themelios

An International Journal for Students of Theological and Religious Studies

Volume 49 Issue 3 December 2024

THEGOSPELCOALITION

themelios

DESCRIPTION

Themelios is an international, evangelical, peer-reviewed theological journal that expounds and defends the historic Christian faith. Its primary audience is theological students and pastors, though scholars read it as well. *Themelios* began in 1975 and was operated by RTSF/UCCF in the UK, and it became a digital journal operated by The Gospel Coalition in 2008. The editorial team draws participants from across the globe as editors, essayists, and reviewers. *Themelios* is published three times a year online at The Gospel Coalition website in PDF and HTML, and may be purchased in digital format with Logos Bible Software and in print with Wipf and Stock.

EDITORS

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

Managing Editor: J. V. Fesko
Reformed Theological Seminary
4268 I 55N
Jackson, MS 39211, USA

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

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
Trinity Presbyterian Church of Orange
1310 E Walnut Avenue
Orange, CA. USA
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: Josh Bowman
Cedarville University
251 N. Main St.
Cedarville, OH 45314 USA
josh.bowman@thegospelcoalition.org

EDITORIAL BOARD

ARTICLES

Themelios typically publishes articles that are 4,000 to 10,000 words (including footnotes). Prospective contributors should submit articles by email to the managing editor in Microsoft Word (.doc or .docx) or Rich Text Format (.rtf). Submissions should not include the author's name or institutional affiliation for blind peer-review. Articles should use clear, concise English and should consistently adopt either UK or USA spelling and punctuation conventions. Special characters (such as Greek and Hebrew) require a Unicode font. Abbreviations and bibliographic references should conform to *The SBL Handbook of Style* (2nd ed.), supplemented by *The Chicago Manual of Style* (18th ed.). For examples of the the journal's style, consult the most recent issues and the contributor guidelines.

REVIEWS

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

Themelios 49.3 (2024): 527–30

EDITORIAL

The Goal of Theological Scholarship: Academy or the Church?

– J. V. Fesko –

J. V. Fesko is Harriet Barbour Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, and managing editor of Themelios.

"No one read the article I wrote. In over a year, not one person had read the article that I spent more than a year researching and writing," are words that a colleague once told me over a cup of coffee. Such an experience can be disappointing and is not unlike the feeling that preachers often have after diligently working over a passage of Scripture, praying, studying, and crafting a sermon. Lines from the Beatles' *Elenor Rigby* come to mind: "Father McKenzie / Writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear / No one comes near." I suspect that some authors spend years writing books and then peek at their Amazon sales ranking and wonder who might be reading their tome. All these experiences are common and the feelings entirely natural, but these scenarios should provoke an important question: "Why am I writing an article?" Why do we write articles, books, and sermons? What is our goal and aim? There should be a twofold aim for our theological labors: to glorify God and to edify the church.

1. Glorifying God

The apostle Paul instructed the Corinthians that even the most pedestrian activities should be done to the glory of God: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). Paul casts a wide net over every activity in life—something as ordinary as eating and drinking—to even greater tasks, such as serving the church, loving one another, or giving witness to the gospel of Christ. When Paul says to glorify God in "whatever you do," it means that there is no task too great or small that can evade this exhortation. If glorifying God in small tasks such as eating is a desideratum, then surely, we should seek God's glory in the articles, books, and sermons that we write. The challenge is, however, that we live in a world that competes for our affections. While Christians of every age must be on guard against seeking the praise of people, the digitalization of our culture has introduced particular and ever-present temptations. The lure of building a brand, establishing a platform, harvesting "likes" and subscribers sounds a siren song. Amid the bright lights and the enticement of acceptance and admiration, we might all too quickly forget the chief purpose for why we carry out our labors. Does the praise of man become a poor and sickly substitute for the praise from God? As Jesus pressed crowds and the religious leaders, "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)? All too often we seek a crown of glory rather

than find contentment in wearing Christ's crown of thorns. How, then, can we ensure that we keep the glory of God as our lodestar as we carry out our labors?

As we engage in our theological labors we must persistently, perhaps even daily, pray the words of John the Baptist: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). By the power of the Holy Spirit, this prayer bears fruit in changing our desires. No longer do we seek personal glory, but we instead seek God's glory. No longer do we boast in our own accomplishments, but we instead boast in what God has done in Christ. One of the ways we can keep the glory of the triune God as our chief goal in our theological labors is to remember that all our work is preparing us for the beatific vision. The Westminster Larger Catechism (1647) asks the question, "What shall be done to the righteous at the day of judgment?" Among the many blessings enumerated in the response, the catechism says that the greatest blessing is especially "the immediate vision and fruition of God the Father, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, to all eternity" (q. 90).

Thus, do we realize that the books that we write, the sermons we preach, and the articles we publish are one of the ways we prepare ourselves for beholding the face of God in the face of Christ? What does Christ teach us? "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt 5:8). This means as we write, it is natural that we would want many people to read our work. But our greatest motivation should be that we write for an audience of One—our triune God. When H. B. Charles Jr. was preparing to preach to a group of people where many pastors in attendance, he sought the counsel of his preaching professor and told him that he would preach to the congregation and ignore the pastors. His preaching professor counseled him, "That's a good thought, but I think about these kinds of events somewhat differently. When I stand to preach, whatever the setting, I don't focus on the pastors or the congregation. I just preach to an audience of One."[1] The subtitle of the chapter where Charles recounts this sage advice is, "Seeing ministry as service to God, not a performance for man." This counsel is relevant not only for preaching but for our academic work, such as writing books and essays.

Do we write for an audience of One? Do we write for the glory of our triune God and lay our labors before him? Above all else, do we seek his, "Well done, good and faithful servant…. Enter into the joy of your master" (Matt. 25:23)? If we remember that all of our theological work is preparing us for the beatific vision and thus, we write for an audience of One, then we will not worry how many people will read, "like," or purchase our books and essays. We will be satisfied with seeking the glory of God and his approbation.

2. Edifying the Church

At the same time, we also remember that we do not stand before the presence of God alone. The triune God has redeemed and united us to Christ's body, the church. He has blessed us with talents and gifts, and those endowments are not for ourselves. Christ has ascended and poured out the Spirit upon the church to distribute gifts, and among those gifts are pastors and teachers (Eph. 4:12–14). As Paul reminds us, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone" (1 Cor 12:4–6). To what end does the triune God give the church gifts? "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor 12:7). The church has historically placed the

[1] H. B. Charles Jr., *On Pastoring: A Short Guide to Living, Leading, and Ministering as a Pastor* (Chicago: Moody, 2016), 19.

individual's role within the wider body of the church under the doctrine of the communion of the saints. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) traces the lines of Paul's statements when he says that just as one member of a physical body redounds to the good of the rest of the body, the same truth applies to a spiritual body, that is, the church. "Since all the faithful are one body, the good of one is communicated to another."[2] Or, in the words of the Westminster Confession (1646), "All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by his Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with him in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory: and, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man" (26:1). Our chief aim, therefore, for our theological labors should be the glory of God, but a secondary aim should be the edification of the church.

Once again, we should ask ourselves, "Why do I write?" Do we write so that people congratulate us? Do we seek "likes"? Are we building a platform, a brand? Are we writing so we can put an entry on our resume, an entry that will get us one step closer to a pay raise, the next rank on the professional ladder, or a book contract? Do we pursue entry into an elite coterie of scholars and influencers, or through our writing are we trying to give people a better vantage point to behold the glory of the triune God? Are we plying our Spirit-given gifts to show people Christ and equip them to teach others how they can get a better glimpse of his glory? The aim of our work makes a difference and shapes its nature and even our lives. John A. D'Elia chronicles the career of evangelical scholar George Eldon Ladd (1911–1982) who made the pursuit of academic respectability one of the main thrusts of his theological writing.[3] Ladd wanted great universities to notice evangelical scholarship and to respect it, and so he submitted articles to prestigious journals and participated in scholarly societies.[4] Ladd believed he reached the pinnacle of his efforts when he published his magnum opus with Harper & Row, a publisher outside of the evangelical world.[5] Ladd waited with baited breath in anticipation of its reception in the wider academic community and was devastated when it was negatively reviewed. He saw his life's work as a failure because of the blow of a single review.[6] He arguably never recovered from this event.[7] If we seek respectability, acclaim, or position, then we tread upon thin ice always in danger of falling through into the icy waters of disappointment, despair, and discouragement. If we walk upon the solid ground of seeking to glorify God in our theological writing and to magnify his name in the church, thereby edifying the church, we will never be disappointed.

3. Conclusion

So, why do we write articles, books, or preach sermons? Ideally, our desire should be to write for the glory of our triune God, for an audience of One. In the words of John Newton (1725–1801) in a

[2] Thomas Aquinas, *The Sermon Conferences of St. Thomas Aquinas on the Apostles' Creed*, trans. Nicholas Ayo (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 13 (p. 135).

[3] John A. D'Elia, *A Place at the Table: George Eldon Ladd and the Rehabilitation of Evangelical Scholarship in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Cf. the discussion by Andrew David Naselli, "Three Reflections on Evangelical Academic Publishing," *Themelios* 39.3 (2014): 428–54.

[4] D'Elia, *A Place at the Table*, xi.

[5] D'Elia, *A Place at the Table*, xix–xx, 126.

[6] D'Elia, *A Place at the Table*, 136–41.

[7] D'Elia, *A Place at the Table*, 144–50.

letter to a friend, "May the cheering contemplation of the hope set before us, support and animate us to improve the interval, and fill us with an holy ambition of shining as lights in the world, to the praise and glory of his grace, who has called us out of darkness."[8] If we, first and foremost, seek God's glory rather than our own, we will not seek the praise of people but of God. "Every blessing we receive from him," writes Newton, "is a token of his favour, and a pledge of that far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory which he has reserved for us. O! to hear him say at last, 'Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord!' will be a rich amends for all that we can lose, suffer, or forbear, for his sake."[9] With the glory of God as our lodestar, we can aim our theological scholarship at the church for its edification. When we write an essay, let's pray that we are able to equip better the pastor in his sermon preparation so he can feed Christ's sheep. When we write books, let's hope to assist theological students so they can understand God's Word so they are equipped to teach others of the wonders and glories of our triune God. Let's undertake our academic work in the hope that someone in the pew who is struggling with understanding Scripture will pick it up, learn, and grow in her conformity to Christ. These are just a few ways that we can aim our theological scholarship at the church. Does this mean we cannot participate in the academy? Of course not. But to pursue theological scholarship merely for the sake of the academy rather than for the edification of the church trades the blessings of our inheritance in Christ and the communion of the saints for a bowl of lentils that may in the moment satisfy our appetite for recognition but in the end leave us ever dissatisfied and hungry for more. Therefore, to borrow words from Paul, whatever you do, whether in writing or preaching, do it all to the glory of God and the edification of the church.

[8] John Newton, "Letter XI," in *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 12 vols. (London: T. Hamilton, 1821), 2:43–46, here 45.

[9] Newton, "Letter XI," 45–46.

Themelios 49.3 (2024): 531–35

STRANGE TIMES

Selfish Preachers?

– 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.

There are seasons in your life when the Lord brings across your path extraordinary and inspirational people who effect change in you. Richard Garnett, who died in early September, was one of those people. For over fifteen years, Richard came every summer to run the preaching and communications workshops at Oak Hill College, London, where I taught and was in senior leadership.

Richard was a R.A.D.A.[1] trained actor, who trained alongside Kenneth Branagh and Mark Rylance. For fifteen years he trod the boards with the Royal Shakespeare Company. In 1989, in Peter Hall's production of *The Merchant of Venice*, he was Lorenzo to Dustin Hoffman's Shylock. The production ended up on Broadway. He appeared in several films, but arguably his most popular role was as Augustus 'Gussie' Fink-Nottle in the early 90s TV adaption of P. G. Wodehouse's *Jeeves and Wooster*, starring Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie. As a result of this role, a colleague and I always called him 'Gussie'.

Recognising the cost to his family in living out of a suitcase, he gave up acting to found GSB Comms and became an internationally sought after communications consultant to large corporate executives in financial services commanding very large fees. He never charged anything for his workshops at Oak Hill apart from asking for a small contribution to the illustrative mug he gave to students on completion of the workshop. Then ten years ago Richard was diagnosed with mesothelioma, perhaps from being exposed to asbestos in old theatres. Although he endured seemingly endless treatments and was in much pain, he did not, to borrow a phrase from John Piper, 'waste his cancer'.[2] On the contrary, he talked about it as a gift from God, seeing life in glorious technicolour, and coming to love his Saviour Jesus all the more. Richard became a passionate evangelist (and poet) for a life of extravagant generosity, exhorting us to ask these questions: 'Who owns it all? (It's all God's which means we are not owners but stewards.)' 'Am I investing in what God has given me, in terms of time, talent and treasure, in what really matters to Jesus and what he cares about the most, which is his kingdom?' 'Am I doing what Jesus wants me to do and only I can do in pursuit of his kingdom?' 'Am I making the biggest possible difference?'[3] Richard modelled all of this and touched many lives in many ways, being particularly passionate on projects in the majority world. One of my last interactions with Richard was during the first lockdown.

[1] The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

[2] John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Cancer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

[3] Listen to the moving interview with Richard by Simon Guillebaud, recorded a few weeks before his death, which includes a powerful address Richard gave to a church network on the theme of generosity. 'Generous Living in Preparing to Die', *Inspired Podcast*, https://tinyurl.com/ysxv6jr8.

Stuck in our houses on campus, I organised a student evening and Richard very kindly read C. S. Lewis's lecture, 'Learning in Wartime'. He read it off his phone without any rehearsal. It was simply sensational.

With *Themelios* readers in view, I want to reflect on Richard to highlight the importance of generous communication in our preaching and teaching. If Barth's *Der Romerbrief* was a 'bombshell on the playground of the theologians', then Richard's communication workshops were a bombshell on the playground of British conservative evangelical preaching. Chris Green, who was responsible for homiletics at the time, had known Richard twenty-five years previously. When a space opened up at the seminary to teach an intensive communication workshop, Chris knew he needed someone with a bit of heft and challenge, especially for some students who thought they knew it all. Chris thought of Richard but had no idea where he was or what he was doing. He tracked him down, however, and phoned him up. The reaction was immediate. Forget the warmth of reconnecting, literally that morning, Richard had been having a quiet time, depressed by the quality of preachers he was being forced to listen to, and praying about whether there was any way he could have an impact. The phone call was a direct answer to his prayers.

When it comes to teaching preaching in seminary, I've had diametrically opposed feedback over the years. On the one hand you'd hear that you can't really teach preaching, it just comes with time and experience, so focus on other things during your time at seminary. On the other hand, you'd hear that seminary should basically just be about learning how to preach … and often, learning how to preach in a certain way. Sometimes you just can't win. Richard was not brought in to help one's exegesis or hermeneutics; he assumed that work had been done already. Rather it was to help in the area of communication, because, and to put it delicately, it was felt that as a tribe we could be somewhat lacking in this department.[4] Of course exegesis, hermeneutics, the work of the Spirit, and communication theory can't be easily compartmentalized when it comes to homiletics, which at times led to some robust discussion. Overall, however, there was a recognised division of labour.

That said, students weren't really prepared for the *enfant terrible* that was Richard. Yes, he was kind and hospitable, but he wasn't tame. He had off-the-scale charisma and energy. He was passionate and one of life's enthusiasts. He was a raconteur. He was also a rascal, a rebel, and somewhat contrarian. He spoke with a brutal honesty about the foibles and failings in his life. Over those three-day workshops, which we quickly made compulsory,[5] he pushed people way out of their comfort zones. For some, he 'pushed their buttons' and certainly received some push-back. Word quickly got around about the communication workshop 'experience' / 'ordeal', and so there was a certain fear and trembling, and maybe even some kicking and screaming, as students entered the lecture room on that first morning, clutching with white knuckles the sermon they'd been asked to bring with them and seeing Richard perched on the end of a desk smiling like Cheshire cat, flip-chart ready to be scribbled on, and surrounded by a mountain of post-it notes.

And so would begin the experience. Richard knew that he was questioning certain orthodoxies and sensibilities in his teaching. He insisted that we should preach with no notes. He loved talking about the implications of the latest neuroscience for communication. And the things he got the students to do…. It was a common experience to witness students memorising the contours of the sermon, eyes closed,

[4] Although the context is different, see Erik Raymond, 'Brothers, We Can Do Better', *TGC*, 2 May 2023, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/erik-raymond/brothers-we-can-do-better/.

[5] Which meant that over the years, Richard brought in others to assist him in the work, a work that eventually would cover other Bible colleges and Christian organizations too.

striding forward from one end of the room to the other; or the sight (and sound) of students roaring across the field. And then there were Richard's acronyms, mnemonics, and questions which would eventually adorn those precious *aide-mémoire* mugs: A.E.I.O.U.[6]; D.A.N.C.E.[7]; (and who can forget) SExI (F.O.A.M.);[8] 'Will you lead me through the text and let me work?'; and the telling question, 'If this was your very last sermon, how passionate would you be?' Finally, at the climax of the workshops, students would preach their sermons in front of a camera with everyone else watching.

These were hard, intense days, but richly rewarding. I know, because over my time, I did the workshop twice. One didn't have to agree with everything Richard said, or believed. I didn't. Yes, there was always a danger that if the workshops were seen in isolation, then technique might start to triumph over other aspects of the homiletical science (or is it art, or even unction?). And yes, at times the line between the simple and simplistic, and between illustration and gimmick, is a fine one. And yet, going forward into ministry, and given the very different starting points of many students when compared to Richard, he seemed always to move the dial and persuade people of *something* of his heart and mission on the task of preaching which would effect real and lasting change, even if it wasn't everything. One student commented to me this week that, as a former school teacher, Richard really helped him connect dots with what he knew from his teacher training and instinctively wanted to do in the pulpit but often felt restrained by convention.

Richard was a brilliant communicator of communication. That communicating and teaching about communication go together might sound obvious, but I don't think it's always a given. A major reason for this combination was a characteristic of Richard's that I've already mentioned, a gospel generosity, which itself rests on a love of God and neighbour. Good communication is an act of generosity. As Oliver O'Donovan writes:

> Communication is the readiness to assert a private interest only to the extent that it can become a common interest. Its logic can be summed up in the phrase: 'what is "mine" is "ours"'—not 'what is "mine" is "yours"' (which is the logic of bestowal), nor 'this "mine" is yours, and this "yours" is mine' (which is the logic of exchange). These logics have their place within the broader logic of communication, but are secondary to it. The private interest must first be located within the common interest, the 'I' finds its context within the 'we.'[9]

Although he might not have put it quite like this, Richard communicated with generosity about the generosity of communication. In those workshops, his giving to us was not that of bestowal or exchange but the 'we' of common interest, the common interest of showing Christ. And with that communication came community. Those workshops were only three days, but there was a feeling of life together and a relational safety, which was needed because what Richard was asking of us didn't often feel safe.

---

[6] Attention with an ask; Empathize with our pain; Insight mountain; Options, What about U?

[7] D.A.N.C.E was concerned with effective teaching on-line during the pandemic: Dot (as in look at the camera on your screen); Away (you don't always have to look at the camera); No Scripts; Cinematic Energy. One can watch Richard's 3-session online preaching workshop during the pandemic, hosted by Keswick ministries, here: (1) https://tinyurl.com/myuspwbs; (2) https://tinyurl.com/a84n72pd; (3) https://tinyurl.com/4t9trdp5.

[8] State; Explain, Illustrate (Fact, Opinion, Anecdote, Metaphor).

[9] Oliver O'Donnovan, 'Communicating the Good: The Politics and Ethics of the "Common Good"', *ABC*, 5 December 2016, https://tinyurl.com/4huws7aa.

Moreover, I would say that over time, as Richard grew in his understanding of generosity's importance, he became more generous, and so a more persuasive and effective communicator. When I first met Richard, a little star-struck by his rubbing shoulders with Hollywood A-listers, I asked him what singled out Dustin Hoffman as a great actor rather than a good journeyman actor. Richard noted that when he first met Hoffman, he didn't see anything that impressive. Here was a diminutive, softly spoken, and introspective guy. However, as evening followed evening, Richard noted that inexorably Hoffman grew and grew, becoming deeper, more nuanced and varied with every performance. There was a charismatic energy that was magnetic and communicative. This is what made him great. In a similar way Richard grew and evolved the communication workshops over the years, and this is what made him a great communicator. He listened and learned. He listened carefully to the feedback he'd been given and contextualized to his surroundings, recognizing the culture of the students he was with and the importance of how one hears and how one is heard. He knew that for these students sometimes he would have to push less so he didn't 'lose' them, sometimes he would have to push more to break through shibboleths that needed breaking. I know that as he began teaching at another evangelical seminary from a different 'tribe', he was able to adjust and contextualize for them. In this I think he exemplified what David Powlison has argued are the marks of persuasive communication: know those with whom we wish to speak; genuinely seek the welfare of those you are speaking to; enter the hearer's frame of reference; shake the reader's habitual frame of reference; portray Christian faith in a fresh relevant way; woo, invite and open a door for readers to change their minds.[10]

Gussie was a gift of God to the church who modelled generous communication and who influenced a generation of students about the need for generous communication. His death has prompted much remembrance and thanks. A message from a former student is a fitting closing testimony:

> 'Who are you preaching for?'
>
> My communications workshop was long ago that I struggle to remember when or why Richard asked this question. Immediately he was given more than suitable theological answers. Naturally, as is often the case in theological college, the answers could be boiled down to 'God and those we're preaching to.' And then Richard asked the killer question. 'Why then do preachers often preach so selfishly?' I was so floored by the question I wrote it down.
>
> When we preach we mix together language, theology, scripture, imagery and other brilliant things to unpack and apply God's word for God's glory and for the benefit and joy of the congregation. At least that should be the goal. But when our language is beautifully intricately complex, when our theology is dense and intellectual, when our imagery is as niche as the preacher would like, when the applications are vague and gentle, who are we preaching for? 'Why then do preachers preach so selfishly?' His words will stick with me forever, as will the memory of a fantastic vibrant man in Richard who

[10] David Powlison, 'Giving Reasoned Answers to Reasonable Questions', *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 28 (2014): 2–14. Powlison here is speaking of a strategy for 'redemptive' communication in talking to non-Christians. However, I think it can also apply more broadly to communication between Christians.

> in his love for Christ and others, as good as demanded a far more deliberately selfless delivery of biblical preaching and teaching from those he taught.[11]

Generous or selfish communication is such a good prod for preachers and teachers. We can be right and fail to serve people in our mode of communication: are we preaching for our congregations or for ourselves, producing sermons that would earn me a pat on the back from our peers but not connecting with and feeding our people? We thank our generous God for Richard's generosity and his challenge.

[11] It's instructive to compare this comment with J. C. Ryle's description of Whitefield's preaching, an essay Richard quoted himself: 'For another thing, Whitefield's preaching was *singularly lucid and simple*. You might not like his doctrine, perhaps; but at any rate you could not fail to understand what he meant. His style was easy, plain, and conversational. He seemed to abhor long and involved sentences. He always saw his mark, and went direct at it. He seldom or never troubled his hearers with long arguments and intricate reasonings. Simple Bible statements, pertinent anecdotes, and apt illustrations, were the more common weapons that he used. The consequence was, that his hearers always understood him. He never shot above their heads. Never did man seem to enter so thoroughly into the wisdom of Archbishop Usher's saying, "To make easy things seem hard is easy, but to make hard things easy is the office of a great preacher."… Another striking feature in Whitefield's preaching was his *singular power of description*. The Arabians have a proverb which says, "He is the best orator who can turn men's ears into eyes." If ever there was a speaker who succeeded in doing this, it was Whitefield. He drew such vivid pictures of the things he was dwelling upon, that his hearers could believe they actually saw them all with their own eyes, and heard them with their own ears.' 'A Sketch of the Life and Labors of George Whitefield', available at https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/ryle/ryle_georgewhitefield.html.

Themelios 49.3 (2024): 536–53

The Deepening of God's Mercy through Repentance: A Critical Review Essay of *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality within the Biblical Story*

– Robert A. J. Gagnon –

Robert A. J. Gagnon is visiting scholar at Wesley Biblical Seminary and previously served as a professor of Biblical Theology at Houston Christian University and professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. He is the author of *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* and other works.

****

Abstract: Richard B. Hays and Christopher B. Hays' recent book *The Widening of God's Mercy* has generated significant interest but suffers from critical hermeneutical, exegetical, and scholarly deficiencies. The authors argue that "a deeper logic" in the Bible reveals God changing his mind to expand the scope of his mercy. This purportedly allows interpreters today to "trace a trajectory of mercy that leads us to welcome sexual minorities" and override the biblical texts that establish the male-female foundation of Christian sexual ethics and speak against homosexual practice. The authors do not meaningful engage relevant scholarship from the past thirty years and fail to adequately explain the biblical texts that present problems for their revisionist position.

****

The new LGBTQ-promoting book by Richard B. Hays and his son Christopher B. Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality within the Biblical Story*,[1] has generated significant interest. The primary reason is that Richard Hays, a good NT scholar teaching at a prestigious institution (Duke Divinity School), had from 1986 to 1996 published two articles and a chapter in his seminal book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, defending the orthodox biblical view on marriage and homosexual practice.[2]

[1] Christopher B. Hays and Richard B. Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality within the Biblical Story* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024).

[2] In 1986, Richard Hays wrote "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1," in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14.1 (1986):184–215. He followed this up five years later with "Awaiting

Richard's announced departure from orthodoxy (or, more specifically, orthopraxy) has been mourned by the Right and celebrated by the Left. Jonathan Merritt, a "gay" propagandist, wrote an article on the book for Religion News Service, itself largely a propaganda organ for the LGBTQ+ cause, five months before the book appeared. It was breathlessly entitled "Conservative Christians Just Lost Their Scholarly Trump Card on Same-Sex Relationships."[3] CNN came out with its own propaganda piece just after the book was released, written by a senior producer at CNN who identifies as "gay," entitled "He Wrote the Christian Case against Same-Sex Marriage. Now He's Changed His Mind."[4]

Christopher's impact, while not as significant as his father's, is still notable. He is chair of the department of Old Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, which is supposed to be an evangelical seminary (albeit an outlier one). His contribution, along with Fuller's newly revised sexuality policy,[5] will signal for most evangelicals Fuller's full and final departure from evangelicalism.

Proponents of homosexual relations had high expectations that the two Hayses would deliver a powerful, ground-breaking refutation of Scripture's stance against homosexual practice. They should be greatly disappointed. The hype generated by the background of the authors has not been matched by noteworthy content. Christopher and Richard disappointingly rehash old revisionist arguments without dealing with any of the scholarly counterarguments raised since 1996 or even addressing the most important biblical texts against their position.

In a nutshell, they argue that there is a larger "story" or "narrative pattern" throughout Scripture of a God who repeatedly "changes his mind" to "reveal an expansive mercy that embraces ever wider circles of people, including those previously deemed in some way alien or unworthy" (p. 206). They claim that "sexual minorities" deserve to be the next group in this ongoing narrative.[6] The larger story of Scripture, they believe, entitles them to ignore all the biblical texts that speak negatively about homosexual practice. They seem to be unaware of other biblical texts that establish a male-female prerequisite for sexual relations as foundational, including Jesus's remarks on marriage (Mark 10:2–12; Matt 19:3–9) and the Genesis creation texts (Gen 1:27; 2:19–24).

Let me be frank: showing that the "widening of God's mercy" is an important theme of the Bible's story (well-known long before the Hayses wrote this book) does not establish that God has "changed his mind" about the male-female foundation of Christian sexual ethics rigorously affirmed by our Lord

the Redemption of Our Bodies," in the magazine *Sojourners* 20 (1991):17–21. Finally, he included a chapter on "Homosexuality" in his seminal work, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethic*s (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 379–406.

[3] Jonathan Merritt, "Conservative Christians Just Lost Their Scholarly Trump Card on Same-Sex Relationships," *Religion News Service*, 8 April 2024, https://tinyurl.com/42sh3yuk.

[4] Ryan Struik, "He Wrote the Christian Case against Same-Sex Marriage. Now He's Changed His Mind," *CNN*, 20 September 2024, https://tinyurl.com/2jhek3cm.

[5] See Robert A. J. Gagnon (@RobertAJGagnon1), "An Open Letter to Fuller Seminary Faculty and Administration regarding Its Proposed New Sexuality Standard," X, 12 June 2024, https://twitter.com/RobertAJGagnon1/status/1800971246835806269.

[6] The euphemism "sexual minorities," used fourteen times in the book, is an attempt to equate "LGBTQ" persons positively with ethnic minorities. The problem is that, while ethnicity is an intrinsically benign facet of human existence, sexual impulses and behaviors are not always so. I think we can all agree that pedophiles, sexual sadomasochists, polyamorists, and those who engage in consensual incest or in bestiality are "sexual minorities," too, but not to be promoted as such. When your choice of descriptors takes in commonly acknowledged immoralities, it is probably best to choose another term.

himself and by which he limits the sexual bond to two persons. The "widening of God's mercy" is not even a universal theme of the Bible. It is often supplanted in the NT by an intensified ethical demand placed by Jesus and the apostles on followers of Christ, a demand accompanied by severe warnings about potential loss of salvation for those who do not do what Jesus commanded but instead primarily live out of the sinful desires of human flesh. Even when present in the biblical story, the theme of God's expansive mercy everywhere presupposes repentance from immoral conduct. And, finally, not only is this theme never applied in the Bible to an acceptance of homosexual practice, but it is categorically rejected whenever homosexual practice is mentioned. Yet, in spite of all that, we are supposed to take Christopher at his word (and Richard makes similar statements) when he declares, "I remain committed to the unparalleled centrality of the Bible for Christian ethical discernment." Pardon our skepticism.

1. What Is Really Going On: An Inverted Revisionist Hermeneutical Scale

In reality, for the Hayses, self-interpreted "experience" is king of hermeneutics (i.e., how to interpret the biblical text for our contemporary context). Anything in Scripture that does not comport with their own experience of "LGBTQ" Christians (note the inclusion of the "T")[7] is discarded as an "isolated text" (p. 206). They operate with *an inverted "revisionist hermeneutical scale,"* descending criteria for making decisions in the church, which is the exact opposite of the church's "traditional hermeneutical scale":

The Church's Traditional Hermeneutical Scale

- Scripture
- Philosophic Reason (Nature Argument)
- Scientific Reason
- Experience

The Inverted Revisionist Hermeneutical Scale

- Experience
- Scientific Reason
- Philosophic Reason (Nature Argument)
- Scripture

Traditionally, what Scripture has to say about a given matter (especially as regards the NT witness) has preeminent authority. It is not just one among four considerations; it is head-and-shoulders above the other three. Moreover, the degree to which a given position shows pervasive, strong, absolute, and countercultural affirmation or rejection in the pages of Scripture is the degree to which that position can be characterized as a core value of Scripture. The degree to which it is a core value of Scripture determines the degree to which the scriptural view cannot be challenged by any of the other considerations. This is particularly true in the Protestant Evangelical tradition. In other ecclesiastical communities (notably Roman Catholic and Orthodox), tradition (i.e., from the Church Fathers onward) may play a co-equal

[7] The acronym "LGBTQ" is used 25 times by the Hayses in their book.

role with Scripture. As regards the issue of homosexual practice or a male-female prerequisite for sex, Scripture and tradition agree that this is a core value of Scripture.

