marrickville Road Church
Marrickville, New South Wales, Australia

Nancy R. Pearcey. *The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2023. 352 pp. £19.99/\$24.99.

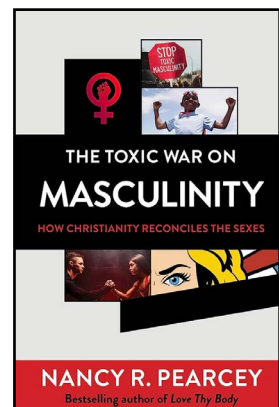
There are some corners of Western Civilization in which maleness is considered toxic in and of itself. The battle over masculinity rages with no end point in sight and with more heat than light generated by the arguments. Responding to this state of affairs, Nancy Pearcey’s *The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes* takes a wide view of societal trends, carefully examines Scripture, and provides a constructive way forward for the church.

Pearcey serves as professor of apologetics and scholar in residence at Houston Christian University. She was deeply influenced by Francis Schaeffer’s ministry at L’Abri and worked with Chuck Colson on several writing projects and as part of his Prison Fellowship. Those influences are clear through *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, as is her bent toward thorough research and sharp thinking. The thesis of this book is that Christianity provides a better answer than culture to the meaning of masculinity and that it is our absorption of secular excesses that accounts for many of the failures of manhood within the church.

The book is divided into three uneven parts, with fourteen chapters in total, along with an introduction and an epilogue. In the introduction, Pearcey speaks candidly of the physical and psychological abuse she suffered at the hands of her father, noting how his failures to be a godly man in the home pushed her away from God. The first chapter then surveys cultural trends to set up the broader problems Pearcey wishes to address in the book. The stakes are clear from the beginning: toxic behavior by men can distort the gospel, but the culture’s treatment of masculinity can be poisonous too.

Part 1 consists of two chapters in which Pearcey shows that faithful complementarian men tend to reflect some of the best aspects of masculinity in their characters and marriages, and that those who are deeply engaged in such settings are statistically the least likely abusers. Additionally, men who regularly attend complementarian, evangelical churches are ironically much closer to the progressive ideal of a compassionate, nurturing masculinity with shared responsibility and mutual respect within marriage. But, by way of contrast, men who are only loosely connected to complementarian congregations are among the worst abusers.

Having established the empirical benefits of a biblical masculinity, in part 2 Pearcey shifts to analyze the trends that have led to both perceived and actual toxicity among men. Some critics of toxic masculinity take aim mainly at recent cultural shifts. In contrast, *The Toxic War on Masculinity* looks at the broad sweep of Western culture over the past several centuries to get a better view. Pearcey’s survey of the evidence comprises the bulk of the volume, with nine chapters dedicated to this pursuit.



The research Pearcey presents is eye-opening. The stereotype of masculinity has varied significantly over the course history, as has societal approval of maleness and femaleness. Rather than Christianity shaping those trends, Pearcey shows that preaching and didactic literature within the church have tended to follow the oscillations of the broader social ideas about gender. According to her argument, a more balanced masculinity was uprooted as men and women's economic roles separated during the Industrial Revolution. When the home was the economic and social center of society, men and women (especially husbands and wives) shared many more tasks in common (e.g., daily childrearing). When men left the home to go work in factories, the typical roles of men and women divided, leading to more competition and less cooperation. This, in turn, set in motion waves of social sentiment against men in what appears to be a regular cycle. Currently, the United States is at a distinctly anti-masculinity point in the sine wave. The point, however, is that "[m]any of the traits that today are labeled toxic began to be attributed to men with ever greater frequency after the Industrial Revolution" (p. 88).

In part 3, Pearcey argues the problems among Christians generally occur when men absorb the prevailing secular script. When men model their behavior after Archie Bunker instead of Christ, harm occurs. Masculinity need not be toxic, but machismo, workaholism, and the "dopey dad" motif undermine healthy relationships. Because of their physical power, men can more easily dominate in ways they do not even realize. Pearcey is unequivocal in critiquing abusive behavior. The cure is for men to be more authentically like the one perfect man: humble, self-controlled, caring, and driven to fulfill God's will in the world. By focusing on the biblical ideal of masculinity many of the negative cultural trends of abuse and oppression can be subverted within the local church. The local church needs to hold Christian men accountable to pursuing a godly form of masculinity that defies cultural trends.

Because of the scope of the book and the interconnections between the chapters, there are some sections that seem a bit repetitive. Given the sensitive nature of some of the arguments, this repetition is likely warranted and Pearcey attempts to minimize it by referring to other chapters as she makes other points. This makes the book more useful as a reference, but may bog some readers down. Additionally, Pearcey's research does not always satisfy the contemporary empirical demands of the social sciences. For instance, at times she uses sources that have not been academically vetted to support some of her arguments. In some cases, she draws conclusions that may not meet the standards of statistical research. Nevertheless, Pearcey's arguments are careful and thorough, and so have explanatory power.

Despite the weight of the topic, *The Toxic War on Masculinity* is a refreshingly positive book. The topic and the title lend themselves to red meat, culture war content. Happily, Pearcey avoids that pitfall. She offers a deliberate, nuanced approach to masculinity that pulls no punches toward either cultural extreme. This book recognizes the real problem and offers a real solution. It is both informative and motivating. This is an accessible book that should be widely read by scholars, pastors, and church members.

Andrew Spencer
The Gospel Coalition
Monroe, Michigan, USA

Matthew P. W. Roberts. *Pride: Identity and the Worship of Self*. Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2023. 182 pp. £14.99/\$18.99.

Of the making of many books about identity there is no end! So, my first reaction to being asked to read another one was a sense of ennui. Here we go again. And yet ... I ended up being pleasantly surprised by Matthew Roberts's *Pride: Identity and the Worship of Self*. In fact, more than surprised. I was also stimulated, challenged and encouraged.

Pride is a relatively short book (176 pages) and is neatly divided into two main sections. In part 1, "Defined by Worship," Roberts looks at who we are, the idolatry of self and the slavery and sinfulness of sinful desire. Part 2, "Restored to be True Worshipers," examines the significance of sex, the gospel of who we are, the redemption of identity, and losing and finding yourself.