As to a nature argument from philosophic reasoning, the rejection of homosexual practice is predicated on a transparent observation of the complementary sexual features of man and female that makes evident that homosexual unions are structurally incongruous (cf. the nature argument in Rom 1:24–27). A same-sex union does not pair sexual counterparts or "other halves." Biologically related impulses are less reliable indicators of what is natural than the compatible structures of maleness and femaleness.

With respect to scientific reasoning, homosexual behavior is characterized by higher rates of measurable harm, which differ for homosexual males and homosexual females in ways that correspond to typical male-female differences. Experience is placed last in the decision-making process, largely because experience should be assessed from the three prior considerations, especially Scripture. It may involve encounters with persons who are same-sex oriented but who live in obedience to the biblical witness on homosexual practice.

What the Hayses have done (along with others before them) is to invert the traditional hermeneutical scale into a revisionist scale that prioritizes experience (as though it were self-interpreting) above all other considerations. Here experience involves the persuasive power of "fruit-bearing" LGBTQ Christians who need to be in homosexual unions to cure their loneliness. Scientific reason factors secondarily, here involving the idea of a homosexual orientation heavily influenced by congenital factors and viewed as resistant to change. Philosophic reason enters in a tertiary sense, often in a "born that way" argument. Finally, Scripture comes last as an influence in decision-making for the revisionist scale.

When it comes in last, Scripture really plays no significant role at all in the decision-making process. It is there to rubber-stamp what has already been decided by experience, assisted by scientific and philosophic reasoning. What we see in the Hayses is what I have seen in nearly every book and article of the past 40 years written by a Bible scholar, church historian, or Christian theologian supporting homosexual unions: while a small number of passages in Scripture appear to oppose homosexual practice, these passages do not oppose caring homosexual relationships between homosexually oriented persons. Scripture's focus on mercy, grace, and love, along with its special concern for the marginalized and oppressed, leave room to support loving homosexual unions despite its "isolated" prohibitions. Changes in the Bible's views on slavery, women's roles, and divorce/remarriage give hermeneutical license for developing a new perspective on homosexual practice.

It is important to realize that what the Hayses are doing here (as many others have done before them) is not just overturning one isolated issue of Scripture but rather inverting the whole scale for decision-making in the church. Experience is king while Scripture is dethroned. For all the claims made by the Hayses to have embraced Scripture's larger "story" more fully, what is actually going on is the dethroning of Scripture's preeminent role in decision-making—and not just Scripture generally but the teaching of Jesus in particular.

Think of this as a card game between two teams. One team decides that the priority of trumps will be, from highest to lowest, (1) spades, (2) clubs, (3) diamonds, and (4) hearts. The other team says, "We like the general concept, but we prefer to prioritize the suits in reverse order," namely, (1) hearts, (2) diamonds, (3) clubs, and (4) spades. Now try to play the game. You can't because the two "teams" don't agree on what has priority in decision-making. This is what is happening in mainline denominations.

Different rankings for different elements in this modified Hermeneutical Quadrilateral have arisen, creating confusion all around.

2. The Deficiencies in Richard Hays's Earlier Work on Homosexual Practice

Richard, known especially for his important work in NT intertextuality and ethics, was thought to be (till 2001) a go-to biblical scholar on the issue of the Bible and homosexuality, even though the sum total of his contributions from 1986 through 1996 amounted to less than 75 pages of material (and much of that was repeated material). What he wrote had great influence because of his scholarly stature at an elite institution.

As important as Richard's work was for many evangelicals, even then it had significant problems:

(1) Richard dismissed the relevance of the Sodom text in Genesis 19 (and the related story of the Levite at Gibeah in Judg 19), failing to grasp the ancient Near Eastern context and to think analogically.

(2) He argued that sexual orientation is a modern construct unknown to the ancient world. Hays failed to grasp that rudimentary but real notions of "sexual orientation" already existed in the ancient world, including among Greco-Roman moralists and physicians who still rejected the behavior arising from said orientation.

(3) Richard asserted that active, unrepentant homosexual sin should be no bar to church membership, even though (a) the early church clearly made abstinence from egregious sexual immorality a condition for church membership (Acts 15) and (b) Paul's words regarding the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians 5 clearly show that a self-professed believer engaged in serial, unrepentant, egregious sexual sin had to be put out of the community pending repentance.

(4) Richard already leaned toward accepting the ordination of homosexually active candidates for ministry.

(5) For Richard, then, self-affirmed, serial, unrepentant homosexual practice was a relatively minor sin. He deduced this from the hermeneutically unsophisticated move of confusing infrequency of mention with importance. Richard never gave thought to the fact that infrequency of mention was due both to infrequency of commission and to the severity of the offense, which was scandalous to talk about even in a negative manner. A simple analogy to incest and bestiality illustrates the point nicely. Instead of comparing adult-consensual homosexual practice to adult-consensual incest as he should have, Richard wrongly argued that homosexual practice was less severe than any form of "materialism," "greed," or "self-righteousness" (all near-universal sins), without any regard for differentiating extreme versions from milder forms.

In conclusion, Richard Hays already held significant anti-scriptural views about homosexual practice back in the 1980s and 1990s. No wonder that he has now caved so completely on the issue.

3. What Changed Richard's Mind about Homosexual Practice

Richard tells the story of his change on pp. 5–10 ("Richard's Story") and pp. 222–26 ("Epilogue: Richard B. Hays"). He presents his own prior view on homosexual relations as tenuous. His chapter on "Homosexuality" in *Moral Vision*, he says, was merely a proposal designed "to stimulate conversation, not to end it." It was not intended as "a definitive pronouncement" (p. 224) or "final word" (p. 9).

He mentions two things that pushed him over to the other side. First, he recounts "a tipping point" five years earlier when his brother had refused to attend his mother's funeral if it were not moved from an "LGBTQ"-affirming church that displayed a rainbow banner next to the church sign outside. An "incredulous" Richard could not believe that his brother would make this issue "a matter on which the faith stands or falls" or "a heretical betrayal of Christian faith" (all anti-biblical positions held by Richard even back then). Again, for Richard affirmation of homosexual practice was nothing to get upset about, as though it were on the level of "the doctrine of the Trinity or justification by faith" or "Nazism's 'German Christianity' or apartheid" (p. 6). Should we assume that Richard would have felt the same way if the church in question had celebrated adult-consensual incest and polyamory?

The second (and I suspect more significant) influence on Richard's change was his "experience of participating in a church where gay and lesbian members were a vital part of the congregation's life and ministry," which caused him "to stop and reconsider what [he] wrote before" (p. 10). His earlier judgments were "not informed by patient listening to my fellow Christians who found their identity indelibly stamped by same-sex attraction and by the longing for companionship" (p. 224). Previously, he said, "I was more concerned about my own intellectual project than about the pain of gay and lesbian people inside and outside the church" (p. 225). Again, should we presume that if Richard were able to witness persons in incestuous or egalitarian polyamorous unions be a vital part of his church he would embrace this, too, as a new expansion of God's mercy?

There is the inevitable *mea culpa* to the "LGBTQ+" community. Richard has co-authored this new book with his son "to repent of the narrowness of my earlier vision" in light of his new grasp of "the widening scope of God's mercy" in the big picture of Scripture (p. 12). This felt need to tell readers that he has repented of his earlier views on homosexual practice is ironic given that the Hayses depict God's mercy as coming to new groups without typically requiring repentance for the behaviors that led to their exclusion in the first place. "The present book is, for me, an effort to offer contrition and to set the record straight on where I now stand.… I can only say to anyone and everyone who has been hurt by my words: I am deeply sorry" (p. 225).

Richard claims that it is his experience of "gay" and lesbian persons that led him to see Scripture's expansive vision of mercy with new eyes. Yet it is arguably the case that he only sees what he wants to see in Scripture based on a decision already reached by his experience. Far from any biblical texts being supportive of homosexual practice, all that speak to it are negative, as even Richard acknowledges in *The Widening of God's Mercy*:

> My chapter [on "Homosexuality" in *Moral Vision*] argued … that "though only a few biblical texts speak of homoerotic activity, all that do mention it express unqualified disapproval" (p. 389).… That statement still seems to me to be correct. (pp. 7–8)

> Many of the passages are unambiguous in their disapproval of homosexual activity.… I (Richard) stand fully behind the descriptive exegetical judgments I made there about the meaning of all these texts. (p. 245 n. 2; referencing *Moral Vision*, 381–89)

The Hayses in their book cannot cite a single biblical text about homosexual practice that is anything other than extremely negative. Of course, they characterize this issue as a minor one in Scripture, even though the mandate of a male-female prerequisite for sexual relations is strong, pervasive, absolute, and countercultural throughout ancient Israel and early Christianity. They can cite only other groups

of people included under the umbrella of God's mercy but not apart from repentance for the behaviors that previously excluded them, including homosexual behavior.

4. The Overall Thesis of the Book

The overall thesis of the book is simply this: There is "a deeper logic," "narrative pattern," or "ongoing story" in the Bible, where "God repeatedly changes his mind" to "widen" or "expand" "the scope of his mercy" (grace, love) and to embrace previously excluded or downgraded "fixed classes of human being" (foreigners or Gentiles, women, eunuchs, and "tax collectors and sinners"), which in turn allows us in our own day to "trace a trajectory of mercy that leads us to welcome sexual minorities" and override the biblical texts that speak against homosexual practice (pp. 2, 10, 125, 186, 207). In short, God (not just the two Hayses) has allegedly changed his mind about homosexual relations, and we all better follow suit.

Accordingly, they opine that "we have lost the forest for the trees, and we need to return to a more expansive reading of the biblical story as a story about the wideness of God's mercy" (p. 2). "Our goal is to demonstrate that the biblical story, taken as a whole, depicts the ever-widening path of God's mercy" (p. 22). They urge readers "to explore *a new way of listening to the story that scripture tells about the widening scope of God's mercy*" (p. 10, emphasis theirs). "Jesus's teaching and actions encouraged his followers to think more broadly about the expansive grace of Israel's God" (p. 150). "Luke's account of the Jerusalem Council" provides "a promising model, fully consistent with the flow of the Bible's ongoing story of God's expansive grace" (p. 186). "God repeatedly reveals an expansive mercy that embraces ever wider circles of people, including those previously deemed in some way alien or unworthy" (p. 206).

The Hayses repeatedly deny that they are rejecting biblical authority:

> Welcoming sexual minorities in the church need not be based on claiming "to know better than the Bible." Instead, the argument for inclusion can be grounded in a broader understanding of *how* the biblical narratives … can reshape communities of faith as visible signs of God's mercy. (p. 7)

> We advocate full inclusion of believers with differing sexual orientations *not* because we reject the authority of the Bible … [but] because we affirm the force and authority of the Bible's ongoing story of God's mercy. (p. 214, emphasis theirs)

> The inclusion of sexual minorities is not a rejection of the Bible's message but a fuller embrace of its story of God's expansive mercy. (p. 221)

> The argument for God's gracious inclusion of people of different sexual orientations does not hang by the thread of a single analogy to Acts 10–15. Instead, it rests on the broad base of scripture's comprehensive story of God's counterintuitive but persistent mercy. (p. 223)

They repeatedly claim the authority of the Holy Spirit for their move in their "Introduction" and final chapter:

> Contrary to the common idea that the New Testament brings complete and final closure to God's revelation, the New Testament itself promises that the Holy Spirit will continue

> to lead the community of Jesus's followers into new and surprising truths [citing John 16:12–13]…. If God's Spirit is still at work in the communities of faith that are grounded in the Bible, then that process must surely continue even now…. Any religious tradition that fails to grow and respond to the ongoing work of the Spirit will stagnate or die. (pp. 3–4, 6)
>
> New prophecies, new visions, and new dreams are potentially exciting stuff…. Some may object that the "moral vision" of the Bible is a different matter from the visions of prophets and other visionaries, but the former is inevitably and profoundly based on the latter. The work of the Spirit is ongoing, and the exegesis of texts does not excuse us from the need to recognize it…. Christians across time have found the Spirit-led freedom to set aside biblical laws and teachings that they deem unjust, irrelevant, or inconsistent with the broader divine will. It is not hard to see how the prohibition of same-sex relations could fall into the same category…. We forthrightly offer here a revisionary theology—one that … re-envisions some ancient realities…. It's time to see new visions and dream new dreams. (pp. 208, 211–13, 218)

At this moment of the review, it may be helpful to raise four critical points. First, despite their efforts at downplaying a radical move, their rejection of a male-female prerequisite for sexual relations, coupled with an attendant acceptance of homosexual relations, are in fact a major "rejection of the Bible's message," namely, the very foundation of the Bible's sexual ethics, including in the witness of Jesus. No amount of lipstick on the pig can cover up that fact. They are eviscerating not only an inerrancy view of biblical inspiration but also *any* special authority ascribed to Scripture, and indeed any special authority ascribed to the teaching of our Lord Jesus.

The Hayses implode the canonical authority of Scripture in general and of Jesus in particular when they adopt such an unprecedented, massive about-face, and all the more so given their claim to the Spirit guiding them to this "new and surprising truth." Their prooftext for this claim is John 16:12–13: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." Of course, any rogue can appeal to the backing of the Spirit for "new and surprising truth."

If only the Hayses had read on from John 16:13, they would have discovered that the Spirit's job is to "take from me [Jesus] and report it to you" (16:14–15). The Spirit of Jesus fleshes out the teaching of Jesus in specific areas. Yet this "spirit" that Hayses speak about is not elaborating or expanding on Jesus's teaching about a male-female prerequisite for sex for a new context but rather diametrically opposing that teaching. Thus, it is far more likely that the Hayses are imbibing from the spirit of this age rather than from the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Second, in their unstinting promotion of God's "ever-expanding grace" (p. 4), "ever-widening path of God's mercy" (p. 22), "God's ever-expanding mercy" (p. 214), and "God's wide and ever-opening mercy" (p. 215), they seem to be bent on universalism, since anything less would be a narrowing of God's "ever-expansive" and "ever-widening" work. They don't say that, but that is the inexorable moral logic of their overarching argument.

Third, their overarching thesis poses a problem for fidelity to the faith of ancient Israel and early Christianity. That ancient faith looks rather "narrow" (not wide) in relation to other religious approaches within the ancient Near East and Greco-Roman milieu. That is certainly the case as regards its worship of one God and one Lord and Savior (Jesus) and as regards its consequent rejection of all else as idols,

along with rigorous rejection of sexual immorality. Hence, this saying of Jesus: "Enter through the narrow gate, for … narrow is the gate … that leads off into life and few are those who find it" (Matt 7:14; cf. Luke 13:23–24: "Struggle to enter through the narrow door, for many seek to enter and are not able"). So much for the ever-widening, ever-expanding mercy and grace of God.

You will not hear much about this distinctively and progressively narrow aspect of the unfolding story of the Bible in the book by the Hayses, even though it, too, is an integral part of the broader story. Indeed, as we shall see, while Jesus promotes change regarding sexual ethics, he does so in precisely the opposite direction of a "widening of God's mercy," closing remaining loopholes on the basis of a rigorous application of the moral logic of God's intentional creation of a sexual binary. The Hayses completely ignore all of this, intentionally so, because it is inconvenient for their overall thesis.

Fourth, there is no connection whatsoever between (1) God expanding in the pages of Scripture the circle of recipients of his mercy and grace, which presumes that all such recipients repent from their sins; and (2) claiming that God, millennia after the canon of Scripture was closed, has now "changed his mind" by declaring that God's people should celebrate what throughout Scripture, from Genesis to the Book of Revelation, was viewed as an egregiously sinful violation of the very foundation of sexual ethics. To me, it sounds like a very dim-witted and self-contradictory picture of who God is. It took God a long time, apparently, to catch up with large swaths of the pagan world on the subject of homosexuality.

5. An Overview of the Book's Contents

Apart from the table of contents and acknowledgements, this hardcover book is 220 pages of main text, plus twenty-one pages of endnotes, with a twelve-page general index and a twelve-page index of ancient sources. The book is on the smaller size. Adapted to a standard-size, hardcover volume, the 65,000 words of main text and endnotes would amount to less than 150 pages. So, it is a relatively short book.

The book is organized into seventeen chapters, plus a twenty-two-page introduction and a four-page epilogue written by Richard that explains "why my mind has changed." Richard also gives an explanation for his change of mind on pp. 5–10 of the introduction ("Richard's Story"). The introduction and the last chapter ("Moral Re-Vision") were jointly written by Christopher and Richard. The chapters are divided into two parts: "The Widening of God's Mercy in the Old Testament," written by Christopher (pp. 26–108); and "The Widening of God's Mercy in the New Testament," written by Richard (pp. 111–202).

There is little value to the chapters between the introduction and the last chapter because none of the arguments therein support their conclusion that "sexual minorities" who profess Christ as their Savior and Lord should be fully included in the body of Christ *while they are actively engaged in egregious, unrepentant sin*. There is no trajectory to build on from within Scripture for accepting homosexual unions, insofar as homosexual practice is consistently treated in Scripture as a denial of the very foundation of God's and Jesus's sexual ethics. None of the other groups that get included in God's "ever-expanding mercy" in chapters 1–16 get a pass for immoral behavior.

For example, most of these chapters focus on the inclusion of foreigners or Gentiles. How does this lead to embracing homosexual practice? God includes Gentiles, but he does not give Gentiles a pass for behavior, especially sexual behavior, that characterized their former life as Gentiles and which is still at odds with God's consistent will revealed throughout Scripture. That is why Paul can say to the Gentile believers at Thessalonica, when he introduces the subject of sexual purity, "This is the will of God: your

holiness, that you abstain from sexual immorality (πορνεία) … [*and not live*] *like the Gentiles who do not know God*" (1 Thess 4:3, 5 emphasis mine). They are Gentiles, but as Gentile believers in Christ they can no longer live like Gentiles.

6. The Same Old Tired Trajectory Argument with a Wrinkle: God Changing His Mind

Many before the two Hayses have appealed to a form of trajectory hermeneutics by way of analogical reasoning. The Hayses do not use this precise phrasing but instead refer to a "trajectory of mercy" (pp. 206–7) and "an imaginative reinterpretation of Scripture" by way of "analogical inference" (p. 184) or more boldly "analogical imagination" (p. 222). Remove some of the veneer and you will discover the same old tired revisionist argument:

> **Major Premise**: The church has deviated from Scripture on a number of issues to take a more liberating posture, in keeping with the core values of the faith.
>
> **Minor Premise**: The scriptural position on homosexual practice is oppressive.
>
> **Conclusion**: So, we should follow the trajectory of those analogies by endorsing homosexual relationships.

This is old stuff. It has been done before. And it has been answered before by others, including by me.[8] The two Hayses never treat counterarguments. Even the title of their book resembles the title of another book published in 1992, though there applied differently to world religions.[9]

The only thing slightly new in this book is the authors' literal embrace of the scriptural anthropomorphic imagery of God "changing his mind." The point is made in the introduction and in the last chapter, "Moral Re-Vision":

> God repeatedly changes his mind in ways that expand the sphere of his love … and show mercy. (p. 2)
>
> If we take the biblical narratives seriously, we can't avoid the conclusion that God regularly changes his mind, even when it means overriding previous judgments. (p. 207)

Between the first and the last chapter it is mentioned only in the OT sections written by Christopher, probably because the NT witness does not talk explicitly in terms of God changing his mind, though it is implicit in all the warning passages (e.g., in Rom 11:17–24, where God is willing to change the fate of believing Gentiles who do not "remain in [God's] kindness" and of unbelieving Jews who do not "remain in unbelief" in the cultivated olive tree analogy). The topic of God changing his mind is addressed primarily in chapter 6: "I Knew That You Are a Gracious God, and Merciful." Christopher asserts:

---

[8] Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon), 441–52, 460–69.

[9] Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

> The idea that God does not foresee and control everything, and feels pity and regret even concerning his past judgments, is troubling for some theological views, but if we take the Bible seriously, it is hard to deny. (p. 86)

Christopher concedes that there are texts that seem to suggest that God does not change his mind; for example, in the words of Balaam: "God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind. Has he not promised, and will he not do it?" (Num 23:19).[10] "In light of what we know about the Bible as a whole, it may be better to admit that there are indeed contrasting perspectives in dialogue with each other in the Bible…. Perhaps we should say that God changes his mind about whether he changes his mind" (pp. 90–91).

In fact, what the Hayses rightly treat as the biggest expansion of God's mercy is *not* treated as a change of mind on God's part in the NT but rather as part of God's eternal plan for the world. It is unfolded in stages to God's people, but it had been God's intention all along. God works in dispensations. The new covenant brings with it a full flowering of the promise made to Abraham that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed [or: bless themselves, gain blessing for themselves, find blessing]" (Gen 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14), accelerated in the vision of the book of Isaiah that Israel become "a light to the nations" (Isa 42:6–7; 49:6; 51:4–5), among other texts.

We see this clearly in the Pauline corpus. At the end of his unpacking of the gospel in Romans 1:16–11:36, Paul expresses amazement at God's "unsearchable judgments" and "inscrutable way," by which God found a way to "coop up" both Gentiles and Jews "into disobedience in order that he might show mercy" to both groups (11:30–35). Ephesians 1–3 refers to the union of Jew and Gentile in Christ as the first and decisive step in God's grand cosmic plan to sum up everything in Christ (1:9–10; 2:12–22). Paul's job as apostle to the Gentiles was to enlighten them to this mystery now-revealed to his "holy apostles," namely, "that the Gentiles are co-heirs and sharers of the same body and of the same promise" (3:5–6, 9). Thus, Gentiles are not an afterthought in God's plan. Even Richard, in his discussion of Gentile inclusion in Acts, refers to the Holy Spirit changing the church's mind, not God changing his mind. This would suggest that God is still not changing his mind.

On what matters does God change his mind, according to the Scriptures? Other than God changing his mind about (or regretting) the selection of Saul as king (1 Sam 15:11, 35), God mostly changes his mind about the extent of punishment that he decides to mete out. God develops in response to the

[10] Christopher also cites Hebrews 13:8 (God "is the same yesterday and today and forever") and Isaiah 40:8 ("… the word of our God will stand forever"; *The Widening of God's Mercy*, 2). Richard has no problem embracing Romans 11:29 about Israel: "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (p. 194). The Hayses could have added still more texts (e.g., Ps 33:11, on how "the counsel [or: plan(s), decision(s)] of Yahweh stands forever"; Heb 6:17–18, regarding God's "unchangeable" purpose in blessing Abraham, confirmed by oath, by which "two things" it is "impossible for God to lie"; Jas 1:17, about every good and perfect gift coming from the Father of lights, "with whom there is no change or shadow of turning"). Christopher qualifies Malachi 3:6 ("I Yahweh have not changed," often translated "… do not change" despite the perfect tense), contending that this is about a specific list of sins such as adultery, swearing falsely, and oppressing others that constitute "enduring principles" (p. 90).

The book starts on p. 1 with a citation of 1 Samuel 15:29, where, after Saul begs Samuel to pardon his sin but Samuel responds that "Yahweh has rejected you from being king over Israel," Saul accidentally tears the hem of Samuel's robe, with Samuel responding that "the Glory of Israel will not recant [or: lie, deceive, break covenant] or *change his mind* [or: regret, be sorry or remorseful] (Heb. נחם), for he is not a human to *change his mind*." Christopher rightly points out that in the context Yahweh says the opposite: "I *regret* [נִחַמְתִּי] that I made Saul king" (15:11) and the narrator confirms that "Yahweh *regretted* (נִחָם) that he had made Saul king over Israel" (15:35).

deep-seated problem of sin in the human heart (poignantly addressed in the aftermath of the Flood in Gen 8:21) a new covenant predicated on forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit writing the law of God on our hearts. Yet, again, what the OT anthropomorphically presents as God's developing response to intractable human sin, the NT presents as God's actualization of his plan from ages past.

In the course of making a new covenant, God does alter ritual and ceremonial laws that inhibit the extension of the gospel to Gentiles and that are inappropriate in a move from the earthly theocracy of Israel to the heavenly theocracy of the kingdom of God. It is a change, not a change of God's mind but a change to a new covenant that brings fulfillment to the old. But God does not radically redefine his moral law for Gentiles, as though declaring egregious immorality to be a positive good so that Gentiles can gratify the sinful desires of their hearts.

How does Jesus explain his rejection of divorce and remarriage-after-divorce that was allowed in the Law of Moses? He appeals to God's creation will as a trump card to God's accommodation to male "hardness of heart," which allowance God was now retracting (Mark 10:5). He did not say that God had "changed his mind" about divorce and remarriage-after-divorce, as though God was once for it and now is against it. He said that God had accommodated to male "hardness of heart" but only for a time that had now passed.

The Hayses do not even consider this option for understanding change. Why? Because they want nothing to do with Mark 10:2–12 (par. Matt 19:3–9). They know that what Jesus says in that passage of Scripture runs absolutely counter to their main thesis. It does so because Jesus here adjusted the OT law to a more (not less) demanding moral standard, closing a loophole in the law, which is the opposite of an "ever-widening mercy" that lets go moral standards. More importantly, it runs counter to the Hayses' main thesis because Jesus based his rejection of remarriage-after-divorce (and implicitly of polygyny as well) on a rigorous application of the logic of God's intention in creation, that of a sexual binary—two sexes—as the foundation of sexual ethics. And it is this foundation that the Hayses want to eviscerate.

Clearly, Jesus was not declaring a male-female requirement for sexual relations an accommodation to human "hardness of heart." Quite the reverse. For him it was the foundation, going all the way back to the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, for establishing the essential twoness of the marital bond, allowing him to reject the accommodation to divorce and remarriage-after-divorce as a serial version of polygyny. So, naturally, the Hayses did not want to touch this text with a 10-foot pole. This text shows that God could not have "changed his mind" about a male-female prerequisite for sexual relations. He rather changed his policy on divorce and remarriage-after-divorce based on the moral logic of God's "male-female" creation. This one passage alone sinks the Hayses' new ship. And there is no way around it. That is why they ignored it. They could not come up with a reasonable or faithful explanation against it. But how can responsible scholars simply ignore the single most devastating text for their position?

This explanation by Jesus for a change in God's policy (but not in God's morality), one of temporary accommodation to male "hardness of heart," would fit changes like the one that Christopher addresses in chapter 3 concerning Numbers 27:1–11, where God approved a new law (albeit limited) that allowed women, whose father had no sons, to be apportioned land in Canaan. The absence of such a law was apparently an accommodation to male "hardness of heart," which God was no longer allowing, owing to the pleas of these women. God did not change his view about women. He ended a specific inequity to women in a patriarchal society.

Christian theologians have long discussed the concept of God "changing his mind." John Calvin, as Christopher notes, explained the image of God "changing his mind" as "figurative" language

"accommodated to our capacity so that we may understand it."[11] This is a possible solution for today's believers in hindsight, even though the biblical authors in these texts really do seem to think that God is changing his mind about the degree or extent of punishment. God presents himself in texts about punishment as someone who, due to his great magnanimity (as the credo in Exod 34:6, cited by Christopher in ch. 6), is willing to relent on continued punishment *if* his people (or even other peoples, like the Ninevites) turn to him in repentance. This does not mean that God always relents on punishment. It can also go in the opposite direction, as when King Saul disobeys Yahweh's command.

Others would cast this language of God changing in mind as really a changing of the mind of biblical writers and their heirs when they come to a clearer understanding of God's will. The literal way in which the two Hayses, particularly Christopher, embrace the concept of God changing his mind suggests that they have adopted "open theism" and challenge the immutability of God, although they never discuss it in those terms. Perhaps this is nothing more than a rhetorical smokescreen on their part, a means to shift the blame to God for the changing of their own minds about homosexuality.

My point here is not to resolve, once and for all, the thorny question of biblical texts that present God as changing his mind. I rather like the fact that God lets me think that my prayers can have some impact on the direction of God's actions within a limited leeway of his will, especially as regards the prevention of suffering that does not lead to immoral actions. (Some suffering and deprivation are inevitable in a life that involves denying one's sinful urges.) My point here is to show that there is no reasonable or faithful basis from the biblical depiction of God in Scripture for showing that God "changed his mind" about the moral foundation of sexual ethics as understood by Jesus our Lord.

7. Two Obvious Deficiencies of the Book

There are at least two major scholarly deficiencies of *The Widening of God's Mercy. First, the Hayses fail to consult virtually any of the scholarship that has been written on the Bible and homosexuality since the publication of Richard's* Moral Vision *almost three decades ago.*[12] Apparently, their excuse is that the book is written for "laypeople in the pews," "clergy," and "our students." As such, there are "few footnotes" and "few new or controversial (academic) ideas," except that they do claim to "retell the biblical story in a way that it is often not told" (although, in my experience, it is the usual retelling in non-evangelical seminaries).

The excuse won't wash. Even for a book written for a broad audience this is inexcusable. Almost all of the heavy-duty work on the subject of the Bible and homosexuality, on both sides of the issue, has been written since Richard's work. This includes not just biblical scholars who uphold the scriptural male-female prerequisite, among which I would cite my own work (a 470-page book, a shorter *Two Views* book, a 150-page chapter in an edited book, articles in academic journals and edited volumes,

[11] Hays and Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy*, 89; from Calvin's *Institutes* 2.13.12–13.

[12] There are only a few exceptions. Christopher cites in a footnote an article by OT scholar Thomas Römer to claim (without any documentation) that biblical passages speaking against homosexuality "were not envisioning LGBTQ Christians in the pews today who abundantly manifest the fruits of the spirit" ("Homosexualität und die Bibel: Anmerkungen zueinem anachronistischen Diskurs," *JBTh* 33 [2018]: 47–63). Richard cites a 2021 essay by NT scholar J. R. Daniel Kirk in a festschrift for Hays, challenging Richard's thinking on the subject (Hays and Hays, *The Widening of God's* Mercy, 247 n. 2). The Hayses cite a paragraph from a 2002 article by "gay" theologian Eugene Rogers regarding the need to mine Scripture and tradition for "new rules" to govern "gay" relationships (Hays and Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy*, 217, 246 n. 9).

and encyclopedia entries),[13] as well as the work of Preston Sprinkle, William Webb, and Darrin Snyder Belousek, among others.[14] It also includes biblical scholars who support homosexual unions, some of whose views (e.g., admitting that the biblical indictment included committed homosexual relationships) do not support the assumptions of the Hayses, most notably Bernadette Brooten, William Loader, and Martti Nissinen.[15]

[13] Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*; Gagnon and Dan O. Via, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); "Paul's Understanding of Same Sex Relations in Romans 1: Recent Discussions," in *Paul's Letter to the Romans: Theological Essays*, ed. Douglas J. Moo, Eckhard J. Schnabel, Thomas R. Schreiner, and Frank Thielman (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2023), 48–85; "The Scriptural Case for a Male-Female Prerequisite for Sexual Relations," in *Homosexuality, Marriage, and the Church: Biblical, Counseling, and Religious Liberty Issues*, ed. Roy E. Gane, Nicholas P. Miller, and H. Peter Swanson (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2012), 53–161; "Why the Disagreement over the Biblical Witness on Homosexual Practice? A Response to David G. Myers and Letha Dawson Scanzoni, *What God Has Joined Together?*," *Reformed Review* 59 (2005): 19–130, https://tinyurl.com/2r8vwm52; "An Exegetical Case for Traditional Marriage," in *Cultural Engagement: A Crash Course in Contemporary Issues*, ed. Joshua D. Chatraw and Karen Swallow Prior (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 72–78; "Accommodation and Pastoral Concern: What Does the Biblical Text Say?" and "How Seriously Does Scripture Treat the Issue of Homosexual Practice?" in *Embracing Truth: Homosexuality and the Word of God*, ed. David W. Torrance and Jack Stein (Haddington, Scotland: Handsel, 2012), 138–50, 151–78; "A Book Not To Be Embraced: A Critical Appraisal of Stacy Johnson's *A Time to Embrace*," *SJT* 62 (2009): 61–80; "The Old Testament and Homosexuality: A Critical Review of the Case Made by Phyllis Bird," *ZAW* 117 (2005): 367–94; "Does the Bible Regard Same-Sex Intercourse as Intrinsically Sinful?" in *Christian Sexuality: Normative and Pastoral Principles*, ed. Richard E. Saltzman (Minneapolis: Kirk House, 2003), 106–55; "Are There Universally Valid Sex Precepts? A Critique of Walter Wink's Views on the Bible and Homosexuality," *HBT* 24 (2002): 72–125; "Understanding and Responding to a Pro-Homosexual Interpretation of Scripture," *Enrichment* 16:3 (2011): 92–101; "Sexuality," in *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 449–64; "Homosexuality," in *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*, ed. Walter Campbell Campbell-Jack, Gavin McGrath, and C. Stephen Evans (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 327–32; "Sexuality," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 739–48; "Scriptural Perspectives on Homosexuality and Sexual Identity," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 24 (2005): 293–303; "Gays and the Bible: A Response to Walter Wink," *The Christian Century* (2002): 40–43; "Are There Universally Valid Sex Precepts? A Critique of Walter Wink's Views on the Bible and Homosexuality," *HBT* 24 (2002): 72–125; "A Comprehensive and Critical Review Essay of *Homosexuality, Science, and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture*, Part 1," *HBT* 22 (2000): 174–243; "A Comprehensive and Critical Review Essay of *Homosexuality, Science, and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture*, Part 2," *HBT* 25 (2003): 179–275.

[14] Preston Sprinkle, *Does the Bible Support Same-Sex Marriage? 21 Conversations from a Historically Christian View* (Colorado Springs: Cook, 2023); *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015); *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church, and What the Bible Has to Say* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook, 2021); Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, *Marriage, Scripture, and the Church: Theological Discernment on the Question of Same-Sex Union* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021); William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

[15] Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); William Loader, *Sex, Then and Now: Sexualities and the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022); "Paul on Same-Sex Relations in Romans 1," *Int* 74 (2020): 242–52; "Reading Romans 1 on Homosexuality in the Light of Biblical/Jewish and Greco-Roman Perspectives of Its Time," *ZNW* 108 (2017): 119–49; "Same-Sex Relationships: A 1st-Century Perspective," *HvTSt* 70.1 (2014): 10.4102/hts.v70i1.2114; *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 22–33, 83–91, 293–338; *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 131–40, 146–47; *Sexuality in the New Testament: Understanding the Key Texts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 7–34,

In failing to consult with such literature, they ignore research done not only on exegetical issues surrounding the most relevant biblical texts but also on hermeneutical concerns that directly impact several assumptions that they carry over into this book. In my own work, I have written hundreds of pages over the years (including 150 pages in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*) refuting hermeneutical revisionist arguments for discounting the biblical witness (for example, refuting the exploitation, orientation, and misogyny arguments, as well as the few-texts argument and the use of alleged analogies like Gentile inclusion, slavery, women's roles, and divorce). There is no response to any of this in the Hayses' book.

This failure to acquaint themselves with the scholarly literature since 1995 becomes most problematic in four areas. (1) They fail to consider that Jesus's discussion of divorce and remarriage, along with the creation texts to which he refers (Gen 1:27; 2:24), establishes a male-female requirement for marriage as foundational for biblical sexual ethics. (2) They adopt a hermeneutically shallow assumption, especially with regard to sexual offenses, that infrequency of biblical mention equates with relative insignificance. (3) They assume that the Greco-Roman and early-Jewish milieu out of which the NT texts emerged were unacquainted with the idea of committed same-sex relationships. (4) They sloppily apply analogies to the Bible's indictment of homosexual practice, where they favor remote analogues (slavery, women's roles, the consumption of blood) over the more proximate analogues (incest, polyamory) that do not get them to their desired ideological destination.

Truth be told, *the authors are engaged in mass censorship of an array of counterarguments to their positions on the Bible and homosexual practice*. One would think that, if they had such confidence in their overall position, they would have been more than willing to present the counterarguments so that they could dismantle them for their readers. That is what I have tried to do in writing on the subject. It is standard procedure for responsible scholars, especially on controversial issues. Instead, they ignore every single counterargument to their position, as if they have no response to offer.

This would be unacceptable in an undergraduate senior thesis. In this case, it is appalling on the part of the seasoned scholars who wrote the book and appalling on the part of the prestigious academic press that published it.

Second, Hays and Hays avoid virtually any discussion of biblical texts that make the case for *a male-female prerequisite or* against *homosexual relations* (two sides of the same coin). They try to turn this shocking neglect into a virtue: "The repetitive arguments about the same set of verses, and the meaning of specific words, have reached an impasse; they are superficial and boring. We have lost the forest for the trees" (p. 2).

"Repetitive" and "boring"? This is a puerile remark for scholars to make. Their concern should rather be defending their position against "the same set of verses" that pose the greatest obstacle to their thesis. The "impasse" is only for those who want to promote homosexual relationships, because the evidence is overwhelming that these texts disallow any and all homosexual relationships.

"Lost the forest for the trees"? The Hayses claim that the examination of these texts is "superficial" because it misses the larger narrative pattern of the allegedly ever-widening mercy of God. The problem here is that what they identify as "the forest" is not the whole forest. Ancient Israel, early Judaism, and early Christianity had clearly defined theologies and ethics that were in most respects far more exclusive, "intolerant" (in a good sense), and demanding than what existed in the religions of the

106–8, 120–26); *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), esp. ch. 2; Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

ancient world. Monotheism led to an intensive one-way approach. The movement in Scripture is not just toward an ever-wider embrace of marginalized groups irrespective of repentance for the sins that lead to their marginalization. There is no "trajectory" toward greater license in sexual behavior. Jesus certainly believed that there was change in moving from the old covenant to the new, but that change was often toward greater ethical demands, including a more rigorous application of the moral logic of a sexual binary, leading to a rejection of polygyny and a revolving door of divorce and remarriage (Matt 5:17–48; Mark 10:2–12). Hence Jesus's remark about the narrow gate or door that few find and many cannot enter (Matt 7:14; Luke 13:23–24).

They speak disparagingly of "the inertia of tradition and the force of a few biblical prooftexts on these questions," which they think "experience outweighs" (p. 213). "We believe that this debate should no longer focus on the endlessly repeated exegetical arguments about half a dozen isolated texts that forbid or disapprove of same-sex relations. (The regularly cited texts are Gen 19:1–9, Lev 18:22, 20:13, 1 Cor 6:9–11, 1 Tim 1:10, and Rom 1:18–32.) In this book, we have not revisited them" (p. 206). This is equivalent to making the case for adult-consensual incestuous or polyamorous unions while ignoring the texts that speak most directly to such behavior.

The Hayses insinuate that the biblical disapproval of homosexual practice is relatively insignificant to the Bible's sexual ethics and even less significant to the Bible itself. But would any Jewish or Christian author of Scripture, or indeed any first-century Jew or Christian, have thought that? Do the Hayses seriously believe that Paul treated the case of incest at Corinth as a relatively insignificant matter (of all the sins that occurred at Corinth, of which there were many, this is the only one that in Paul's view required immediate expulsion of the offender), or that if Paul had encountered at Corinth, instead of the case of the incestuous man, a case of a man having sex with another male, he would have treated it as a relatively insignificant matter? Is infrequency of mention as regards sexual offenses a good indicator of degree of significance and severity? The evidence indicates "no" to all these questions, but the Hayses want to leave the impression that dumping these texts poses no significant obstacle to fidelity to the authority of Scripture.

The idea of determining the significance of specific acts of sexual immorality on the basis of counting texts indicates a semi-Gnostic approach to "texts without flesh." I have never heard a pastor give a sermon, in whole or in part, on why one should not have sex with one's parents, siblings, or children. I do not deduce from that absence of mention that all these pastors thought incest was a minor sin. On the contrary, I deduce the exact opposite, namely, that it is scandalous to have to broach the subject at all, so egregious and offensive is the sin of incest.

It used to be the same with homosexual practice, but now the full-court press of the secular culture has made it necessary to address the issue from the pulpit (and, even so, only rarely in churches that do regard it as egregious sin). I suppose that we should be grateful that there was a perpetrator of incest at Corinth, for without him there might be people arguing in the church today that an absence of mention indicates the insignificance of the sin of incest for NT authors. Since bestiality receives no mentions in the NT (and only four in the OT), it must be an exceedingly insignificant sin or no sin at all, if we follow the logic of the Hayses. It is shocking to see two scholars of the Bible of their caliber make such an egregious hermeneutical blunder.

Let us also be clear that their bare listing of texts that speak more or less directly to the immorality of homosexual sex is truncated (Gen 19:1–9; Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:24–27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10). We would have to add other texts: Genesis 9:20–27 (Ham's offense against Noah); Judges 19:22–25

(the Levite at Gibeah, a virtual carbon copy of the Sodom story); the "shrine guys" (קְדֵשִׁים) texts in Deuteronomy (23:17–18) and the Deuteronomistic History (1 Kgs 14:21–24; 15:12–14; 22:46; 2 Kgs 23:7), to which one should compare also Revelation 22:15 ("dogs"), Rev 21:8 ("the abominable"), and various texts that interpret the sin of Sodom as homosexual practice or at least "sexual immorality" (Ezek 16:49–50; 18:12; Jude 7; 2 Pet 2:6–7, 10). Readers can consult a detailed defense of the relevance of all these texts in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*.

Most importantly, the Hayses fail to mention texts that substantiate a male-female prerequisite for sexual relations, the flip side of the same coin that excludes homosexual relationships. Of these the most important are: (1) Jesus's discussion of divorce and remarriage in Mark 10:2–12 (parallel in Matt 19:3–9; plus the eunuch text in 19:10–12); and (2) the two texts from Genesis that Jesus therein cites as normative, with proscriptive implications for all sexual behavior (Gen 1:27; 2:24, to which add the preceding narrative in 2:21–23). I regard these texts as so important to the issue of homosexual practice that, when I give presentations on the Bible and homosexuality, I nearly always begin with these texts.

The Hayses treat opposition to homosexual practice as an isolated view in the Bible. The truth of the matter is very different. From an historical perspective, we can state categorically that every biblical author recognized that homosexual practice was a heinous offense to God. That it does not appear more frequently in Scripture is testimony to the near universal aversion for the behavior in ancient Israel, early Judaism, and early Christianity. *This is why every text in Scripture having anything to do with sexual intercourse, whether narrative, law, proverb, poetry, moral exhortation, or metaphor, always presupposes a male-female prerequisite*. No exceptions.

For example, in OT legal material there are constant efforts at distinguishing appropriate forms of other-sex intercourse from inappropriate forms but nothing of the sort for same-sex intercourse. The reason for this is apparent: since same-sex intercourse was always unacceptable, there was no need to make such distinctions. Another example involves metaphor: even though ancient Israel, early Judaism, and early Christianity were male-dominated cultures, they imaged themselves in relation to Yahweh or Christ as a bride to a husband so as to avoid the imagery of a man-male sexual bond (see especially Eph 5:22–33, *inter alia*).[16]

For a fuller defense of the scriptural support for homosexual practice being a particularly severe sexual sin, readers can consult my online article, "Is Homosexual Practice No Worse Than Any Other Sin?"[17]

8. Conclusion

The fact that the Hayses feel compelled to minimize the biblical texts against homosexual practice underscores how desperate they are to convince readers that Scripture's rejection of such is no big deal. Yet, as I have just shown, homosexual practice was universally regarded in ancient Israel, early Judaism, and early Christianity as a severe sin that violated the male-female foundation of sexual ethics. Would acknowledgement of this truth make the Hayses back down on their main thesis? Certainly not, for the

[16] Also: Isa 5:1–7; 54:5–7; 61:10; 62:4–5; Jer 2:2; 2:20–3:3; 31:32; Ezek 16, 23; Hos 1–3; Mark 2:19–20, par. Matt 22:1–14; 25:1–13; John 3:29; Rev 19:7–9.

[17] Robert A. J. Gagnon, "Is Homosexual Practice No Worse Than Any Other Sin?" (2015): 8–10, http://www.robgagnon.net/articles/homosexAreAllSinsEqual.pdf.

obvious reason that they have already made up their minds based on their own experience and now only seek to justify that decision to the rest of the church.

They know it will be a harder sell to the church if it looks like they are discarding an important element of the biblical witness. However, whether it is one way or the other would not change their own verdict derived on entirely separate grounds. That is why they were not interested in doing their homework to see if rejection of homosexual practice really is an important concern within Scripture. They do not want to know, and they certainly do not want their readers to know. Ultimately, the Hayses do not care about what was important to Jesus and the apostolic witness to him. Their own self-interpreted experience is Lord, not Scripture, not even Jesus—at least not the real Jesus as opposed to the ideological cipher that they call "Jesus."

I close with my own conclusion that God hasn't changed his mind. The Hayses have. In so doing, they reject the clear and overwhelming witness of Scripture (including Jesus) for an embrace of behavior that leads to exclusion from the kingdom of God. As such, they are now swimming in a sea of heresy and no longer walking in love.

Themelios 49.3 (2024): 554–63

The Image of God and the Plight of Man

– Colin J. Smothers –

Colin J. Smothers is executive director of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and an adjunct professor at Boyce College. He also serves as director of the Kenwood Institute and editor-in-chief of Eikon Journal.

****

Abstract: The doctrine of the image of God is fundamental to Christian theology and ethics, and it forms the foundation for justice and human flourishing in society. Yet this doctrine is under assault today by anti-Christian forces. This article explores the biblical meaning and implications of the *imago Dei*, including God's design for sexuality, marriage, and the family, in order to reassert this doctrine's prominence in the unfolding debates about anthropology, what it means to be human, and the identification and promotion of what is good.

****

Regardless of what else one may or may not think about the ongoing project that is the United Nations, it is a decidedly Western undertaking infused with Western ideals—Judeo-Christian ideals—that could produce this opening sentence in the Preamble of their 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*:

> The inherent dignity and … equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.[1]

Having just faced down a grave evil and prevailed in a world-altering, global war, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was an attempt by the United States and her allies to reassert what is true about every human person and the necessary morality that flows from a common commitment to human dignity that is owed to and from every individual.

Notably, this *Declaration* included the following statements about the centrality of marriage and the family toward an overarching aim of upholding and protecting human dignity:

1. Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.
2. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.
3. The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.[2]

[1] "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," *United Nations,* https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

[2] "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," Article 16.

Now, it must be admitted this is nowhere near a sufficient proclamation of all that is true about marriage and family, especially as compared to the great Christian tradition. But note a few things. First, here in black-and-white is gender binary, enshrined for all time in this significant historical document: It is "men and women" who have the right to marry and found a family.

But more fundamental is the recognition in this declaration of what is right according to Nature, what is natural to man, where it states that "the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society." What does it mean to be natural? Here we find an echo of another, prior declaration that shaped the West, one wherein men appealed openly to the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" in the United States' *Declaration of Independence.* But this is to raise one of our time's greatest questions: can the laws of Nature, or what is natural, be asserted apart from an appeal to Nature's God?

Remarkably, when it came time for the United Nations to adopt this declaration in 1948, there were forty-eight countries voting in favor, and eight abstentions. Six of these abstentions came from the Soviet-aligned communist bloc. At least one of these communist countries was ideologically opposed to the very idea of natural rights at all, instead insisting that rights are granted by the state. Another abstention came from Saudi Arabia, an historically and ideologically Muslim country, largely on the grounds of its disagreement with Western ideals of marriage and in protest to the notion that people have the right to change their beliefs. The final abstention came from South Africa, largely because they saw this declaration as a threat to their regime of apartheid.

In sum, opposed to the UN's *Declaration of Human Rights* were arrayed Marxism, Islam, and racism—in other words, totalitarian statism, sexism, and challenges to the natural family and human dignity.

Looking at the landscape today, we might observe that it is largely these same ideologies that threaten our doctrine of the image of God, our anthropology.

1. The Image of God and Western Man

Last year, I attended a conference in London sponsored by a new organization called the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship (ARC). This organization was recently founded as an international coalition of leaders who are concerned about the obvious and ongoing decline in the West in nearly every sector: in our economies, our institutions, our social fabric, and our faith. At the conference were two consistent themes: first, opposition to the rise of cultural Marxism and radical Islam; and second, the absolute necessity of recovering the conviction of the immeasurable worth of every human person, owing to the *imago Dei.* We lose this conviction; we lose Western civilization.

It is arguably the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, given to the world by the Judeo-Christian tradition, that contributed most to human flourishing and the peace of civil society in the world. On this doctrine stand a host of attendant commitments to the dignity and worth of every person, male and female, including the natural and inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, freedom of conscience, bodily autonomy, and the like.

But one of the most obvious facts of our time is that the doctrine of the image of God is not a given in every sphere of life. Nearly every one of our anthropological challenges today—and there should be no doubt that ours is an anthropological age[3]—stems from a misapprehension, misappropriation, or

[3] See Michael Haykin, "This Anthropological Moment," *Eikon* 1.2 (2019): 6–7.

even a complete denial of the *imago Dei.* But to acknowledge the divine image, isn't it true that one must first acknowledge the Divine?

Without a Creator God, there is no creative purpose. According to Charles Taylor, this is a defining mark of modernity: "The cosmos is no longer seen as an embodiment of meaningful order which can define the good for us."[4] How is meaningful order lost? By denying our Maker, we have turned Psalm 100:5 on its head and declared that it is we who have made ourselves. Historian Jacques Barzun laid part of the blame at the feet of the father of modern naturalism, when he wrote, "The denial of purpose is Darwin's distinctive contention."[5] But Darwinians do not have a monopoly on denying purpose in God's creation, especially in God's design of humanity as male and female. Every time we downplay or ignore God's creative purposes in our bodies as male or female, or in Nature, or in God's inspired and perspicuous Word, we contribute to the denial of our divine purpose.

We must re-attend and return to God's revelation in the Book of Nature and the Book of Scripture to recover and reassert the biblical teaching of the *imago Dei*, especially against the proliferation of anthropological errors with which our society is awash.

I would contend that the most significant threat to the *imago Dei* comes by way of what is most natural to humanity, as recognized by the United Nations back in 1948, and what is most repugnant to the Marxist revolutionaries: Marriage and the family. There is a reason why no-fault divorce, and free, on-demand abortions were among the first societal reforms in Bolshevik Russia. In a communist-industrial society, it is the de-natured, androgynous, de-coupled individual person who is best able to contribute interchangeably to the greater good of the state. In this view, marriage and family are obstacles to be overcome in order to squeeze maximal fealty and utility to the state. Any other human bond are barriers that may be destroyed. This was Friedrich Engels's main contention in his work, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. Inheritable property keeps families insulated from the arm of the state (something Engels did not celebrate).

When we look around today, we see the cultural Marxists carrying the torch that was passed on at just the moment when economic Marxism was found wanting and imploding, at least in the West. Although they may not have Marx or Engels on their shelves, these cultural revolutionaries have been influenced by or are downstream of Antonio Gramsci, Herbert Marcuse, Judith Butler, and the like. But make no mistake: the revolutionary goals are the same.

Many cultural observers found themselves asking in 2020 what "disrupting the natural family" has to do with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) organization. Nothing, unless the movement is underwritten by intersectional Marxism, which became clear in the months and years following, which is why this aim was found (and then taken down after public outcry) on the BLM website in 2020. The Marxist doctrine of intersectionality brings together the most pernicious threats to natural marriage and family we face, while the LGBT ideologues promote fruitless relationships within a movement that not only ignores male-female design but plays the Maker as it commends the cutting off of healthy organs to remake them into a different image.

[4] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 148–49.

[5] Jacques Barzun, *Darwin, Marx, Wagner* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 11. I am indebted to Nancy Pearcey for drawing my attention to these two quotes in her excellent book, *Love Thy Body* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2018).

This is one vantage of the lay of the land today. And it is just here where the Bible's teaching on the image of God, particularly in the book of Genesis, comes as a breath of fresh air. Because not only do we need a recovery of a full-orbed understanding of the *imago Dei* if the West is to survive, but we need to come to grips with how the institutions of marriage and the family are themselves bound up in this all-important doctrine as both an implication and a bulwark for its safeguard from its would-be detractors.

2. The Image of God in Genesis

The image of God is mentioned three times in the book of Genesis: in 1:26–27; 5:3, and 9. By surveying these three texts, I aim to reassert the biblical teaching of the *imago Dei* in its proper context and push back against anthropological errors at war with the truth.

James Madison famously asked, "What is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature?" This isn't quite right. The greatest of all reflections on human nature is found in Scripture, and government—including self-government, familial government, ecclesial government, the government of social and cultural norms, and statecraft—is the consequent response to what one believes about human nature. And as Herman Bavinck reminds us in his *Reformed Ethics*, "Origin determines direction and purpose."[6] If so, then let us return to humanity's origin story.

2.1. Blessing, Fruitfulness, and Dominion (Genesis 1:26–31)

In Genesis 1:26, on the sixth day of creation, God turns to the special creation of man:

> Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

Set apart from the rest of God's creative acts, this creature is to be made in God's image and likeness. While "image" and "likeness" are near synonyms, as Peter Gentry has suggested in several places, most recently in print in an article for *Eikon Journal*, דְּמוּת, or "likeness," likely refers to man's vertical relationship to God via his obedient sonship, while צֶלֶם, or "image," likely refers to man's horizontal relationship as servant king over creation.[7] Indeed, this purpose is closely identified with God's special creation of man, as "they"—note the plurality—will "have dominion … over all the earth."

This mediating role, representing God to creation and creation to God, is made more evident in Genesis 2, where the author presents a zoomed-in look at God's special creation of the man, *Adam*. After creating the earth and everything in it out of nothing, on the sixth day God takes some of the earth and molds it like clay into the body of something not yet seen in the world: a man.

It is noteworthy that before God's breath of life comes to animate him in Genesis 2:7, there lying on the ground is not just an ordered pile of dirt, but something God calls the "man of dust." This detail may signify the priority and irreducibility of man's bodily constitution. God made man a hybrid, a mediating creature with visible (bodily) and invisible (spiritual) attributes, in order to represent the invisible to the visible, and the visible to the invisible—indeed, to *make visible* the invisible.

This is *how* man is to image God: as a psychosomatic unity, imaging forth God's nature in our own nature. Upon receiving the breath of life from the mouth of God, the man awakes a living creature. The

[6] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019–2021), 1:35.

[7] Peter Gentry, "Humanity as the Divine Image in Genesis 1:26–28," *Eikon* 2.1 (2020): 56–70.

first words the man hears are from the mouth of God, as God addresses the man as a "Thou," a personal agent distinguished in this divine address from the rest of creation. It is at this point in the narrative, in Genesis 2:16, that the Septuagint begins to translate the generic word for man, אָדָם, with the personal name, Ἀδάμ, in place of the heretofore impersonal ἄνθρωπος.

If this is the case, then our bodily constitution is not immaterial to how we bear the image of God. As Bavinck summarizes in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, "The whole being … and not something in man but man himself, is the image of God."[8] Elsewhere in his *Reformed Ethics* he writes, "We are God's image with respect to all of our existence, in the soul with all its capabilities (thinking, feeling, willing) and also in the body."[9]

In other words, our bodies, male and female, are not immaterial to how we image God. Indeed, they are consummate with being God's image. With this in mind, let us return to Genesis 1:27 to see how God's image subsists:

> So God created man in his own image,
> in the image of God he created him;
> male and female he created them.

These three lines of Hebrew poetry contain a whole world of theological anthropology, against which the world is at war. In this verse, not only are male and female both said to be created in the image of God—a truth denied by hyper-patriarchists, misogynists, and Islamists by their practice—they are also both referred to, first, as is clear by the parallel structure, under the singular generic Hebrew term אָדָם. Importantly, this term becomes the particular name of the first man in the very next chapter. But in Genesis 1, this name establishes Adamic headship and, by implication, male headship in the family.

But perhaps more at the center of our anthropological crisis today, we must note the inherent binary in the dimorphic, complementary shape of humanity made in God's image: "male and female he created them." The very words used to describe the creation of the אָדָם in Genesis 1:27 as "male and female" point to a social-sexual complementarity that is fleshed out in Genesis 2. The Hebrew term for "male," זָכָר, in Genesis 1:27 is a word that etymologically hints at outwardness and prominence as a definitional aspect of this creature, and the Hebrew term for "female," נְקֵבָה, is a word that etymologically hints at inwardness and receptivity.[10]

---

[8] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 2:554. This understanding is similar to that found in D. J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *TynB* 19 (1968): 101: "Man is created not in God's image, since God has no image of His own, but as God's image, or rather to be God's image, that is to deputize in the created world for the transcendent God who remains outside the world order. That man is God's image means that he is the visible corporeal representative of the invisible, bodiless God; he is representative rather than representation, since the idea of portrayal is secondary in the significance of the image. However, the term 'likeness' is an assurance that man is an adequate and faithful representative of God on earth. The whole man is the image of God, without distinction of spirit and body. All mankind, without distinction, are the image of God. The image is to be understood not so much ontologically as existentially: it comes to expression not in the nature of man so much as in his activity and function. This function is to represent God's Lordship to the lower orders of creation. The dominion of man over creation can hardly be excluded from the content of the image itself. Mankind, which means both the human race and individual men, do not cease to be the image of God so long as they remain men; to be human and to be the image of God are not separable."

[9] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:35.

[10] See Marc Brettler, "Happy Is the Man Who Fills His Quiver with Them (Ps. 127:5): Constructions of Masculinities in the Psalms," in *Being a Man: Negotiating Ancient Constructs of Masculinity*, ed. Ilona Zsolnay (New

To downplay, ignore, or efface our maleness or femaleness is a direct affront to the *imago Dei*. We are, after all, in the image of God as male or female. If our bodily constitution as psychosomatic units is the way in which God has made us to image him, either male or female, then to undermine this binary, as LGBT activists aim to do, is nothing less than an attack on the image of God.

But it isn't just LGBT activists who undermine God's image in humanity as male and female. In a recent review,[11] I recently responded to an article by Christa McKirland that appears in the third edition of the egalitarian book *Discovering Biblical Equality* titled, "Image of God and Divine Presence: A Critique of Gender Essentialism."[12] Some may be surprised to find in this book, which is widely promoted in mainstream evangelical circles as a foremost text in defense of gender egalitarianism, a capitulation to some of the most destructive aspects of transgender ideology. Aside from using and promoting the unbiblical, gender-neutral pronoun "Godself," as if God's self-revelation is not consistently and clearly masculine in Scripture, McKirland uses preferred pronouns for a woman who presents herself as a man, and then writes this astonishing paragraph:

> The implications of this chapter, however, are not to provide a moral prescription for transgender persons, but to (1) show how gender-essentialist logic may actually be contributing to the internal angst of some trans persons, and (2) to emphasize that the priority of the scriptural text is on following Jesus, not being 'real men' or 'real women.' For those who are discerning whether their givenness should be altered, the New Testament rubric for any such choice (which would include all bodily modifications, not just those affecting sexual anatomy) is how such can be done in submission to the Spirit and in order to become more like Christ.[13]

The "altering" McKirland refers to here in the context is so-called sex reassignment surgery: the cutting off of healthy organs to match a troubled mind. The author suggests that, if this is to be pursued, it should be done in submission to the Spirit. How is this possible? McKirland does not answer. But a biblically faithful answer must declare that it cannot be done in submission to the Spirit who inspired Genesis 1 and 2. Such activity would be done contrary to God's Spirit, because it would be a defacement of the image of God.

How did we get here in evangelicalism, in this book, written and promoted by many prominent and influential evangelicals, adopting the very Marxist frameworks that are actively at work trying to tear down everything we hold sacred? In this chapter, at least, the destruction comes through a rejection of what is termed by McKirland as "gender essentialism." At the center of the author's argument is the notion that "the Scriptures do not make maleness and femaleness central to being human, nor can

York: Routledge, 2017), 199: "An overliteral, etymological translation might render every *zakar* as 'one who possesses a penis' and every *neqebah* as 'a pierced one,' but I doubt that in ancient Israel, when the average person used *zakar* and *neqebah*, they thought of the words' etymological meaning—instead, they meant 'a biological male' or 'a biological female.' There is no case I can see in the Bible where either term is used in reference to gender rather than sex."

[11] Colin J. Smothers, "Rejecting Gender Essentialism to Embrace Transgenderism? A Response to Christa McKirland, "Image of God and Divine Presence" *Eikon* 5.1 (2023): 46–53.

[12] Christa McKirland, "Image of God and Divine Presence" in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce, Cynthia Long Westfall, and Christa L. McKirland, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 282–309.

[13] McKirland, "Image of God and Divine Presence," 308.

particular understandings of masculinity and femininity be rigidly prescribed, since these are culturally conditioned."[14] But is this true?

At the very least, a plain reading of Genesis 1:26–27 must note the close connection between being made "male and female" and "in the image of God." And if Bavinck and Clines are correct, then our bodily constitution is not some kind of gnostic shell that merely houses the real image, but it is part of the very essence of our humanity as the image of God, soul and body together being the substrate of our humanness—not one over the other.

What is more, Jesus taught in Matthew 19:4–5 that our maleness and femaleness is meant to point beyond itself when he said,

> Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"?

In this passage, Jesus brings together the text of Genesis 1 and 2 to make this theological point: our maleness and femaleness bear witness to their complement in the other by design, a complementarity that finds meaning in the institution of marriage and family. John Paul II refers to this reality as the "spousal" meaning of the body in his book, *Man and Woman He Created Them*.[15] Whether or not "spousal" is the right word to describe the sexual meaning of the human body, he nevertheless rightly directs our attention to discerning a meaning and purpose behind God's bodily design for male and female sexual complementarity.