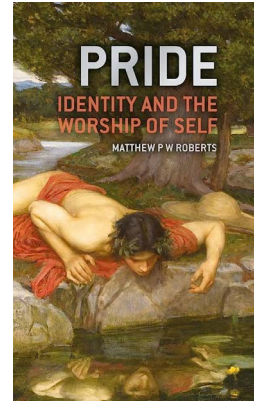
Roberts recognizes that the issue of identity is overblown, but suggests that this is not a new phenomenon. What *is* new is how the question of sexual and gender identity has become the major idolatry of our times. While the range of these identities is encompassed by the LGBT+ acronym, Roberts suggests that "'Pride' captures the essence of the movement best of all" (p. 49), for to claim that "our sexual inclinations are our fundamental identity is to ascribe to ourselves ultimate significance, to declare ourselves to be our own creators" (p. 46). Thus, the Pride philosophy and movement is the epitome of the idolisation of the Self. It is the ultimate in the false worship of our self-obsessed, narcissistic, secular society. Pride has become the new state religion, complete with sacraments, signs, rituals, holy days/months, and blasphemy trials for any who dare to question. The antidote to this social and spiritual contagion is, as Roberts demonstrates, the Christian gospel.

The whole book shows an awareness not only of biblical teaching, but also an excellent understanding of contemporary society, and philosophy throughout the ages. You could argue that this is a concentrated version of Carl Trueman's *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020). For most people it will be more accessible and useable. Moreover, along with an historical analysis of how we got to where we are, Roberts provides an important theological analysis as well. (In this respect, his discussion and application of the doctrine of concupiscence is worth the price of the book alone.)

One of the great strengths of the book is how clear it is. In a week where I have read one author claiming that evangelical understanding of Romans 1:18–32 is flawed, another stating that Paul "defended the Queer," and yet another saying that Scripture "does not say gay marriage is wrong, nor that transgender surgery is wrong; because it is not talking about them," it is clear that ordinary Christians need clear teaching—teaching that shows the truth and love of Christ, without capitulating to the culture. In this regard, Roberts's book is a breath of fresh air and a shining light that scatters the gloom. And he manages to do so without coming across as some kind of negative, right wing, reactionary. He skillfully walks the tightrope between the twin towers of cultural capitulation and cultural cancellation.

The main point of his thesis can be summed up in these words: "The freedom to create myself according to my own desires has become the highest and final authority. And we cannot establish a new authority without coming to worship it, to lavish our devotion upon it, to willingly prostrate ourselves before it as our god" (p. 41).

For Roberts, the real divide in the church is "not between those who are conservative or liberal on sexual morality. It is between those—conservative or not—who hold a Pelagian view of human nature,



and those whose view is, in fact, Christian. For if our hearts are corrupt, and our natural desires are oriented towards evil, then the ‘naturalness’ of desires says nothing about the rightness of fulfilling them” (p. 63).

Pride demonstrates that the issue is sin. Homosexual sin in this regard cannot be classed as different. The problem is not that our desires are basically good and should be followed, but rather than we are all sinners and thus cannot trust our desires as guides. “We cannot speak of them as ‘orientations’ any more than we could say that kindness and cruelty, thankfulness and gluttony, humility and pride, or even righteousness and sin are just different ‘orientations.’ They are diametric opposites. Neutral language is not appropriate to describe such things” (p. 81).

Sexual freedom is not freedom at all. “If identity is based on identifying sexual desires and fulfilling them then it follows that the thing young adults need to do most is to experiment sexually as much as possible. This is the route to discovering who you really are” (p. 122). This sexual philosophy is why the Pride movement encourages everything to be seen through the sexual lens, and why they are determined to use the education system to indoctrinate that philosophy into children.

There are numerous other pithy insights.

Paradoxically, for a movement which claims that it is seeking a harmonious inclusion of all, the Pride movement in fact shatters humanity into multiple groups with little in common. If our identity is in what we feel, then the only real unity we have is with those who feel the same way as us. (p. 125)

It may surprise some that Roberts argues against “conversion therapy.” But in this he is being consistent, because he does not regard homosexual lust as a psychological disorder—and sin is not cured by psychology.

On the transgender issue he argues that to give people their “preferred pronouns” is to acquiesce to a lie. He also reasons that the large increase in children being referred for transgender treatment is evidence that these desires are not just being recognized but “to a very significant degree generated by what is being normalized in the surrounding culture” (p. 160).

It can be argued that it is relatively easy to analyze the problems. In this respect, secular commentators such as Douglas Murray, Jordan Peterson and Abigail Shirer have shown us the way. But where they all fall short is in their solutions. Here Roberts shows the way.

In his last, and perhaps most controversial chapter, “The centrality of Christian worship to true humanity,” he argues that the only way to confront the idolatry of self-worship is to worship the Triune God. In dispensing with the worship of God, Western society has ended up endorsing self-worship. What we need among other things is a return to the centrality of the worship of the church on the Lord’s Day. Roberts questions the wisdom of only applying the language of worship to a life of obedience of God, and regarding the assemblies of the church as occasions for instruction and edification alone. We also need to teach the biblical view of gender so that our young people know that the sex-and-gender binary is not a social construct, but the divinely ordained plan for humanity. It is the way God made us. It is the way God intends us to be. Anything else is contrary to the Maker’s instructions. Anything else is sin.

Despite the book’s many strengths, occasionally Roberts’s concern for rigour leads him into terminological pedantry and pastoral insensitivity. Faulting Sam Allberry for calling same-sex attracted Christians to celibacy (rather than, as Roberts would prefer, “abstaining from sodomy”) is an example

of the first. His claim that there is “no reason at all” why a same-sex attracted man “may not court and marry a godly woman” (p. 105) is an instance of the second. At the same time, Roberts is right to warn us against defining ourselves by our sinful desires (pp. 152–54).

It may be that the Christian teaching about being male and female, though counter cultural, is precisely the kind of teaching that our culture is so desperately crying out for. As an example of such teaching, *Pride* is clear, convicting, and Christ exalting. Any Christian or church that has it, plus Kimberly Ells’s *The Invincible Family* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2023) and Robert S. Smith’s *How Should We Think about Gender and Identity?* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2022), will have a good foundation upon which to build their own culturally appropriate and biblically faithful response to a culture drowning in a cesspit of confusion.