Back in Genesis, directly after the Bible establishes male-female equality in the *imago Dei* and complementarity in sexual differentiation in Genesis 1:27, we are given the primary reason why God designed for his images to come in two distinct genres as male and female. As Genesis 1:28 says,

> And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

This verse is known by a variety of names, one of which is the Creation Mandate. But what is its relationship to the *imago Dei*? Instead of understanding the image of God as some kind of intellectual rationality, as Aquinas does (leading him to speculate that angels likewise bear God's image), I suggest it makes more sense to see the image of God not as something that is written over, or on, or in, mankind, but something that mankind was written in—in other words, mankind, form and function, images God because he is the image of God.[16]

In this view, function follows form, or essence, and form presupposes function. God has both in mind in his design of mankind as male and female in his image. This is why in Genesis 1:26, God says, "*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion…*" The function, in this case dominion, is already considered in the form. In other words, it would be a mistake to drive a wedge between form and function, as if one and not the other is the meaning of being made in God's image.

[14] McKirland, "Image of God and Divine Presence," 286.

[15] John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. by Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 13:1; 14:5–6; 15:1, 3–4, etc. Waldstein calls the spousal meaning of the body the "single most central and important concept" in *Theology of the Body*, 682.

[16] For a defense of mankind not just *in* the image of God, but *as* the image, see D. J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man."

The same point can be made by considering both the nominal and verbal meaning of the word image: One thing can be described in nominal terms as being *the image* of something else, while it can also be described in verbal terms *to image* another thing.

This, I would suggest, is the connection between Genesis 1:28 and 1:27. God blesses the man and the woman, both made in his image, and commands them to image him in this way: "*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion.*" To paraphrase, "image me as my image." Our procreativity allows us to participate in God's creativity, and our Lordship in God's Lordship. Indeed, the filling and dominion-izing must come by means of procreation, for mankind is only two in the beginning. The world is to be filled with God's image, and this is done by imaging God's creativity: it is *why* he created them male and female in his image, after all.

Some have attempted to cordon off procreativity from the image of God, even by way of implication. To be sure, I am not suggesting that those who are not married, or those who are not procreative, somehow bear God's image less. But I would suggest the converse: God's image is further adorned, expanded, and propagated through procreation. I think this is what Bavinck is getting at in his *Reformed Ethics* when he suggests that God's original, creation covenant with mankind involved "becoming the image of God more and more through procreation, worship, and culture."[17]

2.2. Procreation and Sonship (Genesis 5:1–3)

The next place in Genesis the image is mentioned is in Genesis 5:1–3:

> This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created. When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth.

The *toledot* structure of Genesis indicates this is a new section,[18] and we have a summary statement in verses 1–2 of what we already saw in Genesis 1:27—man, male and female, created in God's likeness. But note that the word "image" is missing in verse 1. In fact, "image" doesn't appear until verse 3, when it is predicated of Seth, being a son of Adam "in his own likeness, after his image." Here the author is catechizing God's people in procreative image-propagation: Adam is in God's image, Seth is in Adam's image, who in turn bears the image of God by virtue of his sonship from Adam. In this way, our image-bearing points us to the fact that we are members of the human family, and being a part of a family shows us what it means to be in the image of God. I think this explains, in part, Luke's genealogy, wherein Seth is called the son of Adam, who is called "the son of God." To be in God's image is to be, as Paul affirms to the Athenians in Acts 17, God's "offspring." Procreative capacity—paternity and sonship—is, at the very least, one way we image God.

Those who would diminish or destroy man's procreative capacity, and the God-given institutions that are meant to promote such—marriage and family—are an affront to God's image and must be opposed, which would include those who would intentionally sever procreation from these institutions.

---

[17] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:43.

[18] The expression "these are the generations" (אֵלֶּה תוֹלְדֹת) occurs ten times (with minor variations) in Genesis (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1; 37:2).

2.3. The Life of Man (Genesis 9:6)

The final text that mentions the image of God in the book of Genesis is in Genesis 9. In Genesis 9, we find Noah and his family debarking the Ark after scores of days enduring a global flood. Eight persons: father and wife and his three sons and their spouses. How does God charge this new Adam and his family in the recreated world? He republishes the Creation mandate in Genesis 9:1:

> And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered."

Contrary to scholars like VanDrunen, the dominion mandate is not here absent, but rephrased, if perhaps diminished—"into your hand they (creation) are delivered."[19] Nevertheless, the procreative mandate is still very much in force, even if it is marred by the curse. Why? Because mankind still bears the image of God, even after the Fall, and God's image must be propagated. This is made clear in verses 5–6, when God grants the power of the sword to human society as a mediator of divine justice.

> And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.
>
> Whoever sheds the blood of man,
> by man shall his blood be shed,
> for God made man in his own image.

The logic of what theologians have called the "power of the sword" is grounded in a right understanding of the value of every human life—which is precisely dependent on man being made in God's image. Why and how does one become an image bearer? As an offspring of an image bearer, which is why image-bearing is so closely connected to procreation, and why something like abortion is such an affront to our Maker. It is no accident that, insofar as the world loses faith in the Divine, there follows an erosion of the dignity associated with the divine image. This is seen nowhere more clearly than the utter disregard for human life in the womb.

But tragically, it is not staying there. Just recently, another infant in Britain was mercilessly killed when a high court ordered her life-support to be removed *against the protestations of her parents*. Herein is the dissolution of all that is holy: marriage, family, and procreation. This is no mere battle of ideas. This is a battle of life and death. And a society that does not uphold and protect the dignity of every human being, regardless of size, age, gender, or capacity, is a society that is spurning the blessing, design, and purposes of God.

Right after giving human society the power of sword to protect the dignity of every human life, as if to highlight its centrality and importance for God's purposes for humanity, God again repeats the creation mandate in Genesis 9:7: "And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it."

At the heart of the Christian faith, after all, is the expectation and fulfillment of the birth of a son to a family, who would grow up to give his life for his bride and join many sons and daughters at the

[19] See David VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 56–78.

wedding supper of the lamb. Christianity is irreducibly familial, which itself is grounded in the *imago Dei.*

3. Conclusion

Patristics scholar Robert Louis Wilken argues in his book *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* that "the biblical doctrine of the image of God set Christian thinking on a different course"[20]—indeed, a course that would come to reshape the world. This teaching is summed up beautifully in the teaching of Gregory Nyssa in his *On the Making of Man*, where he said, "Remember how much more you are honoured by the creator than the rest of creation. He did not make the heavens in his image, nor the moon, sun, the beauty of the stars, nor anything else you can see in creation. You are made in the likeness of that nature which surpasses understanding…. Nothing in creation can compare to your greatness."[21]

This is what the Christian faith has to give the world: human dignity in the *imago Dei*. But as evangelical Christians, we must also teach that God's creation of mankind in his image as male and female is just as fundamental to human dignity and the divine image, promoting unashamedly the institutions of marriage and family. For against this is the world at war: maleness, femaleness, natural marriage, and the family. But what God has created and revealed is not only good, but very good. And it is good for us—for the recovery of the West, yes—but also for the regeneration and renewal of every human person, male or female, by personal faith in Christ, who is the perfect image of the invisible God (Col 1:15).

[20] Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 150.

[21] Gregory Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1987), 70–71.

Themelios 49.3 (2024): 564–78

Resurrection and Reign: The Inseparable Bond Between Resurrection Life and the Kingdom of God in All of Scripture

– M. Jeff Brannon –

Jeff Brannon is professor and chair of biblical studies at Belhaven University in Jackson, Mississippi.

****

Abstract: In biblical theology, the kingdom of God and the hope of resurrection are major themes. As the biblical story unfolds, from the creation account in Genesis 1–2, to the fall in Genesis 3, to God's election of the nation of Israel, and finally to the fulfillment of God's promises in Jesus Christ, these doctrines are closely linked in striking ways. Although much attention has been given to these twin themes, the inseparable link between them in all of Scripture has often been overlooked or neglected. Therefore the purpose of this article is to trace the kingdom of God and the hope of resurrection throughout Scripture to demonstrate how and why they are inseparably linked. At the conclusion of the article, I offer some thoughts on why this relationship matters and what difference it makes in the lives of Christians.[1]

****

Throughout the course of my career, two of my primary research, writing, and teaching interests have been the kingdom and God and the doctrine of the resurrection.[2] From my study of Scripture, what has become evident is the close relationship between the notion of reigning (or the kingdom of God) and the doctrine of the resurrection. The title "Resurrection and Reign"[3] provides an apt and accurate summary, with alliterative effect, of my purpose in this article: to trace the unfolding

[1] For much of the research and conceptual formation of this article, I draw upon and follow my work in M. Jeff Brannon, *The Hope of Life After Death: A Biblical Theology of Resurrection*, Essential Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022).

[2] See M. Jeff Brannon, "The Kingdom of God," *Biblical Perspectives* 17.30 (2015), https://tinyurl.com/3wx3f7h8, and Brannon, *Hope of Life After Death*. Another interest of mine is the book of Ephesians; see M. Jeff Brannon, *The Heavenlies in Ephesians: A Lexical, Exegetical, and Conceptual Analysis*, LNTS 447 (London: T&T Clark, 2011). Notably, my work in Ephesians only increased my interest in the topics of the kingdom of God and resurrection since the two themes are linked in the Christology (Eph 1:19–23) and soteriology (Eph 2:1–10) of Ephesians.

[3] Some readers will perhaps recognize the similar title to Richard B. Gaffin Jr.'s *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987). I am unaware of how much I was subconsciously dependent on that work for the title of this article.

of the kingdom of God and the doctrine of resurrection in Scripture in order to demonstrate that these biblical themes are inseparably linked throughout Scripture and the history of redemption. In line with this purpose, I will, throughout the article and particularly at the conclusion, offer some thoughts on why this relationship is important and what difference it makes in the lives of Christians.

Before commencing on our biblical journey, it will be helpful to provide a brief introduction to the topics. In its most basic sense, the kingdom of God should be understood as the reign of God. God's purpose throughout all of history is for his reign to come to the earth as it is in heaven. This all-important goal is summarized by Jesus's words in the Lord's prayer: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:9–10).[4] For Jesus, this petition was of utmost importance, such that he placed it at the beginning of his model prayer for his disciples. We are to pray that God's kingdom would come and that God's will would be done on earth as in heaven because this is God's purpose for all of history.

In addition to the kingdom of God, the doctrine of the resurrection is a central theme in the drama of redemption.[5] By the term "resurrection," I mean "God's act to raise his people from the dead to a bodily and glorified eternal life in the new creation."[6] As we will see, this doctrine is not peripheral to, but is rather a central aspect of God's plan of redemption. In this light, Jesus's salvific purpose can be summed up with his words in John 10:10: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

To be sure, scholars have at times pointed out connections between the doctrines of "resurrection" and "reign."[7] But as far as I know, beyond my own research efforts, no attempt has been made to trace and demonstrate their relationship throughout all of Scripture. And therein lies the primary contribution of this article: to articulate this inseparable bond between resurrection life and the kingdom of God *throughout the Bible*.[8] Moreover, in addition to *identifying* the link between these redemptive themes, attention will be given to demonstrating *why* this bond is so important, namely the theological basis for the close link between resurrection life and reigning over creation. This article traces these themes through three major movements in the biblical narrative: (1) Creation, Fall, and God's Promise (Gen 1–11; The Failure of Adam); (2) the Old Testament Story of Israel (The Failure of Israel as Corporate Adam); and (3) New Testament fulfillment in Jesus Christ (Salvation through Jesus as the Second Adam and True Israel). We now turn our attention to these matters.

---

[4] Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations are from the NIV 2011.

[5] See Brannon, *Hope of Life after Death*.

[6] Brannon, *Hope of Life after Death*, 2. I do not contend that "resurrection" language in the Bible always carries this definition; see Brannon, *Hope of Life after Death*, 2 n.1. This definition does, however, represent the final fulfillment of God's plan to bring new life to his people.

[7] For example, G. K. Beale notes the connection between resurrection and kingship in *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 247–248, 330, 344. Brandon D. Crowe notes the relationship between the kingdom and the resurrection in the book of Acts, *The Hope of Israel: The Resurrection of Christ in the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020).

[8] As mentioned above, I draw upon my research and work in *Hope of Life After Death*, and while I draw attention to the relationship between resurrection life and the kingdom of God (among other redemptive themes), I also emphasize that not enough attention has been given to this relationship. This article represents the goal of giving more attention to that relationship. And in contrast to my work in the book, the sole focus of this article is to articulate how and why the redemptive themes of resurrection life and reigning with God are inseparably linked.

1. Creation, Fall, and God's Promise (Gen 1–11)

The opening chapters of Scripture (especially Gen 1–3) provide the foundation for biblical theology. The creation narrative (Gen 1–2), the account of the fall (Gen 3), and the first preaching of the gospel (Gen 3:15) set the stage for the entire biblical story and God's plan of redemption. In order to understand the inseparable relationship between "resurrection" and "reigning" with God, we must begin with these all-important chapters.

1.1. Creation

The themes of "resurrection" and "reign" trace their roots back to creation and the foundational chapters of Genesis 1–2. One crucial aspect of the creation account, perhaps so obvious as to be often overlooked, is this: God created humanity for life. In the creation account, this experience of life relates to two things: the tree of life and obedience to God. In the middle of the garden is the tree of life (2:9), which holds out the opportunity for eternal life.[9] Also in the middle of the garden is the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In God's directives to Adam, he says, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die" (2:16b–17). In summarizing the implications of these two trees and the Lord's command, life is promised for obedience and death for disobedience.[10]

Also embedded in the creation account is humanity's purpose: to reign over creation as God's vice-regents.[11] On day six of creation, God says, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (1:26). On the one hand, as God's image, humanity is to *reflect* God's glory back to him. Paul's famous words in 1 Corinthians 10:31 summarize this all-important aspect of creation in the image of God: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

But in addition to *reflecting* God's glory, humanity is to *refract* God's glory—that is, to bring God's reign and glory to bear on the earth. Although many proposals have been set forth for what it means to be in the image of God, from the context of Genesis 1:26–31, to be in God's image means that humanity is to reign (recall here God's words, "Let us make mankind in our image … that they may rule…"). God is the great king, and he calls humanity to reign over creation as his vice-regents.[12]

More clarity for humanity's purpose comes in Genesis 1:28 when God says, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it." This command, often referred to as the Cultural Mandate or, as I prefer, "the original commission," is the biblical foundation for the kingdom of God. Connecting 1:26 with 1:28, God's purpose is for humanity to be fruitful and increase in number, thereby multiplying his image. Thus, the more images there are, the more glory it brings to God. Additionally, God wants his image throughout the entirety of creation. God's image marks his reign, and as his image extends to the

[9] This is the implication of Genesis 3:22–24 where the Lord banishes Adam and Eve from the garden and the tree of life specifically so that Adam cannot eat from the tree and "live forever" (3:22).

[10] This arrangement is sometimes referred to as the covenant of works; see, for example, the Westminster Confession of Faith 7.2.

[11] See again Brannon, *Hope of Life after Death*, 15–17.

[12] See Genesis 1:26–31 and Psalm 8.

ends of the earth, so also does his reign. By "filling the earth and subduing" the earth, humanity, as God's image, *refracts* God's glory and brings God's kingship to bear on the earth.

In summary, God creates humanity for a wonderful purpose and glorious privilege. God calls humanity, as his vice-regents, to reign over creation and to bring his kingship to bear on the earth. Moreover, God affords humanity the opportunity to experience eternal life (physical and embodied life) in his presence. As we will see, these two realities, which are established at creation, are linked throughout the Bible.

1.2. The Fall

Although God grants Adam and Eve (and their descendants) the opportunity for eternal life and the privilege of reigning over creation, they sadly turn away from God and his word. The serpent tempts Adam and Eve, and they eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. With this transgression, the serpent, a part of creation, rules over Adam and Eve rather than humanity ruling over the serpent and creation. Consequently, Adam and Eve fail at their call to obey God's word, fail at their task to reign over creation, and ultimately give their allegiance to the serpent.[13] Adam and Eve have turned away from the Lord as their king, and turned to the word of the serpent.

In addition to giving allegiance to the serpent, the other thing that makes the fall so heinous is that Adam and Eve choose death over life. With two options before them, the tree of life that brings life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that brings death, Adam and Eve choose that which brings them death (Gen 2:15–17; Rom 6:23). After eating the fruit, Adam and Eve immediately experience spiritual death. Rather than enjoying intimate fellowship with God, they experience shame and run and hide from God (Gen 3:7–11). Whereas Adam and Eve previously enjoyed a good relationship with God, they are now estranged from him. Moreover, God banishes Adam and Eve from the garden, and they are exiled from his presence and the tree of life (3:22–24). And although physical death is not immediate, even life itself is a slow march to death. John Donne's famous words communicate this horrible reality: "And therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for *thee*."[14]

After the fall, the trajectory of humanity is not a good one. While Adam was supposed to be "life-giving," the fall introduces death, and what follows in Genesis 3–11 can only be described as a reign of death. In 3:15, God declares that humanity will be divided into two camps—the offspring of the woman (allied with God) and the offspring of the serpent—and that there will be enmity between these two groups. This enmity comes into clear focus when Cain, who is allied with the serpent, murders his brother Abel, who is allied with God. For the first time, humanity experiences the effects of the fall in physical death. Moreover, this account introduces a dichotomy that unfolds with the biblical story: the serpent is associated with death, while God is at work to bring life to his people.

The trajectory of death continues with the tracing of Cain's lineage in 4:15–24. Cain and his descendants build cities and cultures and bring advancements in technology and the arts. But the implication is that these activities are pursued for self-glorification rather than for the glory of God. John Frame notes, "The Cultural Mandate does not anticipate the fall. But what happens after the fall? People still try to subdue the earth. In Genesis 4, we find the development of civilization among the

[13] For the notion that humanity (or at least a part of humanity) is in allegiance to the serpent, see Genesis 3:15, John 8:44, and Ephesians 2:2.

[14] John Donne, "Meditation (17)," in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 87. Emphasis original.

descendants of wicked Cain. But they are not filling and subduing the earth to God's glory. So the result is wars, pollution, sickness, and so on."[15] In line with his spiritual and physical ancestor, Lamech, descended from Cain, even boasts of his murderous acts.

By the time of Noah, the outlook on the human race is bleak indeed, and God's evaluation of the situation can be summarized: "The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time" (6:5). The consequences of sin are more evident than ever as the Lord decides to wipe out humanity except for Noah and his family. Even after the flood, the picture of humanity at the Tower of Babel is grim. Rather than seeking to glorify God and bring his kingship to bear on the earth, people aspire to make a name for themselves and contend with God (11:1–9). Humanity's purpose is to glorify itself and promote its own kingship, and the result is disastrous. It is nothing less than a reign of death.

1.3. Hope and God's Promise

In the midst of the sin, despair, and trajectory of death after the fall, there are glimmers of hope. Although humanity will be divided between the offspring of the serpent and the offspring of the woman, God promises that the offspring of the woman will one day crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15). Scholars have often noted that this first preaching of the gospel is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one who crushes the head of the serpent, defeats Satan, and brings victory for his people. In addition, this first preaching of the gospel is an implicit promise that the curses of the fall will be overturned and that God's creation purposes for humanity will be fulfilled through redemption. Understood in this way, the first preaching of the gospel implicitly promises and guarantees that God's people will one day *reign* over creation as God intended, and that death, as the consequence of sin, will be conquered through eternal *resurrection* life.[16]

In addition to this first preaching of the gospel, there are further glimmers of hope with God's provision for Adam and Eve's shame through clothing them (3:21), Adam's trust in God's promise by naming his wife "Eve" (3:20), Enoch being spared from death (5:21–24), and God's rescue of Noah and his family from death.[17] These glimmers of hope provide the first biblical evidence that God will indeed fulfill his creation purposes for his people—that they will one day reign again and death will be overcome through resurrection. As this biblical story unfolds, the inseparable relationship between these two themes continues and intensifies.

2. The Old Testament Story of Israel

God's plan of redemption comes into clearer focus with his election of Abraham and the nation of Israel. In this section, my purpose is to demonstrate how the themes of *resurrection* and *reign* unfold

[15] John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 1035.

[16] G. K. Beale writes, "The first possible hint of resurrection life may be discernible in Gen 1–3.... The promise of Gen 3:15 of the seed of the woman who would decisively defeat the serpent likely entails also an implicit reversal of his work that introduced death" (*New Testament Biblical Theology*, 228).

[17] For further discussion of these glimmers of hope, see Brannon, *Hope of Life after Death*, 28–33, 38–39.

with the nation of Israel.[18] To be clear, at this stage of redemptive history, I do not claim that the doctrine of resurrection is always explicit. The doctrine comes into focus at different times and in different ways,[19] but my primary purpose is to demonstrate how the story of Israel prefigures the hope of resurrection life.

The beginning of the book of Exodus highlights that Abraham's descendants have indeed become exceedingly numerous (1:7). But on account of their numbers, Israel is now perceived as a threat to Pharaoh and Egypt. After Pharaoh's brutal treatment and enslavement of the Israelites fails to stop Israelite growth, he orders that newborn Hebrew boys be killed. Pharaoh attempts to wipe out Israel as a nation, and this is nothing less than attempted genocide. In the history of redemption, this is no doubt another picture of the enmity between the offspring of the serpent (Pharaoh and the Egyptians) and the offspring of the woman (the nation of Israel). But rather than God's people reigning over creation, the serpent reigns over God's people.

In light of Israel's situation in Egypt at the beginning of Exodus, two things come into focus: Israel is not reigning as God intended, and Egypt is a place of death. Consequently, God raises up Moses to rescue his people. Moreover, with God's plan to save his people, the story of Israel highlights the themes of "resurrection" and "reign." God will rescue Israel from enslavement and death, establish them as his kingdom, and lead them to the land of promise, a place of life.

With the exodus event, the Lord reveals his power and supremacy by demonstrating that he is greater than the Egyptian gods. This is evident when Aaron's staff swallows up the staffs of the Egyptian magicians (7:8–13), but also with the plagues God sends on Egypt. In addition to the Lord distinguishing between Israel and Egypt with all or some of the plagues, many scholars have argued that the plagues are specifically designed to demonstrate that Yahweh is greater than the gods of Egypt.[20] Following the final plague, Israel plunders the Egyptians, and Pharaoh and the armies of Egypt are lured into their destruction in the Red Sea.

After God's miraculous deliverance, Moses's song of worship and celebration is significant. Moses proclaims, "Who among the gods is like you, Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" (15:11) and "The Lord reigns for ever and ever" (15:18). Moses celebrates that Yahweh is the great God of heaven, that he is greater than all other gods and powers, and that "Yahweh reigns." Although it has been implicit since the creation account, this is, notably, the first explicit reference to Yahweh's kingship.

In the ancient Near Eastern worldview, the reign of a particular god in heaven has massive implications for that god's people. If Yahweh reigns in heaven, then his people will reign on the earth. Israel's kingdom status is confirmed in Exodus 19:6 when God covenants that Israel will be for him "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Israel will be the Lord's kingdom people. The Lord was to be the ultimate king over his people, but in accordance with his plan, it was also his will for Israel

[18] Space prohibits a detailed investigation of this lengthy period of Israelite history. My goal is to paint in broad strokes and touch on some important aspects of how resurrection and reign are linked. For a more thorough discussion, see Brannon, *Hope of Life after Death*, 34–87.

[19] See, for example, Exodus 3:6, Moses's song (Deut 32:39), Hannah's prayer (1 Sam 2:6), Elijah and Elisha's miracles of raising people from the dead. The doctrine of resurrection comes into clearer focus in the Psalms and the Old Testament prophetic books.

[20] See John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 83–120.

one day to have a human king.[21] And in 2 Samuel 7:5–16, God enters into a covenant with David and his descendants. David's house will be established as the permanent dynasty to represent the Lord's kingship on the earth. This is of utmost significance because from this point on, the hopes for God's people are always tied to the family and kingship of the Davidic dynasty.

The story of Israel is not only a movement from slavery to a nation, and then to a kingdom; it is also a movement from death to life. As previously mentioned, with the attempted genocide of the Israelites, the land of Egypt represents nothing less than a place of death. In his book, *Exodus Old and New*, L. Michael Morales provides a thorough discussion of the biblical motif of Egypt as a place of death, and emphasizes that Egyptians were the religious and scientific experts on death at that time, that the biblical language of "descending" into Egypt is reminiscent of entering the underworld or Sheol, and that "ascending" out of Egypt is a rescue from death.[22] Moreover, God's deliverance of Israel with the parting of the sea is consistent with the biblical motif of God rescuing his people from the waters of death.[23] Accordingly, "the exodus was the redemption of God's firstborn son from death, a resurrection of Israel from Sheol."[24] The exodus event is nothing less than God's defeat of death and the serpent as the force behind death.

In addition to the story of Israel being a rescue from Egypt, the place of death, it is also a movement to the land of promise, a place of life. Moses's description of this land of promise bears some striking resemblances to the language of creation and the Garden of Eden. In Exodus 15:17, Moses sings, "You will bring them in and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance—the place, Lord, you made for your dwelling, the sanctuary, Lord, your hands established." This language is reminiscent of the Garden of Eden as the Lord's sanctuary before the fall. Additionally, Moses's description of the land as good and as a place of abundance echoes the description of the garden in Genesis 1–2 (Deut 4:22; 8:6–10; 11:8–15).[25]

Before their entrance into the land of promise, Moses proclaims,

> See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. (Deut 30:15–18)

This language is reminiscent of the creation account in Genesis 1–2 and echoes the same choice of life and death that Adam and Eve had before the fall. The land of promise is to be a place of *life*, and Moses exhorts Israel to obey God and experience life in the land.

---

[21] For example, Genesis 17:6, 16; 40:10; Num 24:7, 17–19; Deut 17:14–20; Judg 21:25.

[22] For his discussion, see L. Michael Morales, *Exodus Old and New: A Biblical Theology of Redemption*, Essential Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 50–54.

[23] See, again, Morales, *Exodus Old and New*, 51–54.

[24] Morales, *Exodus Old and New*, 76.

[25] See Oren R. Martin, *Bound for the Promised Land: The Land Promise in God's Redemptive Plan*, NSBT 34 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 77–86.

What we find then is the story of Israel as a movement from *enslavement* to *kingship*, and a movement from *death* to *life*. Once again, God's people will be in his place, enjoying life in the land, and God's people will be his kingdom people. As a corporate Adam, Israel is God's son (Exod 4:22), and is faced with a choice. Walk in obedience to God and enjoy life in the land, or turn from the Lord and be exiled from the land and suffer God's punishment.

Unfortunately, those familiar with the Bible know that the story is not always a good one. On account of Solomon's sin, the kingdom is divided into the North and the South. As the Northern and Southern kingdoms persist in their rebellion against the Lord, they are eventually defeated and taken into captivity, the Northern kingdom in 722 BC by Assyria and the Southern kingdom in 587–586 BC by Babylon. With the Babylonian exile, God's people are once again removed from the land, the place of life, and do not rule over creation as God purposed. With the exile, there is no king from the line of David on the throne, and God's people are again enslaved. To be banished from the land and the Temple as the place of God's presence is to suffer the curse of death. Jeremiah's words, "Death has climbed in through our windows and has entered our fortresses" (Jer 9:21), are a fitting description of the horrors of the exile.

Yet even in the midst of these darkest days for the kingdom of God, the Old Testament prophets write about a glorious future restoration. The Old Testament prophetic books contain a number of future restoration hopes, but in line with the purpose of this article, I highlight some important passages from Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel that reveal how these future restoration hopes are inseparably linked with resurrection and reign.

On the one hand, the prophet Isaiah writes of the future Messianic king from the line of David who will establish God's eschatological kingdom of justice, righteousness, and peace. Isaiah 9:6–7 captures these hopes and expectations:

> For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Yet also linked with Isaiah's vision of the eschatological kingdom is the hope of resurrection. In Isaiah 25:6–9, Isaiah writes,

> On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth. The Lord has spoken. In that day they will say, "Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."

Although resurrection is not explicit, God promises that he will swallow up death forever, that the Lord will wipe the tears from the faces of his people, and that he will remove the disgrace of his people. Surely there is no greater disgrace and cause for tears than the curse of death. God promises to save his people, and this passage clarifies that this is nothing less than *salvation from death*. In Isaiah 26:19, the

resurrection promises are even more explicit when Isaiah proclaims, "But your dead will live, Lord; their bodies will rise—let those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy—your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead." Just as God forms man from the dust in creation, God's people who return to dust on account of sin and death will one day rise from the dead.

In the song of the suffering servant (52:13–53:12), Isaiah prophesies about the servant of the Lord who will be punished for the sins of his people and who will be a sacrifice for sin. But significantly, and often overlooked, is that this suffering servant will be raised to life. This servant ultimately "will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted" (52:13),[26] and after his suffering "will see the light of life and be satisfied" (52:11).[27] Although there is ambiguity with the various references to the "servant" in Isaiah, the New Testament communicates that this passage is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Putting the pieces together, not only will the Messiah be king, he will also be raised from the dead.

The prophet Ezekiel weds Israel's restoration hopes with spiritual renewal and the eschatological kingdom of God through a graphic picture of resurrection. In depicting Israel's restoration, God leads Ezekiel to a valley of dead and dry bones that come to life after Ezekiel prophesies and the Spirit gives new life to the bones (Ezek 37:1–14). The context of this passage makes it clear that this passage is about the restoration of Israel after the exile (see 37:11–14). But accompanying this restoration will be spiritual renewal (37:14) that undoubtedly culminates in resurrection life. As the next passage reveals, these restoration hopes are linked with the eschatological kingdom of God and with the promise that God's people will experience *life* in the land (37:15–28). Although there is debate whether these passages describe bodily resurrection, the fact that the prophet Ezekiel utilizes resurrection language to describe eschatological kingdom hopes should not be easily dismissed. In light of the entire biblical witness, renewed spiritual life and the restoration of God's people will culminate in nothing less than resurrection.

Finally, in Daniel 12:1–3, we find the clearest and most explicit prophecy of resurrection in the Old Testament:

> At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

With the curse of death after the fall, humanity returns from whence it came: the dust (Gen 3:19). But Daniel, perhaps drawing from Isaiah 26:19, proclaims a resurrection from the dead. God's people "will awake … to everlasting life" while his enemies "will awake … to … everlasting contempt" (Dan 12:2). The description of the resurrection of the righteous implies a *glorified* bodily resurrection as

[26] The words "raised," "lifted up," and "highly exalted" are reminiscent of Jesus's resurrection, ascension, and heavenly enthronement; see also J. Alex Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1993), 424.

[27] The phrase, "the light of life," appears in the Dead Sea Scrolls but not in the Masoretic text. Regardless of whether these words are original, J. Alex Motyer contends that resurrection is in view since the servant is clearly alive again after his suffering. *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 20 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 381–83.

they "will shine like the brightness of the heavens" and "like the stars for ever and ever" (12:3). In light of the whole of the book of Daniel, Daniel's resurrection prophecy should not be divorced from other eschatological hopes and prophecies, including Daniel's prophecy of the heavenly son of man who establishes the eschatological kingdom of God that crushes the other kingdoms of the world (7:9–14).

What this survey of the Old Testament reveals is that kingdom hopes and resurrection hopes are always inseparably linked, both in the creation account and in God's plan of redemption. God creates humanity to reign over creation, but on account of sin, death enters the picture and creation instead reigns over humanity. Although Adam and Israel (as a corporate Adam) fail at their call to reign as God's vice-regents and experience life in the land, God nevertheless promises a wonderful restoration for his people in a future new covenant. Linked with the arrival of the new covenant will be the eschatological kingdom of God and the resurrection of God's people. In light of these promises, we now turn to the New Testament.