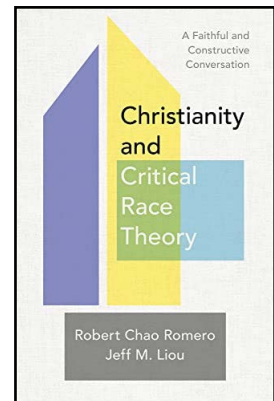
David Robertson

The ASK Project

Newtown, New South Wales, Australia

Robert Chao Romero and Jeff M. Liou. *Christianity and Critical Race Theory: A Faithful and Constructive Conversation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023. 209 pp. £18.94/\$21.49.

The rancorous, intra-evangelical debate over critical race theory (CRT) has seemingly turned a corner. Critical race theory “examines the intersection of race, racism, and US law and policy ... [showing how] US laws and public policy have been manipulated and constructed over the years to preserve privilege for those considered ‘white’ at the expense of those who are people of color” (p. 7). Five years ago, most evangelicals would have denied that CRT was influencing their thinking, writing, or theology. In sharp contrast, Robert Chao Romero and Jeff M. Liou’s new book *Christianity and Critical Race Theory: A Faithful and Constructive Conversation* takes a different approach, arguing explicitly that CRT is not merely “helpful” (p. 7) but “deeply forming and comforting” (p. 175). Given that Romero is a tenured professor teaching CRT via Chicana/o Studies at UCLA and that Liou is the National Director of Theological Formation for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, both are well-positioned to offer an informed treatment of CRT and its theological implications. Unfortunately, however, their work is likely to exacerbate, rather than to allay, the concerns of CRT’s evangelical critics.



Their relatively slim book is divided into four main chapters (“Creation,” “Fall,” “Redemption,” and “Consummation”) which deliberately map some of CRT’s ideas onto a biblical-theological schema. Chapter 1 shows that the CRT concept of “community cultural wealth” is congruent with Revelation’s eschatological vision of a future kingdom composed of people from “every tribe, language, people, and nation,” each of whom brings their cultural “glory and honor” into the New Jerusalem. Chapter 2 argues that the biblical doctrine of the universality of sin coheres with CRT’s claim that “racism is ordinary” (i.e., racism is embedded in “systems and structures” that materially and psychically advantage whites and disadvantage people of color). Chapter 3 contends that CRT’s acceptance of the “voice of color” thesis (i.e., people of color are best able to understand racism and to interrupt the racial status quo) provides Christians with tools for enacting racial justice. Finally, chapter 4 contrasts Christianity’s eschatological

hope with CRT's pessimism. Romero and Liou argue that only a Christian vision of the future can fuel activism and prevent burnout within the justice-seeking "beloved community."

Like CRT itself, Romero and Liou's book makes some true claims that Christians can and should affirm. For example, they are right to argue that critics (and, I would add, proponents) of CRT often misrepresent or misunderstand its claims. Their discussions of the history of racism within the US under slavery and Jim Crow, the social construction of "whiteness," and the contemporary legacy of racist laws and policies are generally correct and track well with CRT scholarship, which is often accurate and even insightful when treating these subjects. They also make it clear that they do not embrace CRT wholesale and say repeatedly that they reject some of its claims. Nevertheless, considered as a whole, the book has several serious problems.

What Is CRT?

Any work attempting to demonstrate the congruence between CRT and Christianity must begin with a description of CRT that is both accurate and thorough. Given Romero's professional credentials, he is eminently qualified for this task. However, in this regard, the book contains notable lapses. I'll name only three here.

First, there is little discussion of the historical antecedents of critical race theory, either its legal predecessors in the fields of legal realism and critical legal studies, or its ideological predecessors in the Neo-Marxism of Antonio Gramsci, the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, and the postmodernist theorizing of Michel Foucault. Second, many prominent critical race theorists, like Mari Matsuda, Charles Lawrence, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and William Tate, are passed over. Most surprising of all, Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined both the term "intersectionality" and the term "critical race theory" itself, is not cited or even mentioned. Crenshaw's wholesale omission from a book about critical race theory is as surprising as would be the wholesale omission of Charles Darwin from a book on evolutionary theory. Finally, and relatedly, the book includes almost no discussion or explanation of intersectionality.

Lay readers may wonder whether any of these omissions really matter. Surely, every author must be selective in what material they include and exclude. However, one of the major disputes between evangelical critics and advocates of critical race theory is over whether CRT is merely a narrow analytic tool or whether it functions like a comprehensive worldview. Given this discussion, it is vitally important to call attention to how various elements of CRT fit together within a coherent, overarching framework.

For instance, on page 142, Romero and Liou helpfully quote Delgado and Stefancic's affirmation that "For the critical race theorist, objective truth, like merit, does not exist, at least in social science and politics. In these realms, truth is a social construct created to suit the purposes of the dominant group" (Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. [New York: New York University Press, 2012], 104). However, Romero and Liou present this claim almost as an afterthought rather than explaining how it fits centrally into the broader critical tradition. CRT—like the fields of critical legal studies, Neo-Marxism, and Critical Theory which shaped it—has always analyzed objective truth claims and "common sense" intuitions as mechanisms by which the ruling class justifies its own power and privilege. Stated briefly, all of these fields aim to "see through" dominant narratives to reveal the ways in which these narratives are really bids for power.

In this fuller context, CRT's claim that "racism is ordinary" is emphatically not just an empirical observation or even a commentary on the lived experience of many people of color. Rather, it is a

necessary entailment of the critical tradition's views about ideology, knowledge, truth, and power. Racism is ordinary because all kinds of oppressions are ordinary and are concealed beneath supposedly natural, neutral, objective, "common sense" discourses about reason, justice, equality, race, class, gender, and sexuality. This leads to a second point.

Romero and Liou's book not only omits Crenshaw entirely, but says almost nothing about intersectionality. Briefly stated, intersectionality is the claim that racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, and ableism constitute "interlocking systems of oppression" that interact in complex ways to produce unique forms of marginalization. When the term "intersectionality" does appear in Romero and Liou's book, it is left unexplored and unexplained, apart from a single sentence in the book's glossary. Yet the very sources that Romero and Liou cite contain explicit discussions of this concept.

For example, Tara J. Yosso's "Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth" (*Race Ethnicity and Education* 8.1 [2005]: 69–91) is one of the most frequently cited sources in Romero and Liou's book. Yet Yosso states that the first "tenet" of CRT is "*The intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination*" (p. 73, emphasis original). She goes on to explain that "CRT acknowledges the inextricable layers of racialized subordination based on gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent and sexuality" (p. 73).