3. New Testament Fulfillment in Jesus Christ

With the coming of Jesus Christ, a new age has begun. The New Testament portrays Jesus as "the second Adam" (Rom 5:12–21; 1 Cor 15:21–22) and "true Israel" (John 15:1–7). Considering this, Jesus's arrival marks not only the beginning of the new covenant but also the dawning of a new creation.[28] Jesus comes as the Messianic king from the line of David, the king who will *reign* over all creation and bring *resurrection* life. In this section, we will trace the themes of "resurrection" and "reign" through the three stages of how the new covenant and eschatological kingdom unfold in redemptive history: (1) the first coming of Jesus (including his life, death, and resurrection); (2) the age of the church (the time between the first and second coming); (3) the second coming of Jesus that culminates in the new creation.

3.1. The First Coming of Jesus

In both his life and sacrificial death, there is much that could be said about the twin themes of resurrection and reign. Jesus announces that his coming means the arrival of the eschatological kingdom of God (Mark 1:14–15; 8:27–30; Luke 4:14–21; 24:44–49; John 4:25–26), and the earliest followers of Jesus proclaim the same (Acts 2:36; Rom 1:1–4). In addition, Jesus proclaims that he is the source of life (John 14:6), the one who possesses eternal life (5:24–25), and "the resurrection and the life" (11:25). Moreover, Jesus's death on the cross is explicitly linked with his Messiahship (1 Cor 1:23) and is the final sacrifice that brings life to God's people.

To be sure, even in his earthly life and his death on the cross, Jesus is both Messiah and Lord. He reigns, but he reigns in weakness.[29] In 2 Corinthians 13:4, Paul emphasizes that Jesus "was crucified in weakness." In his sacrificial death on the cross, Jesus reigns, but he willingly sacrifices his life for the sins of his people. But as the New Testament reveals, something of monumental significance happens with Jesus's resurrection. To return to the same verse, although Jesus "was crucified in weakness," in his resurrection he "lives by God's power" (13:4). As a result, the focus in this section will be the relationship between Jesus's resurrection and his kingship.

[28] See, for example, John 1:1–18 and 2 Corinthians 5:17.

[29] On the notion that Jesus reigns in "weakness" in his suffering and death, see Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 45.

In light of our purposes, it is highly significant that the New Testament links Jesus's resurrection from the dead with his kingship. In Acts 2:22–36, Peter proclaims that God has raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him at his right hand, where he reigns as Lord and Messiah. Similarly, in 13:16–37, Paul proclaims that God has raised Jesus from the dead and implies that this resurrection is tied to his enthronement as Messianic king.[30] In both cases, the clear implication is that Jesus's resurrection from the dead serves as his installation as king and the beginning of his enthronement.[31]

The apostle Paul makes explicit this connection between Christ's resurrection and enthronement. At the beginning of Romans, Paul writes that Jesus "was appointed the Son of God *in power* by his resurrection from the dead" (1:4). Notably, the term, "Son," is a kingship term which find its background both in ancient Near Eastern culture[32] and in important Old Testament texts such as 2 Samuel 7:14 and Psalm 2:7. Whereas Jesus reigned "in weakness" in his crucifixion, on account of his resurrection from the dead, he now reigns as the Son of God *in power*. Moreover, in Ephesians 1:20 Paul writes that God "raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms." Here the relationship between Christ's resurrection and enthronement are so closely linked that one almost implies and guarantees the other.[33] As G. K. Beale notes, "Christ's resurrection is so linked to his kingship that the two are two sides of one coin."[34]

If we reflect on where we started, this connection between Jesus's resurrection and kingship is of utmost significance. God creates humanity to reign as his vice-regents over creation (see again Gen 1:26–30; Ps 8). It is precisely this God-ordained creational role that the author of Hebrews ponders when he emphasizes that the world to come is not to be subjected to angels, but rather to humanity (Heb 2:5–8). The author of Hebrews writes, "you crowned them with glory and honor and put everything under their feet" (2:7b–8a, citing again Ps 8), and there is "nothing that is not subject to [humanity]" (Heb 2:8). But as the author of Hebrews notes, the problem is that "at present we do not see everything subject to [humanity]" (2:8). On account of sin and death, humanity's quest to rule over creation is frustrated, stifled, and ultimately falls short, especially in light of the fact that the end result of (almost) every life is death. In this way, creation actually rules over humanity.

But Jesus's exaltation comes into the picture precisely at this point. Although "at present we do not see everything subject to [humanity]" (2:8), "we do see Jesus … now crowned with glory and honor" (2:9). Although resurrection is not explicit in Hebrews 2:5–18, the clear implication is that Jesus is "now crowned with glory and honor" (the description given to humanity before the fall—see Ps 8:5 and Heb 2:7) because he has conquered death and reigns. C. S. Lewis writes,

> The New Testament writers speak as if Christ's achievement in rising from the dead was the first event of its kind in the whole history of the universe. He is the "first fruits," the "pioneer of life." He has forced open a door that has been locked ever since the death of

[30] This is implicit when Paul cites Ps 2:7, Isa 55:3, and Ps 16:10.

[31] In their respective sermons, Peter draws from Ps 16 and Ps 110, and Paul draws from Ps 2 and Ps 16. Both Peter and Paul cite Ps 16 for Jesus's resurrection from the dead, while Peter quotes Ps 110 for Jesus's enthronement and Paul quotes Ps 2:7 for Jesus' installation as king.

[32] For a brief discussion of the term "son" as a kingship term, see Karen H. Jobes, *Letters to the Church: A Survey of Hebrews and the General Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 90–93.

[33] I do not contend that "resurrection" and "enthronement" are synonymous. They are distinct events, but they are so closely related and linked that one implies the other.

[34] Beale, *New Testament Biblical Theology*, 247.

> the first man. He has met, fought, and beaten the King of Death. Everything is different because He has done so. This is the beginning of the New Creation: a new chapter in cosmic history has opened.[35]

As Lewis notes, everything is different because of Jesus's resurrection. In Revelation 1:18, Jesus proclaims, "I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades." On account of his resurrection, Jesus has conquered sin and death and therefore reigns over creation. Indeed, Jesus is the only person at present who reigns over creation in glory and power. What is more, only the one who has conquered death holds the keys of death and Hades. And as we will see, Jesus's "resurrection" and "reign" have massive implications for his people, and that is the next topic to consider.

3.2. The Church

One of the unexpected developments of New Testament eschatology is that the kingdom of God will not be established with one coming of the Messiah, but rather with two, and with a lengthy time period between those two advents. This time between the first and second coming of Jesus is the age of the church. The church age is a time of inaugurated eschatology. Salvation has been accomplished through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, but will not be consummated until Jesus's second coming. In line with the New Testament vision of inaugurated eschatology, believers' experience of "resurrection" and "reign" has been inaugurated through new birth and spiritual resurrection, but their final resurrection and reign are still to come. The relationship between these themes during the time of the church is the focus of this section.

One passage that illumines this relationship between "resurrection" and "reign" is John 3:1–15. In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus teaches, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the *kingdom of God* unless they are *born again*" (3:3).[36] Since Nicodemus is stupefied by Jesus's teaching, Jesus clarifies, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit" (3:5). In both cases, Jesus teaches that the key to entry into the kingdom of God is new birth. This new birth is nothing less than being "born again"[37] and being born of the Holy Spirit. This connection between new birth and birth by the Spirit is important. In creation, God breathes life into Adam (Gen 2:7). In Ezekiel 37:1–14, the Spirit of the Lord gives new life to the dead bones. The Spirit raises Jesus from the dead (Rom 8:11). And here in John 3:1–15, to be born of the Spirit is to be a part of the kingdom of God. New spiritual life means that believers reign with Christ because they are a part of the kingdom.

In Ephesians 2:1–10, Paul also notes the connection between resurrection and reign. Here we should recall that in 1:20, Paul emphasizes that God has raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, highlighting the connection between Jesus's resurrection and enthronement. But according to Paul, the same power that raised Christ from the dead is also at work in believers (see 1:19–20). Therefore, what God has done for Christ by the Spirit, he also does for those who are united to Christ by faith.

But while Ephesians 1:19–20 highlights Jesus's bodily resurrection from the dead and enthronement at God's right hand, the movement in 2:1–10 underscores believers' spiritual (i.e., of the Holy Spirit)

---

[35] C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, reprint ed. (New York: Harper, 2001), 236–37.

[36] Emphasis mine.

[37] Or born "from above," depending on the translation of ἄνωθεν.

resurrection and reign with Christ. While unbelievers were previously dead in their sins (2:1), they have now been "made alive with Christ" (2:5). What is more, God has raised them up and seated them in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (2:6). These verses shine the light again on this all-important relationship between resurrection and reign. Those who are united to Christ have been made alive and are therefore "spiritually" raised from the dead and consequently "already" reign with Christ in some important ways.[38]

The New Testament, however, also clarifies that salvation has not yet been consummated. While Paul stresses that believers have "already" been made alive and raised up with Christ (2:4–6), he writes that the bodily resurrection of believers is in the future (1 Cor 15:35–58). And in this same book where Paul emphasizes the *future* bodily resurrection, he chastises the Corinthians for their view that they perhaps already reign with Christ (4:8). Similarly, although Jesus teaches that eternal life is a *present* reality for the believer (John 5:24), he also speaks of a *future* resurrection of the dead (5:25). This future resurrection and reign represent the final stage in redemptive history.

3.3. The Second Coming of Jesus and New Creation

With the second coming of Christ and the onset of the new creation, we arrive at the final stage in redemptive history.[39] At Jesus's second coming, the heavenly voices loudly proclaim, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever" (Rev 11:15). The entire world will be Christ's, and he will reign forever.

Essential to this comprehensive and consummated reign of Christ will be the defeat of death through resurrection. This connection is explicit in 1 Corinthians 15:20–26:

> But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

As previously discussed, on account of his resurrection, Jesus now reigns in glory and power. But Paul emphasizes that Jesus's resurrection is merely the "firstfruits" of a much greater harvest. When Christ returns, those who belong to him will also be raised from the dead. But significantly, with Christ's second coming and the resurrection of believers, the consummation of the kingdom will also arrive. Since "the last enemy to be destroyed is death" (15:26), the fullness of the kingdom does not arrive until the final glorified resurrection of believers.

Paul's description of the future resurrection of believers is significant. Whereas their present bodies are perishable, sown in dishonor, weak, and natural, their future resurrection bodies of believers will be imperishable, raised in glory, raised in power, and spiritual (meaning, of the Holy Spirit; 1 Cor 15:42–44). Only these glorified resurrection bodies are fit to inherit the new creation wherein God dwells with his people. The new creation will no longer be subject to sin, and the resurrection bodies of believers

[38] More discussion of this will come in the concluding application section.

[39] On account of space, I skip over the intermediate state, the period of time between the death of the believer and the second coming of Jesus. For a discussion of these themes in the intermediate state, see Brannon, *Hope of Life after Death*, 147–51.

will no longer be subject to sin and death but will be fit to enjoy the fullness of God's presence. No longer will the creation rule over humanity so as to bring death. Rather, for the first time, humanity will reign over creation as God intended, in the fullness of eternal life.

The final two chapters of the Bible (Rev 21–22) provide a glimpse of the glorious future inheritance for God's people. Jesus will return, and heaven will come to earth. The voice proceeding from the throne will say, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (21:3). Only in this new creation will there be no more death, mourning, crying, or pain, because the old order of things has passed away (21:4). In the middle of this heavenly city that has come down to earth is the tree of life (22:2). Death will be defeated, and abundant eternal life will be the new and abiding reality. Only then, as John tells us, will God's people "reign for ever and ever" (22:5).

4. Conclusion and Application

So, what do we make of this connection between resurrection and reign? In closing, I offer two application thoughts for how this should shape and impact the Christian life. First, the present spiritual resurrection of believers means they "already" reign with Christ in some important ways. Second, the future inheritance of believers provides strength and motivation to persevere in faith in the present.

4.1. The Present "Resurrection" and "Reign" of Christians

If the realities of "resurrection" and "reign" always go hand in hand, then it follows that the present spiritual resurrection of believers means that they *already* reign with Christ in some important ways. On the one hand, since Jesus reigns over sin and death, believers have been set free from the penalty of sin. On account of their union with Christ, there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1). This also means death is not the final word for Christians. Eternal life has already begun because they have crossed over from death to life (John 5:24). Although death still looms, they reign because death is not the final word and because God has promised future eternal resurrection life.

On the other hand, the spiritual resurrection of believers is the foundation for new life in Christ. As a result of his resurrection from the dead, Jesus has become "a life-giving spirit" (1 Cor 15:45) and consequently sends the Spirit to bring new life to his people. Whereas the first Adam should have been "life-giving," he instead brought death to humanity (Rom 5:12). But the one who has conquered sin and death is the one who gives new life to his people. In this light, Richard Gaffin contends, "The Christian life in its entirety is to be subsumed under the category of resurrection. Pointedly, the Christian life is resurrection life."[40] Whereas they were formerly dead in transgressions and sins (Eph 2:1), Christians have now been made alive in Christ (2:4–6); they have died with Christ and subsequently been raised to new life (Rom 6:1–14). Because of this new life in Christ, they have been set free from their slavery to sin so that they might become slaves to righteousness (6:17–18). And significantly, to be set free from slavery to sin is to "reign" with Christ. Jesus has conquered sin, and those united to him by faith reign based the fact that they are servants of Christ and righteousness rather than sin and death.

This new life that believers have is the basis for the living out of the Christian life. As a result of being newly created (2 Cor 5:17; Eph 2:10), believers have a new orientation in life and are called and

[40] Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 77.

enabled to walk in good works (2:10). In light of this new life in Christ, Paul can write, "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (4:22–24). In its most basic sense, Paul exhorts Christians to be who they are in Christ or to become who they are in Christ.[41] Since they have been newly created, Christians are to live in light of this new reality.

Here we should also note the close relationship between the new resurrection life of believers and life by the Spirit.[42] Just as the Spirit gave life in creation (Gen 2:7), so also the Holy Spirit provides new life for believers. This new life in the Spirit is the basis and the impetus for living out the biblical commands to "walk by the Spirit" (Gal 5:16), to "live by the Spirit (5:25), to "keep in step with the Spirit" (5:25), and to "be filled with the Spirit" (Eph 5:18). To walk or live by the Spirit is to walk in the power and reality of new spiritual life in Christ.

4.2. The Glorious Future Inheritance of Christians in the New Creation

A second application point stems from the wonderful future inheritance that believers have in Christ. In 1 Peter 1:3–4, Peter writes that God has given believers "new birth" through Jesus's resurrection and an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade." The future hope that believers have in Christ is nothing less than abundant eternal life in which they reign with Christ forever. Believers rejoice in this salvation even though, as Peter notes, they undergo suffering, trials, and grief "for a little while" (1:6). Peter's contrast between the present challenges and the glorious future inheritance highlights again that the time between the first and second coming of Christ is one of inaugurated eschatology. It is a time of both "suffering" and "kingdom" (Rev 1:9). It is a time when believers continue to suffer, yet also reign with him. As a result, it is also a time of "patient endurance" (1:9).

For the Christian, the future shapes the present. The wonderful future inheritance provides the motivation and strength to endure the time of suffering that lasts for a little while. On the one hand, the one who perseveres in faith "will eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (2:7; note the theme of *resurrection*), while on the other hand, the one who perseveres "will … sit with [Christ] on [his] throne" (3:21; note the theme of *reign*). The apostle Paul puts it this way: "If we died with him, we will also *live* with him; if we endure, we will also *reign* with him" (2 Tim 2:11–12).[43] The glorious hope of resurrection life and reigning with Christ is wondrous indeed. In light of this, Christians are equipped to persevere through this short time of testing and suffering.

[41] See also Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight*, 80.

[42] For further discussion, see Brannon, *Hope of Life After Death*, 141–44; Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 214–23; Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 835–70; Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight*, 85.

[43] Emphasis mine.

Themelios 49.3 (2024): 579–88

Misunderstanding the Gaps: A Critique of Bryan Bibb's Interpretation of the Nadab and Abihu Episode

– Joshua Pittman –

Joshua Pittman is a PhD candidate at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

****

Abstract: This article critiques Bryan Bibb's charitable interpretation of Nadab and Abihu's cultic offering in Leviticus 10. Bibb proposes that Nadab and Abihu committed no sin, exposing the "gaps in the ritual legislation" of YHWH's sacrificial system. Conversely, I argue that Nadab and Abihu committed an act of disobedience because (1) Moses describes the brothers' offering as profane; (2) the brothers most likely presumed the role of the High Priest by transgressing the bi-daily incense offering outlined in Exodus 30:7–9 that was not their responsibility; (3) YHWH consumed the brothers with fire; and (4) YHWH cites his own character to explain his act of judgment.

****

The deaths of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10 remain an interpretive enigma for interpreters of the Old Testament.[1] As Rolf Rendtorff states, "There are many strange stories in the Bible, but this is one of the strangest. Many things in this story we do not fully

[1] Interpretations on the episode include Jay Sklar, *Leviticus*, ZECOT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023), 293–305; Katherine M. Smith, "The Persuasive Intent of the Book of Leviticus," (PhD thesis, University of Bristol, 2017), 143–47; James W. Watts, *Leviticus 1–10*, HCOT (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 503–52; Arthur J. Wolak, "Alcohol and the Fate of Nadab and Abihu: A Biblical Cautionary Tale against Inebriation," *JBQ* 41 (2013): 219–26; Christophe Nihan, *From Priestly Torah to Pentateuch: A Study in the Composition of the Pentateuch*, ZAT 2/25 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 576–619; Jeffrey M. Cohen, "*Acharei Mot* and the Strange Fire," *JBQ* 34 (2006): 51–54; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, CC (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 94; D. Jeffery Mooney, "On this Day Atonement Will Be Made for You: A Theology of Leviticus 16 (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003), 99–120; John W. Kleinig, *Leviticus*, ConC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 223–39; Rolf Rendtorff, "Nadab and Abihu," in *Reading from Right to Left: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honour of David J. A. Clines*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum and H. G. M. Williamson, JSOTSup 53 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 359–63; Richard S. Hess, "Leviticus 10:1: Strange Fire and an Odd Name," *BBR* 12 (2002): 187–98; Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 200–205; Mark F. Rooker, *Leviticus*, NAC 3A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 156–58; Moshe Greenberg, "The True Sin of Nadab and Abihu," *JBQ* 26 (1998): 263–67; John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, WBC 4 (Dallas: Word, 1992), 129–38; John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 330–31; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16:*

understand."[2] One notable scholar, Bryan Bibb, has uniquely proposed a more charitable reading of the Nadab and Abihu episode.[3] Bibb proposes that the literary function of the episode is to "expose *gaps* and *ambiguities* in the ritual legislation."[4] He states elsewhere, "By looking more carefully at the elements of ambiguity in this narrative [of Nadab and Abihu], one discovers that the story reveals the subtle intertwining of ritual and narrative for the purpose of exposing and addressing the ambiguities inherent in divine-human relationships."[5] In other words, the Nadab and Abihu episode according to Bibb demonstrates what is lacking, or the holes, in YHWH's sacrificial system.

Bibb's proposal relies on a unique interpretation of Nadab and Abihu's cultic offering. Nadab and Abihu did not sin or commit an act of disobedience[6] since "there is no indication in the text that the priests know that what they are doing is wrong."[7] Thus, if the brothers did nothing inherently wrong, then Leviticus 10:1–3 does not emphasize priestly disobedience but "that the ritual system itself is basically flawed."[8] The flaws of the cultic system, which Nadab and Abihu expose in Leviticus 10:1–3, provide the impetus for the priestly laws in Leviticus 10:8–20.[9]

This article does not attempt to jettison Bibb's proposal concerning the literary function of Leviticus 10, but it does challenge his view that Nadab and Abihu were not disobedient.[10] It proposes that Nadab's and Abihu's cultic mishap is best categorized as an act of sinful disobedience[11] because (1) Moses describes the brothers' offering as profane; (2) the brothers most likely presumed the role of the High Priest by transgressing the bi-daily incense offering outlined in Exodus 30:7–9 that was not their responsibility; (3) YHWH consumed the brothers with fire; and (4) YHWH cites his own character to explain his act of judgment. This article moves in four stages. Section 1 considers the twofold function of זור ("profane") in Exodus 19–Numbers 10. Section 2 analyzes Moses's authorial comment in Leviticus

A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, AB 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 595–640; Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 152–58; John C. H. Laughlin, "The 'Strange Fire' of Nadab and Abihu," *JBL* 95 (1975): 559–65.

[2] Rendtorff, "Nadab and Abihu," 359–63.

[3] Bryan D. Bibb, "Blood, Death, and the Holy in Leviticus Narrative," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 137–46; Bryan D. Bibb, *Ritual Words and Narrative Worlds in the Book of Leviticus*, LHBOTS 480 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 111–32; Bryan D. Bibb, "Nadab and Abihu Attempt to Fill a Gap: Law and Narrative in Leviticus 10.1–7," *JSOT* 96 (2001): 83–99.

[4] Bibb, "Blood, Death, and the Holy," 142, italics original.

[5] Bibb, *Ritual Words and Narrative Worlds*, 116.

[6] Bibb, *Ritual Words and Narrative Worlds*, 116.

[7] Bibb, "Blood, Death, and the Holy," 142.

[8] Bibb, *Ritual Words and Narrative Worlds*, 116.

[9] Bibb, "Blood, Death, and the Holy," 142.

[10] I ultimately disagree with Bibb's proposal concerning the literary function of Leviticus 10, but a response to his entire proposal is beyond the scope of this article.

[11] So Sklar, *Leviticus*, 293–305; Smith, "The Persuasive Intent of the Book of Leviticus," 142; L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?: A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus*, NSBT 37 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 143; Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 257; Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, 94; Rooker, *Leviticus*, 137; Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 330–31, Peretz Segal, "The Divine Verdict of Leviticus x 3," *VT* 39 (1989): 91–95.

10:1, אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם ("which he did not command them"), suggesting that the brothers committed a cultic infraction. Section 3 examines YHWH's fire-filled response in Leviticus 10:2 and highlights its connection with Numbers 16 plus Leviticus 4 and 10. Section 4 considers YHWH's verbal response in Leviticus 10:3 and juxtaposes it with Leviticus 22:32 and especially Ezekiel 28:20–24. The Nadab and Abihu episode reads as follows:[12]

> And the sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, each took his censor, and they placed on them fire, and they set on it incense. And they brought before YHWH profane[13] fire, which he did not command them [אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם]. And fire came out from before YHWH, and it consumed them. And they died before YHWH. And Moses said to Aaron, "This is what YHWH has said, saying, 'By those near me I shall be recognized as holy, and in the sight of all the people I shall be recognized as glorious.'" And Aaron was silent.

1. Profane Fire: A Cursory Survey of זור *in Exodus 19–Numbers 10*

Leviticus 10:1 records Nadab and Abihu's cultic offering, categorizing it as אֵשׁ זָרָה ("profane fire").[14] The phrase "profane fire" has engendered an abundance of scholarly discourse.[15] Bibb suggests that this phrase has an indeterminate meaning, and because it is not explicitly prohibited, Nadab and Abihu committed no transgression.[16] Bibb rightly recognizes our inability to fully understand profane fire, yet he fails to account for the twofold function of זור in Exodus 19–Numbers 10, crippling his proposal.[17] The verb זור first describes a person who cannot participate in certain cultic elements.[18] Most of the occurrences of זור in Exodus 19–Numbers 10 fall under this usage (Exod 29:33; 30:33; Lev 22:10, 12, 13; Num 1:51; 3:10, 38; 17:5 MT; 18:4, 7). Of special relevance are Numbers 1:51, 3:10, 3:38, 17:5 MT//16:40, 18:4, 18:7 because they juxtapose profane (זור), death, and Tabernacle. Take note of Exodus 29:33 and Numbers 1:51. Exodus 29:33 reads "And they [Aaron and his sons] shall eat them, [those things] that made atonement by them, to fill their hand [and] to consecrate them, but a profane person [זור] shall not eat for they are holy." Also, YHWH commands Moses in Numbers 1:51, "And when the tabernacle is ready for departure the Levites shall dismantle it, and when the tabernacle rests the Levites shall set it up, but the profane person [וְהַזָּר] who is near shall die." Both examples clearly juxtapose YHWH's sacred space and the profane person. If a profane person comes too close to YHWH's presence, he will die.

The verb זור also describes a cultic substance forbidden on the Altar of Incense. Exodus 30:7 says that Aaron shall burn on the Altar of Incense only an "incense of spices", a mixture of balsam, onycha,

---

[12] All translations and Hebrew citations are taken from Rudolf Kittel et. al, eds. *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1967).

[13] Commentators disagree over the translation of זרה. C.f. Watts, *Leviticus 1–10*, 527; Hartley, *Leviticus*,

[14] Leviticus 10:1–2 presents the Nadab and Abihu story via a chiastic structure of seven *wayyiqtols*.

[15] See footnote 1. Cf. *HALOT* 1:279; *TDOT* 4:52–58; *DCH* 3:98–100.

[16] Bibb, "Blood, Death, and the Holy in Leviticus Narrative," 142.

[17] This survey does not include Numbers 3:4 and 26:61 since both texts quote Leviticus 10:1.

[18] Hess, "Leviticus 10:1," 189.

galbanum, and frankincense.[19] Exodus 30:9 then says that "You shall not offer on it profane incense [קְטֹרֶת זָרָה] or a burnt offering, or a grain offering, and a drink offering you shall not pour on it." Profane incense refers to a prohibited substance that is not סַמִּים (balsam, onycha, galbanum, and frankincense). To determine the exact nature of profane incense is impossible, but it represents an unholy substance.[20]

The data above does not lead us to a definitive understanding of profane fire but it helps illuminate whether the brothers were disobedient. The brothers' offering suggests at the bare minimum: (1) permitting a profane person to enter sacred space and/or (2) putting a profane substance on YHWH's altar.[21] One may assert that Nadab and Abihu's offering should not be read in light of the other occurrences of זור outlined above, but reading these occurrences together is useful since they appear in the same literary corpus of Exodus 19–Numbers 10.[22]

2. Nadab and Abihu's Offering: Cultic Disobedience

Leviticus 10:1 concludes with an ominous comment: "which he did not command them."[23] Bibb comments on this clause:

> Commentators have generally assumed that there exists a specific command that Nadab and Abihu violate by bringing their incense offering. The text explicitly says, however, that there is no command particularly relevant to this incense offering. They perform something that he had not commanded them.… The real problem for Nadab and Abihu is the absence of Yahweh's word or command. The priests prepare their incense offering and "bring it near [קרב] unto Yahweh." The text gives us no indication that they know their incense to be inherently wrong.[24]

However, imagine a husband and wife, who own a bakery specializing in oatmeal cookies, and have two adult sons. The parents take a vacation and leave the two adult sons in charge of making the cookies. The parents have prepared their sons for their absence, providing them a specific recipe for the oatmeal cookies. The parents return from their vacation and discover their sons have sold oatmeal cookies with a different recipe. The parents are frustrated and vow never again to leave their sons in charge of the bakery. According to Bibb's logic, the adult sons committed no shortcomings because the parents never told them that they could not add or change the recipe for the oatmeal cookies. The adult sons are not

[19] *DCH* 6:167; *HALOT* 2:759.

[20] Smith, "The Persuasive Intent of the Book of Leviticus," 145–46 n. 51; Hess, "Leviticus 10:1: Strange Fire and an Odd Name," 190–91.

[21] *TDOT* 4:55.

[22] David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 80; Rolf Rendtorff, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 147.

[23] The subject of צוה ("to command") in verse 1 is vague. The Greek Old Testament translates the relative clause as ὃ οὐ προσέταξεν κύριος αὐτοῖς("which the Lord did not command them") with YHWH as the subject of προσέταξεν(Heb: צוה). The subject of צוה is ultimately inconsequential because the main point is that Nadab and Abihu's offering did not stem from YHWH's or Moses's instruction.

[24] Bibb, *Ritual Words and Narrative Worlds in the Book of Leviticus*, 121–22.

at fault; instead, the parents are wrong because they never explicitly charged the sons not to add or change the recipe.

Bibb's remark ultimately has two flaws. First, his remark fails to recognize the centrality of priestly obedience in Leviticus 8–10.[25] Priests must not add to or subtract from YHWH's cultic instruction but must diligently adhere to it. The relative pronoun אֲשֶׁר(כַּ)and verb צוה are conjoined seventeen times in Leviticus 8–10, nine times in chapter 8 (vv. 4, 5, 9, 13, 17, 22, 29, 31, 36), five times in chapter 9 (vv. 5, 6 ,7 10, 21), and three times in chapter 10 (vv. 1, 15, 18), and Leviticus 10:1 is the only instance of לֹא ("not") being conjoined with אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ("which he commanded"). Consequently, obedience to divine/mosaic instruction is a paramount theme in Leviticus 8–10, and the brothers' offering sorely stands out. James Watts comments, "The intrusion of the לֹא 'not' in the familiar refrain comes like a thunderclap…. The story in Lev 10:1–3 does not introduce a new theme or subject, but rather the momentary reversal of the theme of compliance with divine instructions which the following verses then reinstate."[26] Similarly, Leviticus 8–10 reinforces the centrality of the priests treating YHWH's sacred space with the utmost care. Michael Hundley aptly comments on the danger of presumptuously entering the Tent of Meeting:

> The Priests may not presume to regulate what YHWH does within his own home, especially since he is superior to them both socially and ontologically…. Since they are in his space, they must follow his rules. Servants must simply obey their masters; they are not entitled to invade their master's space or to fully understand his purposes.[27]

This discussion ultimately leads to a proposal concerning Nadab and Abihu's transgression. While there is no consensus on this issue, Jacob Milgrom has popularized that Nadab and Abihu offered their own private incense with illegitimate coals of the outer altar or an oven when they should have taken coals from the altar before YHWH.[28] Some commentators similarly argue that Nadab and Abihu took fire from an unauthorized source[29] or presumptuously entered YHWH's throne room at a wrong time.[30] Other commentators meanwhile plead ignorance but emphasize priestly disobedience.[31]

Most scholars retroactively apply the stipulations of Leviticus 16 to the Nadab and Abihu episode. The problem with this hermeneutic is that Leviticus 10 fails to indicate that Nadab and Abihu presumptuously performed the Day of Atonement. Leviticus 10 certainly provides the buildup for Leviticus 16 (16:1–2), yet retroactively transposing the cultic instruction of the Day of Atonement onto the Nadab and Abihu story fails to recognize the fundamental difference between Leviticus 10 and

---

[25] Smith, "The Persuasive Intent of the Book of Leviticus," 153; Watts, *Leviticus 1–10*, 512; Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord*, 146; Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 256; Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative,* 330; Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, 94.

[26] Watts, *Leviticus 1–10,* 513.