Yosso is hardly alone in her affirmation that CRT is deeply committed to the idea that racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism are all interlocking forms of oppression. You can find this same claim named as a "defining element" of CRT in key works spanning three decades of CRT scholarship, from Mari J. Matsuda et al.'s *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, And the First Amendment* (New York: Routledge, 1993) to Khiara M. Bridges's *Critical Race Theory: A Primer* (St Paul: Foundation Press, 2019).

Despite the absence of an explicit treatment of intersectionality, intersectional sensibilities are visible at numerous points in the book. In several places, Romero criticizes the "patriarchal" tendencies of Hispanic culture (he is part Hispanic). Readers are cautioned in a footnote that it is wrong to dismiss racism as "crazy" because this usage "unmasks forms of ableism" (p. 64). The term "Latinx," which the authors explain is used "by academics and the younger generation both to challenge chauvinistic bias and to emphasize a belief in gender fluidity beyond the traditional male-female binary" (p. 2), shows up repeatedly throughout the book.

This failure to grapple with intersectionality is problematic on two counts. First, it glosses over one of the most obvious and glaring conflicts between CRT and Christianity: diametrically opposing views on gender and sexuality. Since its inception, CRT and movements that draw on its ideals have sought to dismantle not just white supremacy, but sexism, classism, and heterosexism. It is no accident that Black Lives Matter's official statement of beliefs included a condemnation of "heteronormative thinking" and a commitment to transgender activism alongside its antiracist affirmations. Thus, any book that attempts to reconcile CRT and Christianity must include some discussion of this basic conflict of visions, one that is readily apparent within our culture and, increasingly, even within the evangelical church.

Second, intersectionality calls into question any insistence that CRT can be adopted as some kind of narrow analytic tool used solely to elucidate matters of race. By its very nature, intersectionality demands that race, class, gender, sexuality, gender identity, immigration status and a host of other factors all be theorized simultaneously and analogously. In every case, the ruling class (whether whites, the rich, men, or heterosexuals) perpetuate systems, structures, and narratives that justify the oppressive

status quo. We may decline to call this comprehensive vision of social reality a “worldview,” but we can’t simply ignore it.

The Authority of Counternarratives

The most powerful passages in Romero and Liou’s book take the form of stories or “counternarratives.” The authors either recount their own experiences of hearing racial slurs and fighting racial stereotypes or tell of similar experiences faced by their students, colleagues, and friends. The authors are right to urge readers to heed the “cries of pain” from those who have experienced racism. And certainly, all Christians should allow other people’s experiences to condition our own understanding. However, by itself, this valid observation lacks a regulating principle, particularly when placed in the context of CRT.

Recall that CRT, like all critical social theories, attempts to peer beneath “common sense” cultural narratives to expose how they serve to justify and perpetuate the ruling class’s privilege. Within this framework, the lived experience of oppressed people is used to construct “counternarratives” that challenge the racial status quo. But an important question naturally arises: how can we tell if someone is misinterpreting their lived experience?

Some of the stories told by Romero and Liou contain obvious racism: a classmate informing Romero “I’d never hire a Mexican lawyer” (p. 2) or Liou’s Chinese church being vandalized with a Swastika (p. 16). Yet other stories are less clear. For example, Romero recounts an incident in which a college staff member made some “seemingly angry and disrespectful comments” to a group of prospective Latino college students (p. 6). Elsewhere, he tells the story of a Latina student whose mother suffered complications from surgery, contracted a disease from a blood transfusion, and then was required to provide “what amounted to a note of apology” when applying for her green card (pp. 3–4). Finally, he tells an extended story of applying for a high-level position at a Christian university (pp. 110–13). After being recommended as the sole candidate by the search committee, he was passed over in favor of an internal candidate who would maintain “the racial status quo” (p. 116). Romero classifies these stories as manifestations of racism.

But readers may be left (hesitantly) wondering whether race actually played a role in these incidents. Couldn’t the staff member who insulted Romero’s students simply be an unpleasant person? Don’t poor white immigrants suffer medical injuries? Could there be a non-racial reason that Romero was not hired?

Romero anticipates these questions and interprets them in keeping with the framework of CRT, which holds that the white ruling class will always protect the racial status quo through appeals to “reason,” “objectivity” and “colorblindness.” According to Romero, when confronted with their biases in hiring, white institutions will “mask invidious racial intent” or provide a race-neutral “smoke screen” by making statements like: “He is too ‘divisive’ or ‘political’” or “She has a problem with authority” or “He’s qualified, but I question how grounded in the faith he is because he believes in CRT” (p. 117).

This last comment in particular should be troubling. If a Christian institution believes that CRT is incompatible with Christianity, doesn’t it make sense that they would be hesitant to hire candidates who openly embrace CRT? Why should we conclude that their claim about CRT is merely an excuse for racism? Because CRT assures us that it is? The truth is that this kind of reasoning sucks us into an epistemic black hole. The deliverances of CRT become unchallengeable: even questioning whether some incident was actually a manifestation of racism is itself interpreted as a manifestation of racism.

CRT and Theology

Finally, despite Romero and Liou's insistence that we should not set a "legal theory like CRT" (p. 74) in opposition to the Christian worldview, they recognize a tension between CRT and evangelical theology at multiple points.

For example, they insist that it is a "category mistake" to assume a conflict between the doctrine of sin and CRT's "critical analysis of the legal system" (p. 74). Yet Liou spends 16 pages criticizing a view of sin that focuses narrowly on "individual culpability" (pp. 68–83). Although he does affirm that individual moral culpability should not be rejected, he argues that "the way Christians understand the scope and nature of sin can be mapped onto one's posture toward CRT" (pp. 70–71). Liou even comments (descriptively, not prescriptively) that "many are coming to regret that the Bible teaches penal substitution (and to question whether it does)" (p. 69).

A CRT perspective also impacts how one reads texts like Matthew 18. The authors sketch a typical evangelical "Matthew 18 protocol" for dealing with "relational conflicts" that consists of the three steps: 1) one-on-one confrontation; 2) confrontation including others; and 3) church involvement (p. 96). However, they then critique this approach:

there is a treacherously thin line between requiring supererogation [in confronting someone one-on-one] and blaming the victim. This is especially true when there are uneven power dynamics (which, by the way, is not the kind of situation being addressed in Matt. 18). (p. 97)

While the authors concede that this "reframing of Matthew 18" should not be considered CRT, they believe that it does reflect "the intentionally race-conscious concerns of people who suffer the failures of a very ordinary and problematic procedure for church discipline" (pp. 97–98).