[27] Michael B. Hundley, "Tabernacle or Tent of Meeting? The Dual Nature of the Sacred Tent in the Priestly Texts," in *Current Issues in Priestly and Related Literature: The Legacy of Jacob Milgrom and Beyond* (Atlanta: SBL, 2015), 13.

[28] Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 596–98.

[29] Kenneth A. Matthews, *Leviticus: Holy People, Holy God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 94; Nobuyoshi Kiuchi, *Leviticus*, AOTC 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 179; Hartley, *Leviticus*, 131–32; Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 231.

[30] Sklar, *Leviticus*, 293–94.

[31] Watts, *Leviticus 1–10,* 512; Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, 94.

Leviticus 16 and explain the actual nature of the brothers' transgression. If YHWH instituted the correct source of coals after Nadab and Abihu died (16:12), then they were ignorant of the right source for coals. Instead, it coheres to read Nadab and Abihu's offer through the paradigm of Exodus 30–Leviticus 9, which records the cultic instruction that Moses taught Aaron and his sons, instead of reading the cultic stipulations of Leviticus 16 onto Leviticus 10:1–3 retroactively.

Bibb secondly fails to consider that Nadab and Abihu potentially presumed the role of the High Priest[32] by offering the bi-daily incense offering outlined in Exodus 30:7–9. Baruch Levine also associates Leviticus 10:1 and Exodus 30:9, but he asserts that the brothers offered their own incense offering, not the daily incense offering.[33] Admittedly, most scholars dismiss a connection between Leviticus 10:1 and Exodus 30:7–9. For instance, Bibb states, "The Exodus verses warn against unauthorized incense mixtures, saying nothing about the source of the fire."[34] John Hartley also dismisses a correspondence between Exodus 30:7–9 and Leviticus 10:1 because "their [Nadab and Abihu] transgression concerns illicit fire, not illicit incense."[35] Jay Sklar similarly states, "It is unlikely this [זרה] refers to the 'unauthorized incense' mentioned in Exod 30:9, for the simple reason that we would expect to read of 'unauthorized incense,' not 'unauthorized fire.'"[36]

My proposal to read Leviticus 10:1–3 in view of Exodus 30:7–9 is legitimate on three grounds. First, Moses speaks in both Exodus 30:7–9 and Leviticus 10:1 of not allowing something or someone categorized as זרה (an uncommon stem) to enter sacred space. Second, both the bi-daily incense offering and Nadab and Abihu's were incense offerings placed before YHWH (Exod 30:7–9; Lev 10:1). YHWH instructs Moses in Exodus 30:6, "And you shall set it [the altar of incense] before the curtain, which is before the Ark of the Testimony, which is alongside the atonement seat, which is over the testimony, where I shall meet you." The bi-daily incense offering sits in front of the Ark of the Testimony, where YHWH appears. Similarly, Nadab and Abihu offer their incense before YHWH (Lev 10:1), and Moses instructs Mishael and Elzaphon to remove their dead corpses from before the holy (Lev 10:4). Third, as will be displayed below, there is lexical and thematical overlap between Leviticus 10:1–3 and Numbers 16, where YHWH judges Korah and his group for attempting to assert the High Priesthood (16:10–11).

Bibb ultimately raises a good point concerning אֵשׁ זָרָה, but he fails to convince in his understanding of אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם. Bibb fails to account for the centrality of (כַּ)אֲשֶׁר and צוה in Leviticus 8–10, a passage that emphasizes priestly obedience. His proposal also fails to read Leviticus 10 in view of Exodus 30–Leviticus 9 and so neglects the allusion to the bi-daily incense of Exodus 30:7–9, an offering reserved for Aaron alone.

---

[32] While Rendtorff does not argue that Nadab and Abihu transgressed the instruction of the bi-daily incense offering, he says, "Though the motivations of Nadab and Abihu are not explicated, one could imagine, as mentioned above, that they wanted to demonstrate their specific role as Aaron's eldest sons, and thereby as next in the priestly hierarchy. They might have felt, like Korah and his followers, that Moses and Aaron elevated themselves too much, and therefore they wanted to claim privileges similar to their father's" (Rendtorff, "Nadab and Abihu," 363).

[33] Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 59.

[34] Bibb, *Ritual Words and Narrative*, 122 n. 4.

[35] Hartley, *Leviticus*, 132.

[36] Sklar, *Leviticus*, 293.

3. YHWH's Fire-Filled Response

Verse 2 reads, "And fire came out from before YHWH, and it consumed them, and they died before YHWH." Bibb surprisingly offers very little concerning YHWH's judgment, commenting, "The severity of the mishap does not seem to correlate with the degree of punishment."[37] Bibb's conclusion creates more concerns than answers, because he implicitly suggests that YHWH unfairly judged Nadab and Abihu. This logic contradicts Leviticus, which portrays YHWH as Israel's merciful redeemer who graciously dwells in Israel's presence through his cultic program. Instead, YHWH's response should be seen as an act of mercy and justice.[38] As Segal notes, "If the Lord had not executed Nadab and Abihu the whole community would have suffered from the wrath of his holiness."[39] In light of Numbers 16 and Leviticus 4 and 10, it seems more plausible that Nadab and Abihu committed an act of disobedience, not a mere misstep.

3.1. Numbers 16

YHWH's response to Nadab and Abihu parallels Numbers 16,[40] where Korah and a large group accuse Moses and Aaron of exalting themselves over the people, setting up a clash over the position of High Priest (16:11). To settle the dispute, Moses commands Korah and his group to take censors, put fire on them, set incense on them, and place them before YHWH. Moses tells Aaron to do the same, and whoever's sacrifice is accepted may assume the High Priesthood. Unsurprisingly, YHWH accepts Aaron's censor and quickly judges Korah and his group. Consider the lexical and thematical overlap below.

Table 4. Parallelism of Leviticus 10:1–2 and Numbers 16:18, 35

Lev 10:1–2	*Num 16:18, 35*
וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי־אַהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מַחְתָּתוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֵן אֵשׁ וַיָּשִׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קְטֹרֶת וַיַּקְרִבוּ לִפְנֵי יהוה אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם (v. 1)	וַיִּקְחוּ אִישׁ מַחְתָּתוֹ וְיִתְּנוּ עֲלֵיהֶם אֵשׁ וְיָשִׂימוּ עֲלֵיהֶם קְטֹרֶת וַיַּעַמְדוּ פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וּמֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן(v. 18)
And the sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, each took his censor, and they placed on them fire, and they set on it incense. And they …approached YHWH	And each took his censer, and they placed on them fire, and they set on them incense. And they stood at the entrance of the tent of meeting. …Now Moses and Aaron
וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יהוה וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמֻתוּ לִפְנֵי יהוה (v. 2)	וְאֵשׁ יָצְאָה מֵאֵת יהוה וַתֹּאכַל אֶת הַחֲמִשִּׁים וּמָאתַיִם אִישׁ מַקְרִיבֵי הַקְּטֹרֶת (v. 35)
And fire came from before YHWH, and it consumed them. And they died before YHWH.	And fire came from YHWH, and it consumed the 250 men who brought incense.

[37] Bibb, *Ritual Words and Narrative Worlds*, 125.

[38] Sklar, *Leviticus*, 303.

[39] Segal, "The Divine Verdict of Leviticus x 3," 93.

[40] Many scholars have also observed verbal and thematic similarities between the Nadab and Abihu episode and the Golden Calf incident in Exodus 32 (Hess, "Leviticus 10:1," 190n. 11; Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 200–205; Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*, 78).

There are nine *lexical overlaps* between both episodes. In both episodes, they take (וַיִּקְחוּ) their own censors (אִישׁ מַחְתָּתוֹ), place fire on them (וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֵן אֵשׁ), and set on them incense (וַיָּשִׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קְטֹרֶת). Then the narration of YHWH's response is the same with four words overlapping between both accounts. Fire (אֵשׁ) comes out (stem: יצא) from YHWH (יְהוָה), and the fire consumes (וַתֹּאכַל) those who gave the offering.[41]

The *thematical connection* between both accounts concerns the intermingling of cultic offering and priesthood.[42] In both incidents, YHWH rejects a cultic offering. In the case of Korah and his group, YHWH rejects their offering because they hastily sought the office of the High Priest, which is rebellion against YHWH himself (Num 16:11). YHWH also rejects Nadab and Abihu's offering likely because they presumptuously offered incense solely reserved for the High Priest Aaron (Exod 30:7–8).

3.2. Leviticus 4 and 10

YHWH prevents Nadab and Abihu from atoning for their transgression or explaining their actions. YHWH provides atonement for those, including the anointed priest, whose sin is שְׁגָגָה ("unintentional" or "inadvertent"; Lev 4:2–3),[43] yet Nadab and Abihu have no chance to atone for their mistake. YHWH quickly judged Nadab and Abihu like Korah and his group in Numbers 16 because their cultic blunder fell outside the category of שְׁגָגָה and in the category of זור, which necessitated divine judgment.[44] Furthermore, in Leviticus 10:16–20, immediately after Nadab and Abihu's cultic blunder, Aaron's other sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, apparently commit a cultic misstep by not eating the sin offering in the sanctuary according to Mosaic instruction (10:16–18). YHWH does not consume them, however, because their mistake seems to be more innocent.[45]

4. YHWH's Verbal Response

YHWH's verbal response further implies Nadab and Abihu committed an act of disobedience. Leviticus 10:3 reads, "And Moses said to Aaron, 'This is what YHWH has spoken saying 'By those who approach me I shall be recognized as holy, and in the sight of all the people I shall be recognized as glorious.' And Aaron was silent." Bibb comments on YHWH's response:

> In this speech the presence of YHWH comes to Aaron, but it is not a comforting word. It helps very little in rationalizing the events that have happened, but only sows further seeds of doubt. In the face of this, Aaron is silent. Therefore, the speech by Yahweh does not close any of the gaps in the story. We could say that Nadab and Abihu are destroyed because they violate the rules of God's holiness. That is certainly true. The problem is, however, that we do not know what all of those rules are.[46]

[41] Rendtorff, "Nadab and Abihu," 360.

[42] Levine, *Leviticus*, 59; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 599–600.

[43] See *HALOT* 4:1412–13; *TDOT* 14:397–405; *DCH* 8:262–63.

[44] Levine, *Leviticus*, 59.

[45] Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, 96; Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 257.

[46] Bibb, *Ritual Words and Narrative Worlds*, 124–25.

According to Bibb, YHWH's verbal response sheds no light on the nature of Nadab's and Abihu's offering, downplaying the significance of YHWH's response to the ordeal. But YHWH's response, his emphasis on his holiness and glory, underscores that Nadab and Abihu committed an act of disobedience on two grounds.[47]

4.1. Leviticus 22:32

The next time in Leviticus YHWH describes himself as קדש ("holy") in the passive, first person singular, it occurs in the context of profaning the sanctuary. Leviticus 22:32 reads, "And you shall not profane the name of my sanctuary so I will be recognized as holy [וְנִקְדַּשְׁתִּי] in the midst of the sons of Israel. I am YHWH who sanctifies you." Note the lexical and thematical overlap below.

There are two *lexical connections* between Leviticus 10:3 and Leviticus 22:32: (1) The divine name יהוה ("YHWH"); and (2) the Niphal, passive, first person singular of the verb קדש.

There are two *thematic connections* between Leviticus 10:3 and Leviticus 22:32. First, both occur in sections detailing priestly stipulations (Lev 10; 21–22). Second, both juxtapose right worship and YHWH's holiness. If the sanctuary is not profaned, then YHWH will be recognized as holy. Conversely, if the sanctuary is profaned, then YHWH's holiness will be absent before the people.

4.2. Ezekiel 28:22

Ezekiel 28:22, like Leviticus 10:3, conjoins כבד ("I shall be recognized as glorious") and קדש ("I shall be recognized as holy") in the context of judgment and disobedience.[48] Ezekiel 28 records three prophecies against the ruler of Tyre (vv. 1–10), against the King of Tyre (vv. 11–19), and against the nation of Sidon (vv. 20–24). YHWH declares to the ruler of Sidon in verse 22, "Behold, I am against you Sidon, and I shall be glorified [וְנִכְבַּדְתִּי] in your midst, and they shall know that I am YHWH when I bring on her judgments, and I shall be recognized as holy [וְנִקְדַּשְׁתִּי] in her." Observe the lexical and thematical overlap below.

There are three *lexical connections* between Ezekiel 28:22 and Leviticus 10:3: (1) The divine name יהוה; (2) both record the Niphal, passive, first person singular of the verb כבד ("glory"); and (3) both record the Niphal, passive, first person singular of the verb קדש.

There are two *thematic connections* between both accounts. First, YHWH references in both episodes his character, his glory, and his holiness to explain his actions. In Leviticus 10:3, YHWH cites his holiness and glory to explain his consumption of Nadab and Abihu. In Ezekiel 28:22, YHWH mentions his holiness and glory to explain his pending judgment of Israel's enemy. Second, YHWH judges in both accounts because of malpractice. In Leviticus 10:3 Nadab and Abihu transgressed cultic instruction, and in Ezekiel 28:22 Sidon mistreated Israel.

[47] Smith persuasively argues that Leviticus 10:3 thematically connects Leviticus 1–7 and Leviticus 11–15 and functions as the rhetorical lynchpin for Leviticus 1–16 (Smith, "The Persuasive Intent of the Book of Leviticus," 146–57).

[48] For a short study on the theological and thematic overlap between Leviticus and Ezekiel, see Preston Sprinkle, "Law and Life: Leviticus 18.5 in the Literary Framework of Ezekiel," *JSOT* 31 (2007): 275–93; Segal, "The Divine Verdict of Leviticus x 3," 91–95.

5. Conclusion

I applaud any scholar who seeks to rightly understand the relationship between law and narrative in the Old Testament, and so I highly recommend Bibb's work on Leviticus. That said, Bibb's unique interpretation of Nadab and Abihu's cultic offering has imperfections. This article has sought to elucidate those imperfections and demonstrate that Nadab and Abihu's cultic mishap is best categorized not as an act of ignorance but as an act of disobedience, because (1) Moses describes the brothers' offering as profane; (2) the brothers most likely presumed the role of the High Priest by transgressing the bi-daily incense offering outlined in Exodus 30:7–9 that was not their responsibility; (3) YHWH consumed the brothers with fire; and (4) YHWH cites his own character to explain his act of judgment.

Themelios 49.3 (2024): 589–605

Destruction and Dispossession of the Canaanites in the Book of Joshua

– David M. Howard Jr. –

David M. Howard Jr. is professor of Old Testament at Bethlehem College and Seminary, Minnesota.

****

Abstract: The supposed "genocide" of the Canaanites is one of the most vexing questions in the entire Old Testament and a leading reason that many people dismiss the Old Testament as hopelessly barbaric, so an examination of the issues here is in order. We discuss this in five discrete sections: (1) the idea of setting people or things apart to the Lord for destruction; (2) the idea of driving out the Canaanites from the land; (3) the concept of "Yahweh war" (also known as "holy war"); (4) the ethics of Yahweh war; and (5) the New Testament and violence. We conclude that there is no genocide in the book of Joshua, despite arguments to the contrary.

****

In Joshua 6:17–21, we encounter the first significant discussion in the book about the related concepts of setting the Canaanites apart for destruction and driving them out of the land.[1] The supposed "genocide" of the Canaanites is one of the most vexing questions in the entire Old Testament and a leading reason that many people dismiss the Old Testament as hopelessly barbaric, so an examination of the issues here is in order.

We discuss this below in five discrete sections: (1) the idea of setting people or things apart to the Lord for destruction; (2) the idea of driving out the Canaanites from the land; (3) the concept of "Yahweh war" (also known as "holy war"); (4) the ethics of Yahweh war; and (5) the New Testament and violence.

1. Setting the Canaanites Apart for Destruction (חָרַם/חֵרֶם)

In 6:17, Joshua instructed the people that Jericho and everything in it was "to be set apart to the Lord for destruction," and then in v. 18 he elaborated: "But keep yourselves from *the things set apart*, or

[1] This paper was first presented at the International Theology Conference at the Emanuel University of Oradea, Romania, on November 21, 2023. It is modified from the section, "Destruction and Dispossession in Joshua," in David M. Howard Jr., *Joshua*, CSC 6 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, forthcoming); it will also appear in a forthcoming issue of *The Sower* journal and is used with permission from both publishing entities.

you will be *set apart for destruction*. If you take any of those things, you will *set apart* the camp of Israel *for destruction* and make trouble for it."

The common element behind the italicized words is the Hebrew root חרם. It occurs in the Old Testament both as a verb (חָרַם: fifty-one times) and as a noun (חֵרֶם: twenty-nine times).[2] This is the term behind many people's calling God's instructions and Israel's actions *vis-à-vis* the Canaanite as "genocide."

The verb can be rendered "to set apart for destruction" or "to completely destroy," and the noun can be rendered as "things set apart" or "destruction."[3] The importance of this concept in Joshua is apparent from the number of times the root occurs, more than in any other Old Testament book. Of the forty-eight times the verb occurs in the Old Testament, fourteen times are in Joshua.[4] Of the twenty-nine occurrences of the noun, thirteen are in Joshua.[5]

Norbert Lohfink provides the following definitions for חרם. The verbal form (hiphil, the "causative" stem) means to "consecrate something or someone as a permanent and definitive offering for the sanctuary; in war, consecrate a city and its inhabitants to destruction; carry out this destruction; totally annihilate a population in war; kill." The noun form means "the object or person consecrated in the sense of the hiphil or condemned in the sense of the *hophal* [passive of the hiphil] or contaminated by entering into their deadly sphere; the act of consecration or of extermination and killing."[6] A common rendering of חרם as "ban" or "to place under the ban" is inappropriate, because חרם does not carry the ideas of secular lawlessness or ecclesiastical excommunication that the word "ban" carries.[7] Lilley stresses that the essence of חרם "is an irrevocable renunciation of any interest in the object 'devoted'" and that it denotes "uncompromising consecration without possibility of recall or redemption."[8]

The concept of חרם is often found in sacred contexts, in which it has a strong connection with the idea of holiness. As such, these things were forbidden for common use and were rather to be an "offering" to the Lord. Leviticus 27:28–29 illustrates this well:

> Nothing that a man permanently sets apart (חרם, twice)[9] to the Lord from all he owns, whether a person, an animal, or his inherited landholding, can be sold or redeemed; everything set apart (חרם) is especially holy to the Lord. No person who has been set apart for destruction (חרם, twice)[10] is to be ransomed; he must be put to death.

---

[2] Introductions to the concept may be found in the following works: *TDOT* 5:180–99; *TLOT* 474–77; *NIDOTTE* 2:276–77. See also P. D. Stern, *The Biblical Ḥērem: A Window on Israel's Religious Experience,* BJS 211 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1991); J. P. U. Lilley, "Understanding the *Ḥērem*," *TynBul* 44 (1993): 169–77; Yair Hoffman, "The Deuteronomistic Concept of the Herem," *ZAW* 111 (1999): 196–210.

[3] So CSB; versions such as the NIV use terms like "devoted to destruction" or "devoted things."

[4] Joshua 2:10; 6:18, 21; 8:26; 10:1, 28, 35, 37–38, 40; 11:11–12, 20–21.

[5] Joshua 6:17, 18(3x); 7:1(2x), 11, 12(2x), 13(2x), 15; 22:20.

[6] Lohfink, *TDOT* 5:188.

[7] Lohfink, *TDOT* 5:188.

[8] Lilley, "Understanding the *Ḥerem*," 176, 177.

[9] A "wooden" rendering here would be "every devoted thing *(*חֵרֶם) which a man devotes *(*חָרַם) to the Lord."

[10] Here again, חרם occurs twice: "every devoted thing *[*חֵרֶם] which is devoted *[*חָרַם] to the Lord that is human."

If something is dedicated or devoted to the Lord, it is especially holy. We find this idea in Joshua as well. In 6:18–19, the devoted things are holy (sacred):

> But keep yourselves from the things set apart (חרם), or you will be set apart for destruction (חרם). If you take any of those things (חרם), you will set apart the camp of Israel for destruction (חרם) and make trouble for it. For all the silver and gold, and the articles of bronze and iron, are dedicated to the Lord and must go into the Lord's treasury.

In 7:13, the people were to consecrate themselves (i.e., make themselves holy) and remove the devoted things from them: "Go and consecrate the people. Tell them to consecrate themselves for tomorrow, for this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: There are things that are set apart (חרם) among you, Israel. You will not be able to stand against your enemies until you remove what is set apart (חרם)."

More commonly, the idea of חרם is found in contexts of war. Numbers 21:2–3 illustrates this well: "Then Israel made a vow to the Lord, 'If you will hand this people over to us, we will completely destroy (חרם) their cities.' The Lord listened to Israel's request and handed the Canaanites over to them, and Israel completely destroyed (חרם) them and their cities. So they named the place Hormah" (חָרְמָה, i.e., something completely destroyed).

In Joshua, the war context is also clearly represented. In most of the cities mentioned in the campaigns in chapters 10 and 11, the Israelites completely destroyed the inhabitants who remained in these cities (10:28, 35, 37, 39–40; 11:11, 12, 20–21). And, in the case of cities such as Hazor, the destruction was of everything, including the city itself: "They struck down everyone in it with the sword, completely destroying them; he left no one alive. Then he burned Hazor. Joshua captured all these kings and their cities and struck them down with the sword. He completely destroyed (חרם) them, as Moses the Lord's servant had commanded (11:11–12).

We should not make too hard and fast a distinction, however, between the sacred and the war contexts. The context of the destruction of Jericho, for example, makes it clear that the destruction was not a secular activity, but a deeply sacred one: most of chapter 6 is devoted to the sacred ceremonial rituals of marching around the city, and only briefly is the actual conflict told. Thus, things would be offered to God by being utterly destroyed. This could happen with respect to material wealth,[11] people,[12] or even entire cities.[13]

2. Dispossessing the Canaanites (ירשׁ)

Equally important to our understanding of God's commands and Israel's actions *vis-à-vis* the Canaanites is the verb ירשׁ. Understanding the nature and place of this root's meanings should dramatically revise many people's thinking about supposed "genocide" in Joshua, since it has nothing to do with killing, but rather inheriting the land or driving the Canaanites out of that land (i.e., displacing the Canaanites, not annihilating them).

[11] E.g., Joshua 6:18–19; 7:1, 11.

[12] E.g., Joshua 10:28, 35, 39–41; 11:11, 20.

[13] E.g., Joshua 6:21; 8:26; 10:1, 37; 11:12, 21.

The primary meanings of ירשׁ are "to inherit" (qal stem) and "to drive out, dispossess" (hiphil stem). The verb occurs 232 times in the Old Testament; of these, almost half of the occurrences are found in Deuteronomy and Joshua: seventy times in Deuteronomy and twenty-nine times in Joshua.[14] Here, we are concerned with the meaning, "to drive out, dispossess" (hiphil stem). In this stem, the verb occurs sixty-six times in the Old Testament, more than a third of the occurrences being in Deuteronomy and Joshua: seven times in Deuteronomy, seventeen times in Joshua.

2.1. ירשׁ as "to Drive Out, Dispossess"

In the hiphil verb stem, the meaning of ירשׁ primarily involves displacing or ejecting someone from his property or territory in order to be able to possess it for oneself (e.g., Num 32:21; Deut 4:38a; Judg 2:21). In almost every case, God is the subject of the verb, indicating that *he* would do the driving out. Deuteronomy 9:4–5 is a key text showing this:

> When the Lord your God drives them out (הדף, a synonym of ירשׁ) before you, do not say to yourself, 'The Lord brought me in *to take possession (*ירשׁ*,* qal) of this land because of my righteousness.' Instead, the Lord *will drive out* (ירשׁ*,* hiphil) these nations before you because of their wickedness. You are not going *to take possession* (ירשׁ, qal) of their land because of your righteousness or your integrity. Instead, the Lord your God *will drive out* (hiphil) these nations before you because of their wickedness, in order to fulfill the promise he swore to your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In Joshua, several references show God working in exactly this way, driving out Israel's enemies (3:10 [2x]; 13:6; 23:5a, 9). In other passages, Moses (13:12), Caleb (14:12; 15:14), and the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh (17:18) drove out peoples and possessed their land, with God's help. Joshua instructed those lying in wait to ambush Ai that they should rise up and take possession of the city (8:7).[15] In a negative sense, several times in Joshua we read that the Israelites did *not*—or could not—drive out the Canaanites from various parts of the land (13:13; 15:63; 16:10; 17:12, 13 [2x]), and once, Israel was warned that God would not drive out the nations before them unless they kept themselves pure and did not intermarry with the Canaanites and worship their gods (23:13).

A number of passages in the Old Testament include a wordplay that uses both the major stems of ירשׁ (qal and hiphil). This wordplay illustrates both sides of the idea that God *drove out* the Canaanite peoples (ירשׁ*,* hiphil) so that his own people could *take possession* (ירשׁ*,* qal) of God's gift of the land.[16] Good examples of this are Deuteronomy 9:4–5 (quoted above), and Judges 11:23–24: "So then the Lord, the God of Israel, *dispossessed* (ירשׁ*,* hiphil) the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you *to take possession* (ירשׁ*,* qal) of them? Will you not *possess* (ירשׁ*,* qal) what Chemosh your god *gives you to possess* (ירשׁ*,* hiphil)? And all that the Lord our God *has dispossessed* (ירשׁ*,* hiphil) before us, we *will possess* (ירשׁ*,* qal)" (RSV).

---

[14] On ירשׁ meaning "to inherit" (qal stem), see my "Excursus: Israel's Inheritance of the Land in Joshua" after chapter 13 in Howard, *Joshua* (forthcoming).

[15] ירשׁ is hiphil here; see Phyllis Bird, *YRŠ and the Deuteronomic Theology of the Conquest* (Th.D. Diss., Harvard Divinity School, 1971), 267–68, on this anomalous meaning of ירשׁ, hiphil.

[16] The list includes Numbers 21:32; 33:53; Deuteronomy 9:4–5; 11:23; Joshua 23:5; Judges 11:23–24(2x). Cf. also Deuteronomy 18:12, 14 and Psalm 44:2–3 (44:3–4 MT), where the wordplays are in separate verses.

In Joshua, this wordplay is found once: "The Lord your God will force them back on your account and *drive them out* (ירשׁ, hiphil) before you so that you *can take possession* (ירשׁ, qal) *of* their land, as the Lord your God promised you" (Josh 23:5).[17]

The distribution of usage of ירשׁ in the book of Joshua is instructive as well. ירשׁ is found primarily in the second half of the book (twenty-one of twenty-nine occurrences). This should not be surprising, given that the primary focus in the second half of the book is the land distribution.

2.2. Further Dispossession Language

For all the discussion of the complete destruction of the Canaanites, what is too often overlooked is that the Bible has *more* language about driving them out of the land (ירשׁ or גרשׁ)[18] than it does about completely destroying them (חרם).[19] Consider this: in Exodus 23:23, God promises to "wipe them out"—the root here is כחד, a close synonym of חרם—but then goes on to say that God himself would drive the Canaanites out:

> I will cause the people ahead of you to feel terror and will throw into confusion all the nations you come to. I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you in retreat. I will send hornets in front of you, and they *will drive* (גרשׁ) the Hivites, Canaanites, and Hethites *away* from you. I will not *drive them out* (גרשׁ) ahead of you in a single year; otherwise, the land would become desolate, and wild animals would multiply against you. I will *drive them out* (גרשׁ) little by little ahead of you until you have become numerous and *take possession* (נחל) of the land. I will set your borders from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates River. For I will place the inhabitants of the land under your control, and you will *drive them out* ahead of you" (Exod 23:27–31).

Notice that God does not promise to do this in one fell swoop; it would be a gradual process: "I will not *drive them out* (גרשׁ) ahead of you in a single year.… I will *drive them out* (גרשׁ) little by little ahead of you until you have become numerous and *take possession* (נחל) of the land" (Exod 23:29–30). And later: "The Lord your God will *drive out* (נשׁל)[20] these nations before you little by little. You will not be able to *destroy* (כלה)[21] them all at once" (Deut 7:22).

---

[17] The continuity of meaning between *qal* and *hiphil* is explained well by Bird: "The idea represented by this *hiphil* is simply the corollary or counterpart of that found in the extended use of the *qal* to speak of 'inheriting' by conquest. It is 'inheriting' by dispossessing. The *hiphil* makes essentially the same statement as the *qal,* only it focuses on the former owners rather than their possessions" (Bird, *YRŠ*, 277). The essential idea of the *hiphil*, then, is not "to drive out" per se and certainly not "to destroy"; rather, it is to "'dispossess' (with the aim of claiming the property of the dispossessed as an 'inheritance')" (p. 283).

[18] גרשׁ is a close synonym of ירשׁ. See the more detailed discussion of גרשׁ in my"Excursus: Israel's Inheritance of the Land in Joshuah," after chapter 13 in Howars, *Joshua* (forthcoming). Some rarer but related terms are indicated here and below.

[19] For the argument here, see also Paul Copan and Matthew Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 76–83 (ch. 6: "Thrusting Out, Driving Out, and Dispossessing the Canaanites—Not Annihilating Them").

[20] This usage of נשׁל means "clear away, drive away," referring to nations.

[21] This usage of כלה means "finish (off), destroy."

The book of Joshua itself echoes such an emphasis on the process of dispossession taking a long time: "and the Lord said to [Joshua], 'You have become old, advanced in age, but a great deal of the land remains *to be possessed* (ירשׁ, qal). This is the land that remains…. *I will drive them out* (ירשׁ, hiphil) before the Israelites, only distribute the land as an inheritance for Israel, as I have commanded you'" (Josh 13:1–6).

Note that the Lord's comment here comes *after* the supposedly "clean sweep" of destruction mentioned in chapters 10–11. That is, in chapter 13, we see many inhabitants of Canaan still alive, despite the seemingly comprehensive statements in chapters 10–11 about complete destruction. This echoes the thought in Deuteronomy 7: There, the language of dispossession *precedes* the language of destruction: "When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess, and he drives out (נשׁל; cf. ESV: "clears away") many nations before you … you must completely destroy (חרם, 2x) them" (Deut 7:1–2). That is, presumably the first set of actions drove away the majority of the inhabitants, and the complete destruction mentioned after that involved those who refused to leave. Thus, the destruction was *not* a scorched-earth operation that left no living souls anywhere in the land.[22]

Was this "genocide"? No. If anything, it might be called "ethnic cleansing,"[23] whereby anyone not committed to Yahweh was driven out, so as to render the land "clean" for Israelite religion to take root (see below), though even here the terminology is misleading. The "cleansing" is not *ethnic*, it is *religious*. The examples of Rahab (and the Gibeonites) show that simply to be a Canaanite *per se* was not a death sentence. What God was "cleansing" was false religious beliefs and practices. Any kings, military leadership, armies, and any average citizens who refused to leave, were subjected to the complete destruction of the חֵרֶם, not simply any Canaanite *per se*.

Another term related to ירשׁ and גרשׁ is שׁלח, "to send away." See, for example, Leviticus 18:24–25: "Do not defile yourselves by any of these practices, for the nations I am *driving out* (שׁלח) before you have defiled themselves by all these things. The land has become defiled, so I am punishing it for its iniquity, and the land will *vomit out* (קיא) its inhabitants"; or Leviticus 20:23: "You must not follow the statutes of the nations I am *driving out* (שׁלח) before you, for they did all these things, and I abhorred them."

In a survey of "dispossession" and "destruction" language in the Pentateuch, Glenn M. Miller notes that "The 'Dispossession' words outnumber the 'Destruction' words by 3-to-1! This would indicate that the dominant 'intended effect' was for the peoples in the Land *to migrate somewhere else*."[24] He cites Deuteronomy 12:29–30: "When the Lord your God annihilates (כרת) the nations before you, which you are entering to take possession of (ירשׁ, qal), and you drive them out (ירשׁ, qal)[25] and live in their land, be careful not to be ensnared by their ways after they have been destroyed (שׁמד) before you." Notice that

[22] See also Copan and Flannagan here: *Did God Really Command Genocide?*, 78–80.

[23] Joe M. Sprinkle, "Just War in Deuteronomy 20 and 2 Kings 3," in his *Biblical Law and Its Relevance: A Christian Understanding and Ethical Application for Today of the Mosaic Regulations* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005), 180.

[24] Glenn M. Miller, "How Could a God of Love Order the Massacre/Annihilation of the Canaanites?," Christian Think Tank, January 2013, https://christianthinktank.com/qamorite.html; emphasis Miller's. Miller is not a biblical scholar (by his own admission), but his blog posting nonetheless offers much helpful data in layman's terms (despite his occasional lapses into overly "cutesy" language; for example, his preferred term for Melchizedek is "Melky"!).

[25] This is one of the few cases where ירשׁ, qal means "to dispossess." *See HALOT, s.v.* ירשׁ.

the language of destruction occurs *alongside of* the language of dispossession, i.e., total annihilation is not the complete picture.

Along these same lines, an interesting perspective is found in the story of Israel's defeat of the Amorites, before they entered Canaan (Num 21:31–35):

> So Israel lived in the Amorites' land. After Moses sent spies to Jazer, Israel captured its surrounding villages and *drove out* (ירשׁ, hiphil) the Amorites who were there. Then they turned and went up the road to Bashan, and King Og of Bashan came out against them with his whole army to do battle at Edrei. But the Lord said to Moses, 'Do not fear him, for I have handed him over to you along with his whole army and his land. Do to him as you did to King Sihon of the Amorites, who lived in Heshbon.' So they struck (נכה) him, his sons, and his whole army until no one was left, and they *took possession* (ירשׁ, qal) of his land.

Note the sequence here: First, the Israelites *drove out* the "regular" people (Amorites) who were living in Jazer and its villages; they did not annihilate them (21:32). But then, when they turned to King Og and his army, they struck him and his army until no one was left, just as they had previously done to King Sihon (21:34–35).

This is a strong indicator that the focus of the annihilation was any king and army opposing God's people, *not* a generalized, sweeping mandate to annihilate every last, living being. The majority of those people in Jazer and its villages were driven out, not annihilated.

Richard Hess has advanced a separate (and novel) argument that tends to support the point just made. He argues that when texts such as Deuteronomy 20:16–18 refer to "cities" to be destroyed, these cities were not large metropolises as we know them today; they were not even places where large numbers of average people lived. The word in question is עִיר (usually translated "city") and, as Hess notes, "this term can describe a village Bethlehem (1 Sam 20:6), tent encampments (Judg 10:4) and a citadel (2 Sam 12:26), or a fortress such as Zion in Jerusalem (2 Sam 5:7, 9)."[26] He references many Late Bronze Age and Iron Age sites where walled fortresses "were not habitations in which average persons lived. The masses lived in hamlets and other places nearby these forts. The forts themselves contained the palace, royal storehouses for the taxes 'in kind,' temples," and more. "These 'cities' were not the home of nonelites or of noncombatants. Rather, they represented the leadership, the military, and those most involved with the oppression and rulership of the land."[27]

2.3. Summary: The Interplay Between ירשׁ ("to drive out, dispossess") and חרם ("to set apart for destruction")

Thus, as we've noted, too often unnoticed in discussions of the חרם is the Bible's equal emphasis—if not larger emphasis—on the dispossession of the Canaanites out of the land, not their complete annihilation. To the contrary, the use of ירשׁ and related terms shows that the supposed "genocidal"

[26] Richard S. Hess, "Appendix 2: Apologetic Issues in the Old Testament," in Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 728 (the full essay is on pp. 717–31). See also his more technical treatment: "The Jericho and Ai of the Book of Joshua," in Richard S. Hess, Gerald A. Klingbeil, and Paul J. Ray Jr., eds., *Critical Issues in Early Israelite History* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 33–46.

[27] Hess, "Apologetic Issues," 729.

destruction of every last, living person (חרם) is not literally true in most cases: the texts affirm over and over again that God drove out the Canaanites from the land, so that, in most cases, they were not completely destroyed. Only those who remained in the "cities" after the expulsion of most of their non-military inhabitants (and those in surrounding villages) were "completely destroyed." Both perspectives accomplished God's purposes in giving Israel the land that he had promised to their forebears.

3. The Concept of Yahweh War

Scholars have spoken of the idea of "holy war" to describe a large complex of motifs in the Old Testament, in which the Lord fights for his people and gives them the victory.[28] A more precise term for this would be "Yahweh war," using the Bible's own term, מִלְחֲמֹת יְהוָה "Yahweh's wars" (see Num 21:14; 1 Sam 18:17; 25:28; cf. also Exod 17:16; 1 Sam 17:47).[29] In these passages, the Bible presents the battles as Yahweh's alone (see also Deut 20:1–4). The model for what Israel's kings should be, laid out in Deuteronomy 17:14–20, is profoundly counter-cultural: Rather than rely on the military (horses, chariots) or foreign alliances, the king was to immerse himself in the study of Torah and leave the battles to the Lord. More often than not, the Israelites flipped that model on its head and looked to its human leader for military deliverance (e.g., Judg 8:22–23; 1 Sam 8:5, 20).[30] Even when such warriors as Samson, Gideon, or David engaged in battle, the text makes it clear that Yahweh gave them their victories (e.g., 2 Sam 5:10, 19; 8:6, 14).

Essential in the idea of Yahweh wars is that the people be properly prepared and consecrated to receive this gift of victory from Yahweh's hands. This idea is much broader than the idea of חֵרֶם, but the חֵרֶם is sometimes a component part of the Yahweh war.[31]

The practice of חֵרֶם, while referred to extensively in the Old Testament, is not commonly seen in surrounding cultures. This is somewhat remarkable, given the bellicose nature of so many of these cultures and given their developed religious systems. The most well-known extrabiblical text with this meaning of the root is from the so-called Mesha Inscription, where Mesha, king of Moab, states that he had devoted Nebo and its inhabitants for destruction (חרם) to Ashtar-Chemosh, the national god

[28] The foundational study on so-called holy war is Gerhard von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991 [1952 original]). See also Patrick D. Miller Jr., *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1973); Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1980); Sa-Moon Kang, *Divine War in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East*, BZAW 177 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989); Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). More recent and extensive bibliographic data may be found in Trent C. Butler, *Joshua 1–12*, 2nd ed., WBC 7A (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 175–78, 353.

[29] The key publication on this is Gwilym H. Jones, "'Holy War' or 'Yahweh War'?" *VT* 25 (1975): 642–58. See also Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Tough Questions about God and His Actions in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2015), 34–45.

[30] See David M. Howard Jr., "The Case for Kingship in Deuteronomy and the Former Prophets," *WTJ* 52 (1990): 101–15.

[31] Kyle Dunham helpfully shows that the two concepts may overlap but are not synonymous. See Kyle C. Dunham, "Yahweh War and ḥerem: The Role of *Covenant*, Land, and Purity in the Conquest of Canaan," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 21 (2016): 7–30.

of the Moabites.[32] Another is an Old South Arabic Sabaean text, where Karib-ilu, king of Sabā (biblical Sheba) "devoted the city of Nashan to the חֵרֶם by burning"[33] as an offering to the moon god 'Almaqah.[34]

Second Kings 19:11 mentions the Assyrian kings "utterly destroying" (חרם) lands they conquered, but it is not in the context of religious destruction. Some parallels between biblical "Yahweh war" and ancient Near East warfare do exist,[35] but the specific idea of חֵרֶם and parallels to it are rare.[36]

4. The Ethics of Yahweh War

4.1. The Problem

The most burning question for many people in this connection is, How can a holy, just, loving God have commanded such harsh actions (labeled as "genocide" by many)?[37] As mentioned above, this is probably the most vexing question in the Old Testament for many people, Christians and non-Christians alike. They are troubled (at best) and repelled (at worst) by what they see as a bloodthirstiness displayed by the Israelites and the God who had demanded the annihilations of the חֵרֶם.[38]

R. Goetz is representative when he states that "the book of Joshua is embarrassment enough, with its ferocity and its religious advocacy of mass murder." He speaks of Calvin's "cold-blooded acceptance of the Deuteronomic theology of the חֵרֶם."[39] He goes on to speak of "the guilt of the living God"

[32] This is written on the so-called Moabite Stone (see *ANET*, 320). Mesha was a contemporary of the Israelite kings Omri and Ahab; indeed, he mentions both as enemies in his inscription.

[33] Lauren A. S. Monroe, "Israelite, Moabite and Sabaean War-*ḥērem* Traditions and the Forging of National Identity: Reconsidering the Sabaean Text RES 3945 in Light of Biblical and Moabite Evidence," *VT* 57 (2007): 318–41 (citing 333). Karib-ilu was a contemporary of the Judahite kings Hezekiah and Manasseh.

[34] A חֵרֶם-*t*ype practice has also been identified in a Hittite text—though the root חרם is not used. See the discussion and bibliography in Dunham, "Yahweh War and ḥerem," *24–25.* For other possible related ideas in the ancient Near East, see Theodore J. Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God: Ancient Israelite Religion Through the Lens of Divinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 831, n. 142, and bibliography there.

[35] See J. J. Niehaus, "Joshua and Ancient Near Eastern Warfare," *JETS* 31 (1988): 37–50.

[36] See also Lohfink, *TDOT* 5:189–93.

[37] Other treatments of the ethical issues raised by the חֵרֶם *o*r Yahweh war that parallel the arguments herein are the following (only a small sample of the extensive literature on the subject)*:* Eugene H. Merrill, "The Case for Moderate Discontinuity" in C. S. Cowles et al.*, Show them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 61–94; Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 158–206; Kaiser, *Tough Questions about God and His Actions in the Old Testament*, 27–45; Kaiser, "The God of Love and His Command to Annihilate (herem) the Canaanites," in *The Old Testament Yesterday and Today: Essays in Honor of Michael P. V. Barrett*, ed. Rhett Dodson (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2019), 245–55; Tremper Longman III, *Confronting Old Testament Controversies: Pressing Questions about Evolution, Sexuality, History, and Violence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2019), 123–205; Paul Copan, *Is God a Vindictive Bully? Reconciling Portrayals of God in the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 187–236. A helpful summary of the four major positions is Charlie Trimm, *The Destruction of the Canaanites: God, Genocide, and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022). An excellent, full-length treatment of the issues is Copan and Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide?*

[38] See esp. Joshua 6:21; 8:22; 10:26, 28, 30, 32–33, 35, 37, 39–40; 11:8, 10–14.

[39] Ronald Goetz, "Joshua, Calvin, and Genocide," *ThTo* 32 (1975): 263–74; quotes from p. 264.

because of actions taken that, were they not committed or commanded by God, we would condemn as unspeakable and unjustifiable atrocities.[40] Or, see Carolyn Sharp's discussion of "Joshua and the Rhetoric of Violence," which begins "Joshua is a genocidal and colonizing text."[41]

In recent years, the "New Atheists" have pressed the argument even more strongly, represented by the famous quote from Richard Dawkins:

> The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all of fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.[42]

4.2. Toward a Solution, Part A: First Principles

By way of response, we must first reiterate the point made above, namely, that a careful reading of the biblical texts reveals that God's commands were more focused on driving the Canaanites out of the land than they were on killing every last, living person. This point is too often misunderstood or ignored, whether by Christian apologists trying to justify the "total" exterminations or by non-Christians accusing Israel and the God of the Bible of barbaric "genocide." But, as we've seen, there was no genocide in the sense commonly understood.

Having said this, hard questions nevertheless remain, whether there was indeed a total extermination of almost all of the Canaanites (as is commonly supposed by many) or whether the killings were only partial, focusing on Canaanite leadership and militaries. Even if the main results were that most Canaanites were displaced from their lands (and not killed), the question still remains as to whether this was fair and just or not; after all, massive displacements still would have been extremely upsetting to people's lives and livelihoods. This also raises the question as to what claim Israel had at all to what many regard as the Canaanites' own land. What right did Israel have to displace the Canaanites from "their" lands?[43]

To address this last concern first, we must note that *no* peoples ever in history have had inalienable rights to "their" lands. The earth and all its lands were created by God himself and are owned by him, not by any peoples or nations. After all, the Bible asserts that "the earth and everything in it, the world and its inhabitants, belong to the Lord" (Ps 24:1) and "the earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it" (1 Cor 10:26). Furthermore, God rebukes the Israelites in Psalm 50:10–12 by stating that "every animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird of the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and everything in it is mine."

[40] Goetz, "Joshua, Calvin, and Genocide," 273. See also D. F. Wright, "Accommodation and Barbarity in John Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries," in A. G. Auld, ed., *Understanding Poets and Prophets*, JSOTSup 152 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 413–27.

[41] Carolyn J. Sharp, *Joshua*, SHBC (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 2019), 44–53 (citing 44); her next section is entitled "Postcolonial Resistance" (pp. 53–57).

[42] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 51.

[43] Today, this also raises the controversial question as to whether the modern-day state of Israel and the Jews there have any right to live in lands where many regard them as "occupiers," even "genocidal." For a good example of such anti-Israel animus today, see Rachel Havrelock, *The Joshua Generation: Israeli Occupation and the Bible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020). For a more moderating view, see Pitkänen, "Joshua, Israel, and the Palestinians," in *Joshua*, 89–99.

We should be very clear that God's own people, Israel, were not inheriting Canaan because of any merit of their own. Deuteronomy 9:5 states that "You are not going to take possession of their land because of your righteousness or your integrity. Instead, the Lord your God will drive out these nations before you because of their wickedness." Nor did they have any permanent claim of "ownership" on it. Before they even crossed into the land of Canaan, God warned Israel that if they turned away from him, "you will quickly perish from the land you are about to cross the Jordan to possess. You will not live long there, but you will certainly be destroyed. The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be reduced to a few survivors among the nations where the Lord your God will drive you" (Deut 4:26–27). And we also see that God is not open to a charge of having a double standard, favoring only his own people, since he did follow through on this by exiling his own people into Assyria and Babylon because of their sins in 2 Kings 17 (Israel) and in 2 Kings 24–25 (Judah).

The earth and its lands have always been God's, and their apportionment to different peoples and nations—"on loan," so to speak—never has given any of them permanent, inalienable claim to them. Lands have been his alone to give or take away, so attempts to characterize the Canaanites as "victims," wrongly expelled from "their" lands, is to misconstrue or misunderstand the biblical picture.

Nevertheless, concerning the destructions of the חֵרֶם, the biblical record is stark and unblinking when it speaks of these things. These are indeed horrifying, and they should cause all of us as human beings to cringe when considering them, even if the destructions were completely justified—and only partial. However, the human perspective is not always the divine perspective. God had commanded Moses that Israel was to carry out this destruction and/or displacement in Canaan (Deut 7:2; 20:16–17; Josh 11:15, 20), and Moses had so instructed Joshua (11:12, 15; cf. 10:40). God also commanded this to Joshua himself (6:17, with reference to Jericho). Thus, the question remains concerning God's basic justice.

The Bible does not address the question directly in this way, but we can discern the outlines of an answer in the points below.

4.3. Toward a Solution, Part B: Purity of Israel's Worship

The special emphasis at the time of Joshua was that Israel was to keep itself holy, undefiled, and the land itself was to be undefiled. In the particular circumstances of the Israelites entering the long-promised land as a newly constituted nation, it was vitally important that they do so uncontaminated by pagan worship. Already they had yielded to temptation in connection with the Baal of Peor in the wilderness (Num 25; 31:1–4). In Deuteronomy, the Lord had made his intentions clear: "You shall utterly destroy them … *precisely so that* they might not teach you to do according to all their abominations which they have done on behalf of their gods" (20:17–18; author translation).

When Israel did not obey the command to utterly destroy things, this did indeed contaminate its religion. This is most visible in the story of Achan's and Israel's faithlessness concerning things set apart to the Lord (Joshua 7). When Israel was defeated at Ai as a result of their disobedience, Joshua and the elders of the people went into mourning (7:7–9).

God's response to Israel's faithlessness was couched in terms of holiness (7:10–15). *Israel* (not just Achan) had sinned, and he would not tolerate it. This passage shows that God is not open to the charge of a double standard with reference to his treatment of Israel and the Canaanites, as we've also noted above. Earlier, God had ordered Israel to drive out and/or exterminate the Canaanites because of their

sin, but now he also held all Israel responsible for the sin of one man. The overriding concern in *all* such episodes was his demand for holiness and obedience and the concern for purity of worship.

Thus, Joshua 7:11 underlines the seriousness of the offense attributed to the nation: Israel had (1) "sinned," (2) "violated" the Lord's covenant, (3) "taken" some of what was set apart, (4) "stolen," (5) "deceived," and (6) "put" those things among their own belongings. The quick, staccato accumulation of these verbs in verse 11 accentuates the severity of the action, since it was essentially one act, but it is described in these various ways. Verse 12 shows that the people of Israel themselves now were, literally, a thing "set apart for destruction" as a result of this offense (as Jericho had already been). God would no longer be with Israel, until the sin was removed from the camp. Verse 13 again emphasizes the importance of holiness in God's eyes: the people were to consecrate themselves, since they had been defiled by the presence of the things set apart.

Achan was found out, and he and his family were stoned and burned (7:16–26). Because he had violated God's command concerning the loot from Jericho, Achan found himself in the position of the inhabitants of Jericho: he himself was set apart for destruction. He in effect had become a Canaanite by his actions.

Another illustration of the effects of not completely destroying pagan influences comes in the book of Judges. Despite the indications in Joshua 10–11 that Israel completely carried out the requirements of complete annihilation, Judges 1 indicates that the various tribes did not fully obey.[44] Judges 2—and indeed the rest of the book of Judges—shows the effects this had on Israel's life: the people turned to the Baals, the gods of the Canaanites who were still living among them, and they forsook the Lord. Israel's worship did not remain pure.

Complete, total destruction of every last, living Canaanite was not necessary for accomplishing God's purposes in giving Israel a clean start in an uncontaminated land, spiritually speaking. This is why God's main emphasis was on driving the Canaanites out of this land, and exterminating only those who remained, whether religious, political, administrative, or military personnel—or simply "average" citizens who refused to leave.

And, related to this, we can hardly imagine that the average Canaanite, upon hearing what Israel's God had done to the Egyptians and to Sihon and Og (Josh 2:9–11)—let alone what he was doing in an organized, sequential fashion to places like Jericho (ch. 6), Ai (ch. 8), and the southern and northern coalitions of kings (chs. 10–11)—would simply stay put, waiting to be annihilated. Israel's reputation continually preceded it (2:10; 5:1; 9:2, 3; 10:1; 11:1), so there would have been no excuse for the average Canaanite citizen not to take some action to avoid destruction. The example of Rahab (and even the Gibeonites) shows that destruction was not inevitable. Those who embraced Israel's God would be spared. Sadly, it appears that most Canaanites did not.

4.4. Toward a Solution, Part C: The Canaanites' Sins in General

Concerning sin, we should first note that, from God's perspective, *all* peoples have sinned and fallen short of his standards (Rom 3:23) and thus are deserving of the severest punishment (6:23). Thus, on this level, the Canaanites only received what all peoples—then and now—deserve, and any peoples who have been spared are so spared only by God's grace. Sin is a harsh reality, but its absolute affront to the holy God is clearly taught in the Scriptures and too often ignored in the modern day.

[44] See esp. Judges 1:19, 21, 28–34. See the comments on 10:40–43 for a discussion of the different perspectives in Joshua 10–11 and Judges 1.

While it is entirely true that the Canaanites only received what all people deserve, and therefore this could conceivably stand as a sufficient answer to the question, this answer is somewhat incomplete, since it is clear that God did not choose to annihilate other peoples in biblical times (or since) who also were sinful. What was distinctive about the Canaanite situation that triggered the unprecedented injunctions to drive out or destroy everyone and everything?

While we cannot answer this question definitively, we *can* say that biblical and extrabiblical evidence alike portray the Canaanites as wicked in the extreme, more so than almost any other nation. Early on, a preview of the Canaanites' sin was presented to Abraham, where he was told that the fulfillment of the promise to him would be delayed, in part because "the sin of the Amorites is not yet complete" (Gen 15:16; see also Deut 9:4–5). That is, the return of Abraham's descendants finally to inherit the land would have as part of its mission the punishing of the Canaanites for their sin.[45] For many years, the Canaanites' sins would not justify the annihilation that would come when the Israelites took the land. Indeed, here we see God's grace and long-suffering in full view, since he did not exact punishment immediately, but rather waited for centuries until their sins had reached a tipping point, so to speak. That point came in the time of Joshua.

In the Bible itself, the sins of the Canaanites are condemned in several places. In the most detailed passage (Lev 18:24–30), Israel is solemnly warned to abstain from the many abominations that the Canaanites had practiced (see also v. 3). The larger context makes it clear that the entire list of sins in 18:6–23 were ones that the Canaanites practiced. These included engaging in incest, adultery, child sacrifice, homosexual activity, and bestiality. Furthermore, in Deuteronomy 9:4–5, the wickedness of the nations in the land of Canaan is given as a major reason why the Lord would drive them out before Israel. So again, the Israelites' displacement of the Canaanites was in part a punishment for their wickedness. Even further, we should note that the promise to Abraham included the provision that God would curse anyone who cursed Israel (Gen 12:3), and the Canaanites sought to destroy Israel on at least three occasions (Josh 9:1–2; 10:1–5; 11:1– 5).

The evidence outside the Bible confirms the biblical picture of a particularly debased culture in Canaan. Archaeological excavation has shown that the practice of child sacrifice was particularly the province of the Canaanites (=Phoenicians) and their descendants who migrated westward to Carthage.[46] As one scholar notes, "The most famous—or notorious—example of Phoenician religious practice is infant sacrifice. It is … abundantly attested archaeologically, although virtually all such attestations come from the colonies. In Carthage as many as 20,000 urns with infant and animal bones were buried in the tophet (the biblical word for such sanctuaries) over 600 years."[47] Or this, from another scholar: "Child sacrifice was an essential element of Phoenician religion. Although this ancient rite seems to have been obsolete in the Phoenician motherland, it continued to be practiced vigorously by the Western

[45] The term "Amorite" in Genesis 15:16 is synonymous with "Canaanite" here. See my *Joshua* commentary on 3:10.

[46] See Paul G. Mosca, "Child Sacrifice in Canaanite and Israelite Religion" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1975), esp. chs. I–II. Mosca also showed that child sacrifice was practiced in Israel and Judah (ch. III). But, significantly, its practice in Israel was strongly condemned by God (e.g., Lev 18:21; Deut 18:10); it was the practice of those who turned away from God, such as Ahaz (2 Kgs 16:3). See also L. E. Stager and S. R. Wolff, "Child Sacrifice at Carthage: Religious Rite and Population Control?," *BAR* 10.1 (1984): 30–51.

[47] Richard J. Clifford, "Phoenician Religion," *BASOR* 279 (1990): 58; the full essay is on pp. 55–64.

Phoenicians well into the Late Roman period."[48] Despite the lack of clear evidence for this practice in Canaan/Phoenicia proper, nevertheless "the Phoenician origin of the rite stands starkly revealed in the antiquity and geographical distribution of the western precincts. By the seventh century B.C., we find such precincts firmly entrenched in North Africa, Sicily, Sardinia, and … Malta. The only plausible conclusion is that these sacrificial enclosures were founded by Phoenician colonists and modelled on mainland prototypes."[49]

Canaanite religion was also highly sexualized, including incest, adultery, homosexual activity, and bestiality, as noted in the sordid list of Canaanite abominations in Leviticus 18. For example, Deuteronomy 23:17 (23:18 MT) mentions both male and female cult prostitutes: "No Israelite woman is to be a cult prostitute (קְדֵשָׁה), and no Israelite man is to be a cult prostitute (קָדֵשׁ)." These were not the type of prostitute known the world over—like Rahab (זוֹנָה). Rather, they were "sacred" or "cult" prostitutes; they were attached to shrines of false worship imported from Canaan into Israel and Judah. Most tragically (and ironically!), these terms are related to the Hebrew word for holiness: קָדוֹשׁ. This represented a complete and utter debasement of the idea of holiness.[50]

By the time of King Josiah, male cult prostitutes had even set up shop in the temple itself: "He also tore down the houses of the male cult prostitutes that were in the Lord's temple, in which the women were weaving tapestries for Asherah" (2 Kgs 23:7). The reference to Asherah here—the wife of the high god El in Canaanite mythology—adds to the debased picture. Josiah also "brought out the Asherah pole from the Lord's temple to the Kidron Valley outside Jerusalem. He burned it at the Kidron Valley, beat it to dust, and threw its dust on the graves of the common people" (2 Kgs 23:6).[51]

---

[48] Charles R. Krahmalkov, "Phoenicia," *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. D. N. Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1056. See also Krahmalkov, *Phoenician-Punic Dictionary*, OLA 90 (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 39–40 (s.v. "ZRM" [the term for "infant sacrifice victim"]) and 286 (s.v. "MLK VI" [the term for "human (child) sacrifice"]).

[49] Mosca, "Child Sacrifice in Canaanite and Israelite Religion," 98.

[50] This idea is downplayed by Richard S. Hess, "'Because of the Wickedness of These Nations' [Deut 9:4–5]: The Canaanites—Ethical or Not?," in *For Our Good Always: Studies on the Message and Influence of Deuteronomy in Honor of Daniel I. Block*, ed. Jason S. DeRouchie, Jason Gile, and Kenneth J. Turner (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 17–38. He argues that Canaanite literature shows a higher ethics in some areas: "attempts to generalize regarding 'Canaanite ethics,' whether positive or negative, are over-simplified and not productive of a more accurate and nuanced understanding of these cultures using the available literary sources native to or at least copied by these peoples" (p. 36). He states that Christians' "own moral character and practice often appears very comparable to that of the Canaanites" and that we too have fallen short of the glory of God (p. 37). While it is of course true that "all have sinned" (Rom 3:23), Hess's attempts to draw moral equivalences between the Canaanites and other ancient (or modern) cultures seem somewhat of a stretch.

[51] For more on Canaanite cultic practices, see J. Day, "Canaanite Religion," *ABD* 1:831–37; Keith N. Schoville, "Canaanites and Amorites," in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 157–82; William A. Ward, "Phoenicians," in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 183–206; Christopher A. Rollston, "Phoenicia and the Phoenicians," in *The World around the Old Testament: The People and Places of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and Brent A. Strawn, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 267–308.

4.5. Toward a Solution, Part D: The Canaanites' Sins against God's People Israel

Another perspective on the sins of the Canaanites is provided in the book of Joshua. Beyond being a punishment for their sins in general—which were especially heinous, judged against those of nations around them—the dispossession or destruction of the Canaanites was also due to their rebellion against God and his people. This harkens all the way back to God's promise to Abraham that "I will curse anyone who treats you with contempt" (Gen 12:3). Here in Joshua, we see that almost every battle that Israel engaged in was defensive in nature, as Canaanite coalitions repeatedly arrayed themselves against Israel to attack them (see 9:1–2; 10:1–5; 11:1–5).

According to Joshua 11:19–20, "No city made peace with the Israelites except the Hivites who inhabited Gibeon; all of them were taken in battle. For it was the Lord's intention to harden their hearts, so that they would engage Israel in battle, be completely destroyed without mercy, and be annihilated, just as the Lord had commanded Moses." This passage shows that the destruction of the Canaanites in chapters 10–11 was orchestrated by God himself: he hardened their hearts so that he could completely destroy those opposing him.

Thus, the text is stark and harsh: the idea and activity of hardening originated from God himself, and it was for the purpose of destroying the Canaanite resistance through battle, with no mercy.

The reference to God's hardening the Canaanites' hearts obviously recalls the same idea in the events of the exodus, where God hardened the pharaoh's heart (e.g., Exod 9:12; 10:1, 27; 11:10) and sent the plagues. A careful reading of the Exodus passages, however, shows that God's actions in Egypt were tied to the pharaoh's defiance. His hardening of the pharaoh's heart must be seen in the context of the pharaoh's own stubbornness and resistance to God. Ultimately, he was not doing to the pharaoh anything that his heart was not already predisposed to do.[52]

The Canaanites' resistance to the Lord can be seen in a similar light. They heard about Israel's victories (Josh 2:9–11; 5:1; 9:1, 3; 10:1; 11:1), and most of them made war against Israel and its God; as a result, they were shown no mercy and were annihilated. God's hardening of their hearts (11:20) must be seen in the same way as the hardening of the pharaoh's heart: in the context of their own stubbornness and resistance of Israel's God. Had they been willing to react as Rahab (or even the Gibeonites) had done, or had they left the land on their own before the oncoming Israelites, the results would have been different for them.[53]

4.6. Toward a Solution, Part E: Hyperbolic Language in Joshua

Finally, we must also note, as hinted above, that some of the language in Joshua has to be read hyperbolically, not literally, based on internal evidence in the book. This helps to explain such verses as 13:1 ("a great deal of the land remains to be possessed") or the many places where we see people remaining in areas supposedly conquered and destroyed completely by the Israelites (see 11:22; 13:2–6; 14:12; 15:63; 16:10; 17:12–13; 18:2–3; 19:47; 23:4–5, 7, 12–13; and Judges 1)—all coming *after* "total annihilation" passages such as Joshua 10:40: "So Joshua conquered the whole region—the hill country, the Negev, the Judean foothills, and the slopes—with all their kings, *leaving no survivors*. He *completely*

[52] On this, see Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 252–56.

[53] See my *Joshua* commentary on 11:19–20 for further discussion of this perspective.

destroyed [חרם] every living being, as the Lord, the God of Israel, had commanded."[54] So here, too, there is no "genocide" as it is commonly understood.

5. The New Testament and Violence

The New Testament is usually thought of as the testament of peace and non-violence, and it does indeed affirm these many times. See, for example, Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (Matt 5:9), or "if anyone slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also" (5:39), or "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (5:44).

Yet, the New Testament does not reject violence or harsh judgment in absolute terms. For example, Jesus himself did not hesitate to display righteous anger, most dramatically in his excoriation of the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23. Or note when he forcibly cleansed the temple of the moneychangers: "Jesus went into the temple and threw out all those buying and selling. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the chairs of those selling doves" (21:12). Note that the gospel of John tells us that this was more than a fit of passion, because Jesus took time to fashion a whip before driving them out: "After making a whip out of cords, he drove everyone out of the temple with their sheep and oxen. He also poured out the money changers' coins and overturned the tables" (John 2:15). The book of Jude even reminds us of Jesus's destructive actions against those who did not believe in Old Testament times: "Now I want to remind you … that Jesus saved a people out of Egypt and later destroyed those who did not believe" (Jude 5).