Finally, Liou recounts how, as a college student, he became interested in apologetics and embraced the idea that a Christian worldview "might be a transmissible body of knowledge" (p. 144). He was "invested in dissecting and critiquing other religious worldviews in order to advance [his]" and believed that other religious traditions were "in need of [his] correction" (pp. 145–46). Yet his perspective was changed by the "beloved community [he] experienced in interfaith work" (p. 144) as the university chaplain at Pomona College. This led him to the view that while the inter-religious, justice-seeking "beloved community" is "beyond church, but short of the Kingdom" (p. 139, quoting Ralph Luker), Christians should welcome it as "an inbreaking (however incomplete) of the righteousness and justice to come" (p. 148). Consequently, Liou believes that one of the problems with Christian worldview thinking is that it "places nonconstructive limits on engagement with academic disciplines—including CRT—and forecloses possibilities for beloved community" (p. 143). While Liou is correct that we can embrace other people on the basis of our shared humanity, he downplays the stark lines that the Bible draws between the church and the world, between true doctrine and false doctrine, between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of men. A shared interfaith commitment to social justice can never become more foundational to our identity or sense of community than a shared commitment to Christ.

In all these cases, the authors are both implicitly and explicitly acknowledging that what we think about CRT will influence what we think about theology and vice versa. Evangelicals who embrace CRT will have to reevaluate their understanding of gender and sexuality, the nature of sin, the reliability of "Eurocentric" confessions, the nature of the church and its mission, and the role of lived experience,

among other important topics. Thus, it is wholly appropriate and not a category error to ask, “Are CRT and Christianity compatible?”

Conclusion

In their introduction, Romero and Liou urge evangelicals to engage with CRT in good faith, seeking to truly understand its claims. I fully agree. We should strive to interact deeply and accurately with primary sources, rather than settling for second-hand denunciations or reassurances. But if we do, we’ll find that the conflicts between CRT and Christianity are deep. *Christianity and CRT: A Faithful and Constructive Conversation* puts the best spin possible on selected elements of CRT, yet it still doesn’t manage to conceal the many cracks and fissures that CRT introduces into Christian theology. Perhaps even more importantly, the skepticism and cynicism of CRT’s approach towards objective truth will make it impossible to have the kind of faithful and constructive conversations about race that Romero and Liou envision and the church desperately needs.

Neil Shenvi
The Summit Church
Durham, North Carolina, USA

— MISSION AND CULTURE —

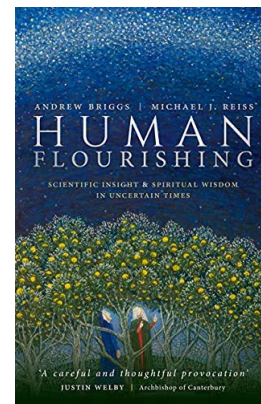
Andrew Briggs and Michael J. Reiss. *Human Flourishing: Scientific Insight and Spiritual Wisdom in Uncertain Times*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 352 pp. £25.00/\$32.95.

Andrew Briggs and Michael Reiss’s recent book, *Human Flourishing: Scientific Insights and Spiritual Wisdom in Uncertain Times*, is a stimulating and thought-provoking read. Written by two scientists who are Christians, the book aims to bring together scientific insights and spiritual wisdom to answer the question, “What does it mean to talk of human flourishing?”

The authors clarify that they are not aiming to write a work of apologetics. Those who read the book for that purpose will likely come away frustrated. Still, the authors are forthright about their own Christian faith. They include biblical truth and wisdom unabashedly throughout the book.

In the preface, the authors contend that all people want their lives to flourish—and most want the same for those close to them—yet, few are clear on how to achieve such flourishing. Some are skeptical about the value of spiritual wisdom in this discussion. Others question whether science can help in vital decision making. The authors’ view is that both scientific insight and spiritual wisdom are needed to help people live well.

In part 1, Briggs and Reiss unpack what they see as the three essential dimensions of human flourishing: the material, the relational, and the transcendent. These three dimensions are interconnected, but each is necessary to any discussion of the nature of human flourishing. In part 2, they move to highlight the three “pillars” that undergird these dimensions: truth, purpose and meaning. Utilizing three case studies as illustrations, part 3 tests their argument, demonstrating how scientific insight



coupled with spiritual wisdom can better promote human flourishing. Here they unpack some of the limits of science as a standalone approach for human flourishing, including the limits of predictability, the lack of consensus in key scientific areas, the reductionism of some evolutionary biology, and the inability of science to provide moral values. In the final section, the authors conclude that the one essential resource for human flourishing is love.

The scope of the book is impressive as well as being contemporary. Although written before the launch of ChatGPT, the authors consider AI and machine learning in their assessment of contemporary approaches to flourishing. In keeping with their broader assessment of the relationship between science and spirituality, the authors conclude, “If machine learning is to contribute as it should to human flourishing, humans will need to combine the best of scientific insight with the best of spiritual wisdom” (290–91).

The greatest value of the book is in the way the authors move beyond commonly held views on human flourishing to argue for the need not only for a material dimension to flourishing, but also for relational and transcendent dimensions. In some ways their work echoes that of American psychologist Jonathan Haidt (*The Happiness Hypothesis* [New York: Basic Books, 2005], *The Righteous Mind* [New York: Pantheon, 2012]). Haidt, however, does not claim to be a person of faith and consequently reduces most things in life to evolutionary mechanisms and responses. Briggs and Reiss, as Christians, provide a much less reductionistic account of both the relational and the transcendent parts of our lives. In turn, their faith allows them to speak naturally of truth, purpose, and meaning in ways that Haidt struggles to adequately address. Using the terminology of Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*, the authors are quite comfortable moving beyond the “immanent frame.” The authors conclude their work well in the final section, “Human Flourishing Fueled by Love.” As one might expect, this concluding chapter affords the authors the opportunity to most clearly present the impact their Christian faith has on their proposals.

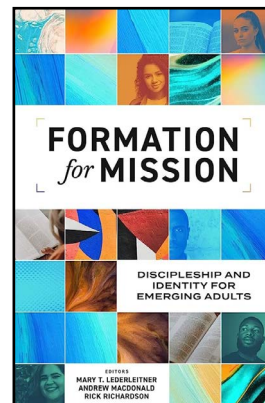
While this book is largely helpful and I commend it to readers interested in the topic, it is not without flaws. For example, from an evangelical perspective, the authors would do well to focus more on the distinctive nature of the Christian gospel compared to other religions and expressions of spirituality. While they identify themselves as Christians, the authors don’t establish distinctively Christian boundaries in giving attention to the “transcendent dimension.” A reader is left wondering whether the authors distinguish between mere spirituality and distinctively Christian understandings of transcendence. Likewise, there was a surprising lack of attention given to the theological idea of common grace, which would have provided a clearer undergirding for developing our understanding and definition of human flourishing. Finally, while it was not the authors’ main goal to write either an apologetic or an explicitly theological text, it is surprising that the person and work of Jesus is not mentioned explicitly in the concluding section which focused on the importance of “love in action.”

Overall, however, despite the critiques outlined above, Briggs and Reiss achieve their goals and they deserve a wide reading among pastors and thoughtful Christians. As a response to reductionist views of human flourishing which attend only to the material sphere *Human Flourishing* is a cogent, firmly grounded analysis. Especially as reflection on the meaning of human flourishing continues to increase in the academy as well as in wider society, this work will prove a helpful tool as we seek to engage meaningfully with our non-Christian friends.

Lewis Varley
Eastwest College of Intercultural Studies
Hamilton, New Zealand

Mary Lederleitner, Andrew Macdonald, and Rick Richardson, eds. *Formation for Mission: Discipleship and Identity for Emerging Adults*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022. 303 pp. £23.68/\$29.99.

For those who wish to disciple today's emerging adults towards mission, *Formation for Mission* is a practical and thought-provoking book of case-studies. Emerging adults are defined by the editors as those who have ended adolescence and have begun making long-term commitments in adulthood. Today's emerging adults have prolonged the process of entering adulthood due to several sociological factors. The authors cite factors such as globalization, growing access to information, greater financial resources, the burden of academic debt, and a lack of opportunity for promotion as reasons for the prolonged process into adulthood. Today's emerging adults attend church with less frequency than their peers in previous generations, thus discipling them will present unique issues (p. 7). This book hopes to speak into these issues.



The editors argue that Christian spiritual formation is needed so that “these emerging adult disciples will then live for Christ, enter into congregational life, and engage in mission in distinctively Christian ways” (pp. 9–10). Their work is intended “to equip anyone who might have a passion to help emerging adults navigate this season of life” (p. 4). With their stated thesis and goal, the authors divide their work into four sections. First, they attempt to lay the groundwork for the conversation by defining their terms and emphasizing the important role of identity formation during the emerging adult years. Second, they attempt to demonstrate that sexuality, church involvement, and lack of leadership are barriers to Christian spiritual formation. Third, the editors explore various strategic ministries and their practices of missional formation. These practices include targeting emerging adults within the local church, singing, racial reconciliation, service-learning trips, and philanthropy. Each chapter includes the insights of a contributor who has contemporary experience in ministry among emerging adults. Finally, the fourth section explores additional missional practices that are uniquely tailored to various ethnic groups.

The book exhibits two major strengths. First, from beginning to end, the book presents practical ideas for pastors and emerging adult workers. Many of the contributors offer insights that can be immediately implemented in the reader's ministry. For example, when discussing possible solutions to the lack of church involvement among emerging adults, one contributor suggests that leaders should give greater levels of responsibility to emerging adults so as to motivate them to keep growing. This suggestion follows the critique that often “emerging adults were being asked to fit into ministries designed primarily, if not exclusively, for married people with children” (p. 59). This critique highlights the fact that if ministry structures are built for people who are not among the emerging adult demographic, it is unlikely that they will feel welcome and improbable that they would step up to lead. Such oversight will likely contribute to stagnation rather than spiritual growth in the emerging adult population.

Second, as has been suggested above, even though the book is primarily about reaching and discipling emerging adults, the local church remains central. For example, one author laments the amount of time and energy dedicated to emerging adults in campus ministries in contrast to their investment in local churches (p. 61). Likewise, in the third section, as the authors focus on missional practices in ethnically diverse situations, they explicitly argue that this is best accomplished through the local church.

However, for all the strengths and insights in the book, there are also weaknesses. The book and its ministry advice would benefit from more rigorous biblical grounding. Although some chapters do this better than others, some do not include biblical or theological foundations at all. For example, in the chapter entitled “The Role of Identity Formation” the authors attempt to show the importance of identity formation by discussing four theories of formation along with their implications for emerging adults. In this chapter, readers would have benefited from a discussion on a biblical understanding of identity, the image of God, being known by God, self-denial, and the believer’s union with Christ (see Gen 1:26–27; Matt 10:38–39; 1 Cor 13:12; Gal. 2:20; Col 3:1–4). While helpful sociologically, the book does not present a biblical-theological foundation for reaching and discipling.

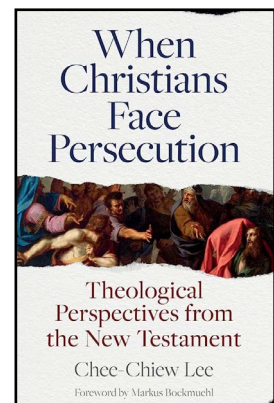
Further, even though the book is about discipling and reaching emerging adults, it fails to give significant attention to holiness, fighting sin, obedience, or submission. Christian readers would be right to question why a book about formation and discipleship doesn’t address the aversion to pursuing holiness exhibited by today’s emerging adults. Some chapters do highlight character formation or transformation into Christlikeness (see for example pp. 88–90, 156–57) but they do not highlight submission to biblical commands and divine authority as the means of their growth in godliness (John 14:15; Jas 4:7; 2 Pet 1:5–8). Such issues such as self-denial, obedience, and submission are essential to making disciples. And, given the culture described among emerging adults, pastors and ministry leaders will need to be equipped to engage in a counter-cultural catechesis including training in submission to biblical authority.

Despite these weaknesses, the editors and contributors have provided a resource that will benefit those who work among emerging adults. In contrast to academic and theological offerings, the tone and tenor of the book is conversational and practical. For those who desire further study, the footnotes and bibliography provide indications of other helpful resources on various topics. This book will not provide the biblical and theological foundations for discipleship readers might be looking for, but readers who are looking for creative ideas for discipling emerging adults for mission will find them here.

Taylor Mendoza
Northpoint Church
Corona, California, USA

Chee-Chiew Lee. *When Christians Face Persecution: Theological Perspectives from the New Testament*. London: Apollos, 2022. xiv + 202 pp. £16.99/\$22.99.

The annals of church history show that God’s people always experience persecution. The apostle Paul, a former persecutor, wrote, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12 ESV). Because Christians continue to face opposition, Chee-Chiew Lee, associate professor of New Testament at Singapore Bible College, offers *When Christians Face Persecution* to help the church better understand persecution by examining theological perspectives from the New Testament. The book seeks to answer a central question of how the New Testament authors interpreted, developed, and reapplied Christ’s teachings in their contexts. Lee aims to formulate a New Testament theology of suffering and persecution to bridge to contemporary contexts.



In the introduction, Lee defines persecution as “the unjust treatment meted out to people due to their faith in Jesus Christ as their God, and their Lord and Saviour” (p. 2). Building upon this definition, Lee distinguishes persecution from opposition and martyrdom. She then introduces three aspects of studying persecution in the New Testament context: the reasons for persecution, the responses to persecution, and the overall message of perseverance in persecution. These three areas form the three major parts of the book.

Lee first investigates why persecution occurred in the New Testament context. Polytheism in the Greco-Roman world created an atmosphere of religious pragmatism, where the populace worshipped different gods for favorable results. While the Roman Empire generally allowed people to practice local religions, they wanted to maintain the *pax deorum*, the “peace among the gods” (p. 14). The monotheistic Jewish worldview clashed with the Romans, particularly when Messianic expectations became political. Christians experienced opposition as they proclaimed Jesus as Messiah and Lord, with non-Jews interpreting the message as cultural subversion and Jews rejecting Jesus as the Christ. Beyond these visible reasons, the New Testament also presents Satan as an invisible source to influence and instigate persecution.

Second, Lee examines New Testament responses to persecution. As Christians faced official and non-official persecution, they responded in three main ways. First, they stood firm against calls to compromise and used persecution as an opportunity for witness. Second, some professing Christians apostatized or assimilated into the world to avoid persecution. Third, the church allowed some accommodation and adaptation for those who secretly believed in or temporarily denied Christ. Individuals like Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, and Peter found grace from New Testament authors because courage or repentance later occurred. As Lee notes, “New Testament authors hold on to the same base line—faithfulness to Christ” (p. 93).

The book’s third main section is the longest and discusses the New Testament’s central message regarding how believers are to respond to persecution: perseverance. Living amid a Greco-Roman culture that valued honor and shame, remaining steadfast despite persecution provided a source of honor (cf. Acts 5:41). Using the literary devices of logic and emotion (*ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*), the New Testament authors call their audience to persevere in the faith no matter how difficult the mistreatment. Believers will overcome because they fear God more than man and consider suffering for Jesus worth their lives (pp. 152–55).

Lee concludes the book by offering personal reflections on how to apply her content to contemporary contexts. She calls readers to embrace the New Testament theme of perseverance yet maintain a charitable attitude toward different responses to persecution. Empathizing with Christians who experience persecution rather than casting judgment displays Christlikeness and encourages the global church to remain loyal to Jesus.

Readers of Lee’s work will appreciate that she allows the New Testament authors to speak for themselves. While offering insight and occasionally making interpretive claims, Lee intends simply to report the facts, and she does not diminish the voice of the original writers to project her own. The first section’s historical context provides a solid footing for examining persecution in the New Testament. In the second section, Lee neither ignores the fear of persecution nor minimizes the temptation toward and consequences of wrong responses to persecution. The third section offers a valuable overview of the theme of perseverance from several books in the New Testament.

While Lee is faithful to engage some of the New Testament in her writing, she does not present a comprehensive treatment of persecution in the New Testament. Ephesians and James, two letters that discuss spiritual warfare and trials, are absent from her work. The Johannine epistles and Jude also merit inspection for added insights into perseverance, yet they are not featured in Lee's investigation. Given that this book intends to present a New Testament perspective on persecution, one would expect more attention to these books and their contribution.

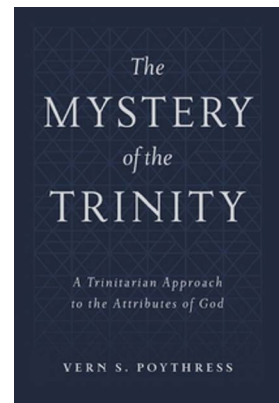
Overall, however, Lee accomplishes her task laudably. She answers her central question by overviewing several New Testament books and eliciting their teaching about persecution. Lee reminds all believers that God's truth, which they study and prize, is worth the distress they face. Lee's work should enjoy a wide readership in the church and among those who recognize Christian persecution around the globe. The book offers hope to believers who know suffering for Christ as a living, daily reality. It also reminds believers in contexts with less current suffering to prepare to persevere and to pray for their brothers and sisters in more persecution-heavy places.

Luke Johnson
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
Wake Forest, North Carolina, USA

Vern Poythress. *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020. xxiii + 647 pp. £49.99/\$49.99.

In his book, *The Mystery of the Trinity*, renowned theologian and polymath, Vern Poythress, raises concerns with contemporary discourse on the doctrine of God. Poythress argues against the casual contemporary approaches to the doctrine of God that diminish the transcendent God to being merely a companion or "a copilot." He refers to this error as "mutuality theology" (p. 439). At the same time, he recognizes a tendency for some classical theologians to overcorrect in the direction of an utterly transcendent deity, defined by abstract concepts of maximal immutability and simplicity, isolated from the world, and ultimately unknowable (pp. 439–40). Poythress calls this error "monadic theology" (p. 440). He writes, "If a Christian sees one extreme and becomes aware of its dangerous error, he can react by unwittingly moving closer to the other extreme" (pp. 440–41). The answer, Poythress argues, is not to reject the valuable insights from classical Christian theism, but to prioritize God's revelation of himself in the Bible, not the fallible and flawed speculations of non-Christian philosophers. Poythress makes a case for taking the Trinity as ontologically basic and the proper foundation for Christian theologizing (p. 237).

In the opening pages, Poythress spells out his intention to address six questions that theologians and philosophers—both Christian and non-Christian—have addressed for centuries. Although Poythress spends over 600 pages answering these age-old questions, he is careful to point out that his discussion leaves the mystery of God intact (p. xxv). Using some form of the word "mystery" over three hundred times, Poythress reminds readers that talking about God means talking about realities that humans cannot comprehend (pp. 521–22).



Poythress divides his book into eight parts. Part 1 addresses some challenges in knowing God, such as human finitude and sinfulness, and overviews theologian John Frame's "Square of Transcendence and Immanence" (pp. 18–19). Frame develops a diagram to illustrate his point by sketching two axes that illustrate the differences between a Christian understanding of God as both exalted (transcendent) and also self-revealing (immanent) compared to a non-Christian view of God as alternatively unknowable (transcendent) or subject to human standards of divinity (immanent). This diagram, which compares Christian and non-Christian views of transcendence and immanence, becomes a prominent theme throughout the book.

Parts 2–4 model Poythress's approach to grounding theistic reflection in Scripture, and then reflecting on divine attributes in the light of the Trinitarian God that Scripture reveals. He also addresses the necessary discussion of human language and its limited-though-sufficient ability to reveal God truly if not exhaustively. These first four parts, consisting of eighteen chapters, provide the reader with a sort of prolegomena to Poythress's approach.

Part 5 begins to tackle some issues raised by philosophy, such as the benefits and drawbacks of using technical, non-biblical terms. This section leads to an examination of Aristotle and his categories because they have greatly influenced the way thinkers analyze, conceptualize, and organize, not only language and the world, but discourse about God Himself. Poythress acknowledges Aristotle's brilliance and the brilliance of his categories (pp. 223–24). However, calling Aristotelian categories "seductively attractive" (p. 237), Poythress critiques Aristotle's attempt to understand the world through the power of autonomous human reasoning. Aristotle's worldview is basically impersonal (p. 210), unlike the Christian worldview, which holds to a personal, Trinitarian God who plans, speaks, and acts.

Moving into a more direct confrontation with contemporary Christian theologians, part 6 traces the influence of Aristotle on Christian theological reflection—most notably, the thirteenth-century Scholastic theologian, Thomas Aquinas. Poythress also looks at Aristotle's influence on Reformed theologians Francis Turretin and Stephen Charnock with respect to their writings on the attributes of God.

While Aquinas drew from many sources, Poythress notes that much of Aquinas's work operates on the basis of Aristotle's system of categories. "That is a potential problem," writes Poythress, "because Aristotle's system not only does not have the Trinity, but also has features that, in the end, are subtly anti-Trinitarian" (p. 292). The mixture of truth and error that Aquinas learned from Aristotle "had effects on his treatment of the doctrine of God" (p. 292). Poythress argues that Aquinas takes Aristotle's system of categories as "ontologically basic," rather than the Trinity (p. 299). This move, says Poythress, "has the potential to corrupt everything that can be said about the attributes of God" (p. 299).

When Poythress turns his attention to Turretin, he points out that to the degree Turretin adopts Aristotelian theological language to talk about God, to that degree he introduces concepts in tension or even in contradiction with Trinitarian doctrine. According to Poythress, Turretin emphasizes the unity of God and discusses God's attributes without self-consciously building on Trinitarian concepts, a doctrine he does not introduce until much later (p. 345). In the two chapters devoted to Charnock, Poythress praises his pastoral and biblically grounded approach to theology. Still, Poythress detects some ways in which Charnock struggles with how to both "differentiate and yet to affirm robustly the fullness of the unity of God" (p. 412). Again, Poythress believes Charnock's theology would benefit from a more explicit Trinitarian grounding in order to avoid some of the critiques to which his work is vulnerable.

In part 7, Poythress turns from criticism to answering constructively the underlying question that his book has been investigating: “How do we mediate between transcendence and immanence?” (p. 485). Poythress suggests that we can make a step toward understanding God’s relation to the world by exploring the question in light of the Trinity. This move retains “the language of classical Christian theism,” while enhancing it “with a Trinitarian foundation” (p. 500). Poythress examines several exegetical case studies to apply his Trinitarian hermeneutic. Extending the constructive exhibition of his Trinitarian-hermeneutic to theological discussions, Part 8 considers four of God’s attributes (love, mercy, will, and knowledge) and examines how the Trinity maintains a unity of the attributes in the one God while allowing us to speak of differentiation within the attributes as expressed by each person of the Trinity. In the final chapter, Poythress reasserts his affirmation of classical Christian theism, yet again voices his concerns about relying too much on philosophy and abstract logic, instead of relying on the gospel and historically-informed biblical exegesis (pp. 594–96).

One of the strengths of this work is that Poythress achieves clarity of prose and concept without sacrificing precision. He only uses technical terms when his subject matter requires it or his interlocutors force it. And he uses such technical terminology only after carefully defining the terms. The result is a readable, meaty, and thought-provoking discussion.

Another strength is that Poythress models Christian virtue in his scholarship. He deals gently with those who may hold differing positions. He does not accuse his opponents of false teaching or of misleading others but graciously points out areas of potential weakness or misunderstanding (see chs. 30–34). A final strength is that Poythress ends every chapter with a prayer that directly flows from the preceding discussion, again modeling how contemplation of theological truths can lead to awe and worship.

One of the weaknesses of this book is that Poythress fails to answer Tertullian’s question, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” Poythress makes a largely negative evaluation of Aristotle, but he does not answer how, or to what degree, Christians can rely on human reason to lead to knowledge of the truth. Poythress focuses his critique on Aristotle and Aquinas, yet he pays little attention to Plato or Augustine, nor does he interact with early Church Fathers, who were engaged in explaining the biblical God to those steeped in Greek thought and philosophical categories. Readers may be left wondering how and to what degree Christians might be able to appropriate human reason and non-Christian philosophy.

Despite this critique, Poythress’s book, *The Mystery of the Trinity*, will serve a new generation of theologians who are contemplating the perennial mysteries of our Trinitarian God. Poythress aims to retain categories from classical Christian theism while also remaining firmly and primarily committed to reading and rearticulating the revealed truths given to the church by the self-revealing God of the Bible. Having rigorously defended his proposal and argued his thesis, this book provides such a massive contribution to contemporary discussions about classical theism that other theologians would be remiss to neglect it.

Joe M. Allen III
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Kansas City, Missouri, USA