Note also the harsh fate of Ananias and Sapphira, who were struck dead at the apostle Peter's feet when they lied about their sale of land (Acts 5:1–11).

The apostle Paul certainly did not shrink from speaking of harsh retribution. Speaking to the high priest Ananias, after Ananias had ordered his men to strike Paul on the mouth, he responded, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall!" (Acts 23:3). Or this: "Alexander the coppersmith did great harm to me. The Lord will repay him according to his works" (2 Tim 4:14).

The book of Revelation is replete with harsh judgment and retribution against evildoers. See, e.g., the voice of the martyrs in Revelation 6:9–10: "When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered because of the word of God and the testimony they had given. They cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, the one who is holy and true, how long until you judge those who live on the earth and avenge our blood?'" Lest it be countered that this refers to eschatological, not earthly, judgment, consider this *temporal* judgment that Jesus pronounced against the church at Thyatira: "Look, I will throw (the false prophetess Jezebel) into a sickbed and those who commit adultery with her into great affliction. Unless they repent of her works, I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am the one who examines minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you according to your works" (Rev 2:22–23).

[54] See further the introductory comments on 10:40–43, as well as such resources as Copan and Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide*, 84–93; Copan, *Is God a Vindictive Bully?*, 200–6; James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 38–43; and K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing*, JSOTSup 98 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990): 190–92, 227–28, 241–47.

And, significantly, the New Testament does not condemn the violence in the Old Testament, but rather assumes or even affirms it in many instances.[55] Even limiting ourselves to New Testament references to the violence in Joshua, we see Stephen affirming that *God* drove out the Canaanites before Joshua (Acts 7:45), Paul affirming the same thing (Acts 13:19), and the author of Hebrews *praising* Old Testament violent characters "who by faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the raging of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, gained strength in weakness, became mighty in battle, and put foreign armies to flight" (Heb 11:33–34). In none of these instances do New Testament characters or authors condemn the violence in the Old Testament.

6. Concluding Thoughts

What of the חֵרֶם and Christians today? Should we derive some imperatives for our own—or our nation's—behavior? In one sense, yes: The book of Joshua should remind us of the terrible affront that any type of sin is to a holy God. We should hate evil just as God does. But should we take the types of actions we find in Joshua against the Canaanites? The answer here is "no."

We need to remember that the instructions to Israel to drive out or annihilate the Canaanites were specific in time, intent, and geography. That is, Israel was not given a blanket permission to do the same to *any* peoples they encountered, at any time or in any place. It was limited to the crucial time when Israel was just establishing itself as a theocracy under God, to protect Israel's worship, as well as to punish these specific peoples.[56] Thus, harsh as it is to our sensibilities, we should remember that it was for very clearly stated reasons, and that it was very carefully circumscribed.[57]

This should caution us in attempting to apply the principles of *the mass displacements* or the חֵרֶם to the modern day. While God abhors evil of every kind and Christians are to oppose it vigorously, the extremes of the חֵרֶם are not enjoined upon Christians to practice today.[58] Even in what some people see

[55] My argument in this paragraph follows Copan and Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide?*, 37–47 (ch. 3: "The God of the Old Testament Versus the God of the New?"), esp. pp. 42–46.

[56] Arie Versluis also makes this point: "in Genesis to Kings the root חרם is used almost exclusively in connection with the conquest of the land of Canaan and the associated elimination of (the practices of) the nations of Canaan," i.e., it was not an unlimited command to practice חרם against any nation at any time. See Versluis, "Devotion and/or Destruction? The Meaning and Function of חרם in the Old Testament," *ZAW* 128 (2016): 244 (the full essay is on pp. 233–46).

[57] God commanded Saul to annihilate the Amalekites (an order he did not carry out; 1 Samuel 15) and Ahab to do the same to Ben-hadad (1 Kgs 20:42), but these again were circumscribed and limited orders. See Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 106–9, on the Amalekite situation.

[58] In today's post-9/11 world, many people wonder what similarities between the biblical חרם and Islamic jihad there might be (if any). We cannot address this in any depth here except to say that there are many significant differences. For in-depth engagement with this question (and bibliographies), see Paul Copan, "Aren't the Bible's 'Holy Wars' Just Like Islamic Jihad? Parts One, Two, Three," in *When God Goes to Starbucks* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), chs. 12–14, esp. ch. 14; and Copan and Flannagan, "Are Yahweh Wars in the Old Testament Just like Islamic Jihad?" in *Did God Really Command Genocide?*, ch. 21. More briefly, see Kaiser, "The Christian and Jihad," in *Tough Questions about God and His Actions*, 44.

as "barbaric" Old Testament times, the חֵרֶם was limited. God worked against evil during most of the Old Testament period, as he does today, in less drastic ways.

Themelios 49.3 (2024): 607–18

Reading the Psalter as a Book

– S. D. Ellison –

Davy Ellison is the director of training at Irish Baptist College in Moira and a lay elder at Antrim Baptist Church, Northern Ireland.

****

Abstract: The canonical shape of the Psalter has enjoyed concentrated attention in the academe for more than four decades. While scholars have agreed on the effort, they have not always agreed on the results. The message of the Psalter, when considered canonically, remains debated. This article distils some of the key pieces of evidence that the Psalter bears traces of editorial activity—thus suggesting it is a purposefully ordered collection—and then proposes a reading of the Psalter that fits this evidence. Some theological implications connected to such a reading are noted throughout. The hope is that this article might elicit renewed vigour in the task of reading the Psalter as a book.

****

Many things that are beautiful on their own create beauty of a different degree when placed together. A single bird flitting around the garden is intriguing to watch—but thousands of them flocking in the sky is mesmerising. A tree towering upwards is majestic—but tens of thousands of them stretching in all directions as far as the eye can see is breath-taking. A solitary snowflake is delicate, intricate, and unique—but billions of them together completely alter a landscape. Likewise with the book of Psalms. An individual psalm is a piece of art worthy of study in its own right—beautiful all on its own. But viewing all 150 together as a purposefully ordered collection reveals another degree of beauty.

The aim in this article is to glimpse this other degree of beauty in the Psalter by viewing it as a *book*—as a purposefully ordered collection. It necessitates three steps: First, a presentation of the evidence for reading 150 individual poems as a purposefully ordered, unified collection. Second, an outline of this collection's narrative impulse. Third, and threaded throughout the narrative impulse as it is outlined, brief reflections on some of the theological values that emerge from such a reading of the Psalter.[1] When read as a book, the Psalter possesses a collective beauty and weight that cannot be gained by examining a single psalm in isolation.

[1] As Kyle C. Dunham, "Viewing the Psalms through the Lens of Theology: Research Trends in the Twenty-First Century," *JETS* 66 (2023): 455, notes: "From its inception the Psalter has proved a rich repository for theological reflection," sentiments echoed by Bullock. See C. Hassell Bullock, *Theology from the Psalms: The Story of God's Steadfast Love* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 1, 47, where he describes the Psalter as "Israel's theology compacted in one book" and "a repository of Israel's theology through the centuries."

Such a reading of the Psalter is by no means new: "This is now the dominant subject of research in Psalms studies."[2] The publication of Gerald Wilson's *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* in 1985 often demarcates the watershed moment in this line of enquiry in Psalms studies.[3] Since then, a consensus has been growing that the Psalter does possess evidence of editorial activity, as the volume of publications corroborates.[4] The meaning of the Psalter's narrative, however, lacks a similar consensus. As Howard and Snearly observe: "Where agreement begins to breakdown … concerns the nature of that storyline."[5] The following aims to reinvigorate the search for consensus concerning the message of the Psalter, and, along the way, to evidence the theological benefit of reading the Psalter as a book.

1. Evidence for Reading the Psalter as a Book

The first task is distilling the evidence that 150 discrete psalms can be read as a unified book. Space permits the presentation of four primary pieces of evidence.[6] Even so, this snapshot of the evidence confirms that reading the Psalter as a book is legitimate.

First, the Psalter possesses an introduction. Psalms 1–2 form a two-part introduction to the Psalter. Given every other psalm in Book One possesses a Davidic superscription, these two psalms are evidently set apart by the absence of superscriptions.[7] As Cole observes regarding the lack of superscriptions in Psalms 1–2, "Their absence would appear to indicate recognition of their mutual prefatory function."[8] Psalms 1–2 are tied together with both lexical and thematic features. Lexically, they are bracketed by an inclusio (אַשְׁרֵי, "blessed" in 1:1; 2:12), both open with the image of meditation/plotting (the same Hebrew root underlies both images: הָגָה), and both end with a consideration of the "way" (דֶּרֶךְ in 1:6; 2:12).[9] Thematically, both psalms appear to present the same person. In Psalm 1 it is a nameless righteous person, while in Psalm 2 the individual is identified as the king—YHWH's anointed. Reflecting on the wording of Joshua 1:8 and the Kingship Law in Deuteronomy 17:14–20, it is not difficult to appreciate the royal overtones in Psalm 1. Cole explains that "Psalm 1 speaks of a future conquering king using Joshua as a pattern and, as such, is as 'royal' a psalm as the following Psalm 2. Its affixing to, and close integration with, Psalm 2 simply confirms further that a king is in view."[10] Furthermore,

[2] David M. Howard Jr. and Michael K. Snearly, "Reading the Psalter as a Unified Book: Recent Trends," in *Reading the Psalms Theologically*, ed. David M. Howard Jr. and Andrew J. Schmutzer, SSBT (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2023), 4.

[3] There is, however, evidence that recognising the Psalter as a book has a much longer heritage. See Steffen Jenkins, "The Antiquity of Psalter Shape Efforts," *TynBul* 71 (2020): 161–80.

[4] See the extensive survey of material in Howard and Snearly, "Reading the Psalter as a Unified Book."

[5] Howard and Snearly, "Reading the Psalter as a Unified Book," 4.

[6] For a more fulsome presentation of the evidence, see S. D. Ellison, "Hope for a Davidic King in the Psalter's Utopian Vision" (PhD diss., Queen's University, 2021), 47–103.

[7] In Book One, Psalms 1–41, only Psalms 1, 2, 10, and 33 lack superscriptions. Psalms 10 and 33 are, however, intimately connected with the preceding Davidic psalms, giving them a Davidic hue.

[8] Robert L. Cole, *Psalms 1–2: Gateway to the Psalter*, HBM 37 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013), 2.

[9] This article follows the versification of the MT.

[10] Cole, *Psalms 1–2*, 63.

ancient commentators paid careful attention to the relationship between the two psalms.[11] In agreement with Grant, "The best conclusion seems to be that these psalms were deliberately placed alongside one another because of their lexical, thematic and theological similarity as the dual introduction to the Psalter."[12]

Second, the Psalter possesses a corresponding conclusion. Psalms 146–150 form a unique collection of psalms that all begin and end with הַלְלוּ־יָהּ (transliterated as *hallelujah* and translated as "Praise the Lord!"). Book Five appears to have a doxology in Psalm 145:21 (for more on doxologies and divisions see below), thus further setting the five concluding psalms apart. Thematic links develop through the five-part conclusion, such as kingship and Zion.[13] Arguably, the five concluding psalms may correspond to the five books of the Psalter.[14] Furthermore, many of the themes present in the two-part introduction are picked up in the five-part conclusion: the wicked perish (1:5–6; 146:8–9), the peoples, kings, and judges of the earth are addressed (2:1, 2, 10; 148:7, 11), and the ones breaking bonds in Psalm 2 (v. 3) are bound in Psalm 149 (vv. 7–8).[15] It is reasonable to conclude that these five psalms function as a conclusion to the Psalter.

Third, within the Psalter there are five movements designated as books but which we might consider chapters. Psalms 41, 72, 89, 106, and 145 all contain a doxology at or near their end (41:14; 72:18–19; 89:53; 106:48; 145:21). The doxologies, although differing slightly, each share four elements in common: a blessing, the name of YHWH, an eternal time frame, and the term "amen" (145:21 lacks this concluding term but carries each of the other elements).[16] The Psalter therefore appears to be intentionally separated into five movements, each designated a book. As Hamilton observes, each of the "benedictions stand as punctuation marks at the end of the books within the Psalter."[17] These five books therefore evidence an internal, intentional structure to the Psalter. They are key features of the Psalter's shape.

Fourth, it is significant that the psalms within the Psalter are not arranged by genre or theme. This is a point made emphatically by Wilson in his groundbreaking study, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*. There, as part of his assessment of various indicators of editorial activity, he exhaustively examines the various methods of ordering ancient collections of hymns, psalms, and poetry before exploring the

[11] Justin Martyr (CE 100–165), Clement of Alexandria (CE 150–215), Tertullian (CE 160–220), Origen of Alexandria (CE 185–254), Eusebius of Caesarea (CE 263–339), Diodore of Tarsus (d. CE 390), Hilary of Poitiers (CE 310–368), and Jerome (CE 347–420). See Susan E. Gillingham, *A Journey of Two Psalms: The Reception of Psalms 1 and 2 in Jewish and Christian Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 38–61, 295; Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 145.

[12] Jamie A. Grant, *The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy's Kingship Law in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms*, AcBib 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 64.

[13] For more on this, see John S. Kselman, "Psalm 146 in Its Context," *CBQ* 50.4 (1988): 587–99; Donatella Scaiola, "The End of the Psalter," in *The Composition of the Book of Psalms*, ed. Erich Zenger, BETL 238 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 701–10.

[14] See, for example, Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Prayer, Praise and Prophecy: A Theology of the Psalms* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2009), 240.

[15] Michael K. Snearly, *The Return of the King: Messianic Expectation in Book V of the Psalter*, LHBOTS 624 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 179–80 outlines more correspondences in a helpful table.

[16] James M. Hamilton Jr., *Psalms Volume 1: Psalms 1–72*, EBTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2021), 23.

[17] Hamilton, *Psalms Volume 1*, 23.

Psalter for indications of a similar ordering methodology. Other ancient collections appear to factor in genre in their ordering, but not so the Psalms. Wilson concludes, "while the analysis of the distribution of genre terms in the pss-headings reveals the existence of clusters of terms spread throughout the Psalter, there is no evidence of any consistent attempt to group all the pss by genre categories as in the Mesopotamian catalogues."[18] Another ordering purpose must therefore exist and the second step necessary in this article will outline a convincing possibility.

The above four pieces of evidence permit the claim that the Psalter is in fact a *book* of psalms. Like any other book it possesses an introduction, conclusion, internal structure, and agenda that orders the whole. It is wholly justifiable to consider the 150 individual psalms as a collective literary unit. As Wilson asserts:

> Let us begin with the fact that the Psalter does have a shape. The one hundred fifty canonical psalms have come down to us in a particular arrangement that is traditional, if nothing else. This arrangement can be found in the versions (e.g. Greek, Latin, Syriac, and Aramaic) and, with the exception of some of the Qumran psalms manuscripts, dominates the Hebrew tradition as well. So, the question that confronts the student of the Psalter is not whether it has a shape but what the indicators of shape are. Further, one must ask what the significance of this shape is.[19]

2. Outlining the Psalter's Narrative Impulse

Step two must seek to set forth an ordering purpose in the Psalter—the significance of its shape. The indicators that the Psalter has a shape, presented in step one, aid the reader in discerning the message of the Psalter. This second step therefore outlines the Psalter's narrative impulse, arguing that the Psalter traces the history presented in the Old Testament.[20] The fivefold division of the Psalter is key to unlocking the narrative impulse. Step three weaves theological reflections throughout the narrative impulse as prompted by the Psalter's shape.

2.1. Book One: The Rise of the King

As noted above, the Psalter opens with a focus on the destinies of the righteous and the wicked as determined by their relation to YHWH's word and YHWH's king. Psalm 1 unambiguously sets up the division, affirming that the righteous one meditates on YHWH's torah and thus his way is known to YHWH—an idiom that confirms protection and care. On the other hand, the wicked perish. Psalm 2 relates this division to YHWH's anointed king who is seated in Zion. As Deuteronomy 17:14–20 stipulates, YHWH's chosen king is to be a student of torah. It is therefore justifiable to view the anointed king of Psalm 2 as the righteous one of Psalm 1. In doing so, it becomes apparent that the wicked do not simply spurn YHWH's torah, but rebel against his king. Thus, the Psalter's introduction—as any

[18] Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, SBLDS 76 (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985), 167.

[19] Gerald H. Wilson, "The Shape of the Book of Psalms," *Int* 46 (1992): 129.

[20] Similar, but independent, presentations can be found in Grogan, *Prayer, Praise & Prophecy*, 181–241; Michael Barber, *Singing in the Reign: The Psalms and the Liturgy of God's Kingdom* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2001), 81–133.

good narrative should do—establishes a tension that needs to be resolved. Who will prevail in the battle between the righteous and the wicked, the torah-abiding king and the rebellious kings of the nations?

Book One, which commences with this two-part introduction, proceeds to connect the nameless royal, torah-abiding individual of the introduction with King David. It does so initially by way of authorship ascription in the psalm superscriptions.[21] Virtually all the psalms of Book One are ascribed to David; only Psalms 1, 2, 10, and 33 lack Davidic superscriptions. While Psalms 1–2 form the introduction, Psalms 10 and 33 are intimately connected to the preceding psalms and are thus colored with a Davidic hue. Book One is therefore thoroughly Davidic. Consequently, the reader is invited to read the psalms of Book One in relation to the Davidic king.

The first book also develops the programmatic division established in the two-part introduction between the righteous and the wicked. The generic righteous/wicked division of Psalm 1 is specified as YHWH's chosen king (righteous) and the rebellious kings and nations (wicked) in Psalm 2. The ensuing psalms strongly allude to this conflict.[22] It is primarily the terminology present in Book One that develops this division, with Miller claiming that almost half of the references to the wicked in the Psalter, and slightly less than that to the righteous, occur in Book One.[23] The occurrence of the root אֹיֵב (“enemy”) alone is prolific.[24] Other roots possess some overlap in meaning: צָרַר/צַר (“adversary” or “foe”),[25] אָוֶן (“evildoers”),[26] רַע/רָעַע (“evildoers”),[27] עָנָו (“afflicted”),[28] עָנִי (“afflicted”),[29] and רָדַף (“pursuers” or “persecutors”).[30] Furthermore, there is the frequent appearance of רָשָׁע (“wicked”).[31] Thus, Book

[21] On reading the superscriptions as suggestive of authorship, see, R. Dean Anderson Jr., “The Division and Order of the Psalms,” *WTJ* 56 (1994): 226–27; Gordon J. Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed: Praying and Praising with the Psalms* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 68–71. Also see Habakkuk 3:1.

[22] See Carissa Quinn, *The Arrival of the King: The Shape and Story of Psalms 15–24*, SSBT (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2023), 158–76, for comments on the tension inherent in such a conflict, with particular focus on Psalms 15–24.

[23] Patrick D. Miller, “The Beginning of the Psalter,” in *Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. J. Clinton McCann Jr., JSOTSup 159 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 85.

[24] Just over 39% of occurrences in the Psalter are found in Book One: 3:8; 6:11; 7:6; 8:3; 9:4, 7; 13:3, 5; 17:9; 18:1, 4, 18, 38, 41, 49; 21:9; 25:2, 19; 27:2, 6; 30:2; 31:9, 16; 35:19; 37:20; 38:20; 41:3, 6, 12 (Book One has 29 occurrences; Books Two–Five have 45 occurrences).

[25] Almost 26% of occurrences in the Psalter are found in Book One: 3:2; 4:2; 6:8; 7:5, 7; 8:3; 10:5; 13:5, 14; 18:7; 23:5; 27:2, 12; 31:10, 12; 32:7 (Book One: 15 occurrences; Books Two–Five: 43 occurrences).

[26] Just over 32% of occurrences in the Psalter are found in Book One: 5:6; 6:9; 7:15; 10:7; 14:4; 28:3; 36:4, 5, 13; 41:7 (Book One: 10 occurrences; Books Two–Five: 21 occurrences).

[27] 45% of occurrences in the Psalter are found in Book One: 2:9; 5:5; 7:5, 10; 10:6, 15; 15:4 22:17; 23:4; 26:5; 27:2; 28:3, 4; 34:14, 15, 17; 36:5; 37:1, 8, 9, 19, 27; 41:6 (Book One: 23 occurrences; Books Two–Five: 28 occurrences).

[28] Just over 69% of occurrences in the Psalter are found in Book One: 9:13, 19; 10:12, 17; 22:27; 25:9 (x2); 34:3; 37:11 (Book One: 9 occurrences; Book Two: 4 occurrences).

[29] Just over 46% of occurrences in the Psalter are found in Book One: 9:13, 14, 19; 10:2, 9 (x2), 12; 12:6; 14:6; 18:28; 22:25; 25:16, 18; 31:8; 34:7; 35:10 (x2); 37:14; 40:18 (Book One: 19 occurrences; Books Two–Five: 22 occurrences).

[30] 45% of occurrences in the Psalter are found in Book One: 7:2, 6; 18:38; 23:6; 31:16; 34:15; 35:3, 6; 38:21 (Book One: 9 occurrences; Books Two–Five: 11 occurrences).

[31] Almost 49% of occurrences in the Psalter are found in Books One: 1:1, 4, 5, 6; 3:8; 5:5; 7:10; 9:6, 17, 18; 10:2, 3, 4, 13, 15 (x2); 11:2, 5, 6; 12:9; 17:9, 13; 18:22; 26:5; 28:3; 31:18; 32:10; 34:22; 36:2, 12; 37:10, 12, 14, 16, 17, 20, 21,

One depicts that the rulers have set themselves against YHWH's anointed (cf. 2:2). YHWH, however, knows the way of the righteous and so brings deliverance from the wicked. The roots חָלַץ ("deliver" or "rescue"),[32] נָצַל ("deliver" or "rescue"),[33] and פָּלַט ("deliver" or "rescue"),[34] both seeking or testifying deliverance, occur regularly. Salvation terminology is likewise repeated.[35] This testimony of deliverance, prominent in Book One, establishes two expectations: first, YHWH will watch over the righteous as promised in Psalm 1; and second, YHWH will enthrone his chosen king in Zion as promised in Psalm 2. It will necessitate the rest of the Psalter's narrative impulse to address these expectations.

Book One emphasizes that the anointed Davidic king can face his wicked enemies with the assurance of YHWH's deliverance. By the end of the book, this is David's testimony—he is set in YHWH's presence (41:13). One theological reflection that emerges in Book One and continues throughout the Psalter is that YHWH is sovereign—he alone directs human history. The psalms are unique in that while they are God's word to his people, they originated as man's words to God. This fact, however, teaches the reader about the theology of those who composed the psalms and the reality of the world: YHWH directs human history. If the authors of the psalms did not believe this to be so they would not have called out to him.

Considering the Psalter as a *book* aids the reader to better grasp this reality. As observed in the preceding paragraphs, in Book One it is YHWH who consistently aids David in his battle against the wicked (e.g., 18:1–4). In Book Two YHWH rescues the nation from its enemies (e.g., 44:5–9). In Book Three, even in the wake of exile, the psalmist cries to YHWH (e.g., 77:1–3). In Book Four praise is once again ignited with the memory and/or experience of YHWH's salvation (105:1–2). Indeed, in Book Five YHWH is praised for his consistently great deeds for his people (117). In every part of the narrative impulse, the psalmists turn to YHWH, and this template is apparent from the outset in Book One. As a result of its intimate connection with King David, it is possible to read Book One as a poetic companion to the establishing of Davidic kingship by YHWH. It testifies to the rise of the king under the sovereign care of YHWH. But further evidence for this claim must be found in Book Two.

2.2. Book Two: The Rise of the Kingdom

The trajectory initiated in Book One evolves in Book Two. A change in authorship ascriptions is the first indication of evolution. In Book Two the Psalter moves from exclusively Davidic authorship ascriptions to largely Levitical attributions. The Sons of Korah (42–49) and Asaph (50) are ascribed the opening psalms, while David is ascribed only 18 of the 31 psalms (51–65, 68–70) in Book Two. Book One ends with the king in YHWH's presence, Book Two commences with the nation—represented by the Levitical leaders—in YHWH's presence (42:5; 43:3–4). Indeed, Psalm 44 is the first communal psalm in the Psalter.

28, 32, 33, 34, 35, 38, 40; 39:2 (Book One: 45 occurrences; Books Two–Five: 47 occurrences).

[32] 6:5; 18:20; 34:8.

[33] 7:2, 3; 18:1, 18, 49; 22:9, 21; 25:20; 31:3, 16; 33:16, 19; 34:5, 18, 20; 35:10; 39:9; 40:13.

[34] 17:13; 18:3, 44, 49; 22: 5, 9; 31:2; 32:7; 37:40 (x2); 40:18.

[35] 3:7, 8; 6:4; 7:1, 10; 9:14; 12:1; 13:5; 14:7; 17:7; 18:2, 3, 27, 35, 46, 50; 20: 5, 6, 9; 21:1, 5; 22:1, 21; 24:5; 25:5; 27:1, 9; 28:8, 9; 31:2, 16; 34:6, 18; 35:3, 9; 36:6; 37:40. The references in this footnote refer to both יָשַׁע ("saved") and יְשׁוּעָה ("saved"). The term תְּשׁוּעָה ("salvation") also appears five times in Book One (33:17; 37:39; 38:23; 40:11, 17).

Book Two also progresses towards two concluding zeniths. The first is a Levitical zenith in Psalm 68. This psalm traces the journey of the Ark of the Covenant from Sinai to Jerusalem, a triumphant hymn recounting a succession of victories in Israel's history. YHWH's presence, as represented in the Ark, is therefore manifest in the nation's capital. The second is a royal zenith in Psalm 72. This psalm introduces another new authorship ascription: Solomon. Too much is happening in this psalm for it all to be treated here adequately. It is sufficient to note that it appears to be "the job description of the king in hymnic form"[36] which also serves as a prayer for successive kings, and in doing so marks the point of transition from Davidic kingship to Davidic dynasty.

This second book of the Psalter concludes at the apex of Israel's monarchy, the end of David's reign and the beginning of Solomon's. Book Two has therefore advanced the narrative impulse from the establishing of Davidic kingship to the celebration of Davidic dynasty. The portrait painted is idealized, indeed too highly idealized as the biblical narratives testify (cf. 1–2 Kings). This idealized picture asserts that throughout the centuries, from embryonic kingdom to dismembered state, YHWH directs human history by caring for, protecting, and sustaining his people. YHWH remains active, no matter the circumstances and their claims. Reading the Psalter as a book reaffirms the theological conviction that YHWH directs human history.[37] Just as St Colman's Cathedral in Cobh, Ireland, is visible from anywhere in the small town, so YHWH's governing of human history is visible from anywhere in the storyline. The Psalter's narrative impulse, mirroring Israel's history in the Old Testament, evidences as much. This confidence wanes, however, in Book Three. Nevertheless, Book Two ends with a confidence that the expectations established in Book One are to some degree being experienced.

2.3. Book Three: The Exile

Book Three abruptly halts any further development of the expectations established and experienced in Books One and Two. At least three features of Book Three mark the changed atmosphere: 1) authorship ascriptions; 2) idiosyncratic vocabulary; and 3) exilic allusions. The exile is the next chapter in the Psalter's narrative.

The noticeable shift in authorship ascriptions is the first indicator that something is different in Book Three. David, who has dominated the Psalter thus far, is almost completely absent (ascribed a single psalm, 86). Moreover, he is not replaced by another royal author—the king is absent. His voice is replaced by that of Asaph (73–83) and other Levitical authors (sons of Korah, 84–85, 87–88; Heman, 88; Ethan, 89). The king was deposed as a consequence of the exile; so also is his voice deposed in Book Three.

The appearance of idiosyncratic vocabulary indicates the second change in tone. Cole closes his study of Book Three with a brief appendix of *dis legomena*, defined as "twice-only occurrences of specific forms in a specified corpus of texts."[38] While he argues that these support Book Three's integrity as a unit within the Psalter—thus challenging the concept of an Elohistic Psalter—I suggest that the employment of such vocabulary may also point to a watershed moment. As Greenspahn observes: "Those words which do occur only seem to do so because they are less mundane, reflecting a more specialized subject

[36] Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth L. Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 573.

[37] See, for example, Bullock, *Theology from the Psalms*, 49, 65.

[38] See Robert L. Cole, *The Shape and Message of Book III (Psalms 73–89)*, JSOTSup 307 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 236.

matter within their context."[39] Although Greenspahn is referring to *hapax legomena*, a similar principle can be applied to *dis legomena*. Moreover, the terms identified by Cole are apt for describing the exile: (לְ)מַשֵּׁ(וּ)אוֹת ("ruins"; 73:18; 74:3), הוֹלְלִים/רְשָׁעִים ("arrogant/wicked ones"; 73:3; 75:5),[40] קוּמָה אֱלֹהִים (the plea, "arise God"; 74:22; 82:8), תֶּאֱנַף ("be angry"; 79:5; 85:6),[41] פָּרַצְתָּ גְדֵרֶיהָ/פָּרַצְתָּ כָל־גְּדֵרֹתָיו ("break through wall"; 80:13; 89:41) and אֵיתָן ("permanence"; 74:15; 89:1).[42]

Third, and as suggested with the idiosyncratic vocabulary, there are strong allusions to the exile throughout Book Three. The opening psalm explores the issue of theodicy: perhaps nothing challenges Israel's trust in YHWH more than exile from the Promised Land. Book Three contains communal laments that refer to the destruction of Jerusalem (74; 79). Furthermore, the persistent mention of YHWH's judgement against Israel underlines that the tragedy alluded to here is not a mere accident of history (73:17–17, 27; 74; 78:31, 59–64; 79:5; 80:5–7, 13–14; 81:9–17; 85:5–6; 89:39–52). Indeed, Psalm 89's vehement charge against YHWH makes it clear that YHWH is active in this disaster, resulting in the de-throning of the Davidic king. These indicators of exile are reinforced by the high concentration of communal laments in Book Three.[43] Thus, writing of only Asaph's psalms, but in a manner which applies to Book Three in its entirety, Goulder remarks: "Virtually the whole collection is marked by a sense of dire crisis: the community is on the verge of the unthinkable."[44]

The Psalter is famous for its embodiment of emotion. It is not simply that as poetry the psalms capture human emotion accurately, they also possess the entire range of emotions. To fully appreciate this, however, all of them need to be read. One would struggle to read Psalm 148 the day one's spouse dies: "Praise the Lord!" (v. 1). It does not fit. Equally, one would struggle to read Psalm 88 the day a long-prayed-for friend experiences conversion: "Your wrath has swept over me" (v. 17). It does not fit. Focusing on a single psalm does not capture the full range of human experience but reading the Psalter as a book—following the narrative impulse—does.

The Psalter mirrors the full range of human experience when read in its entirety. This theological reflection helps calibrate the reader, bringing ballast and balance to life. When despairing, the Psalter not only provides words to express such experiences but offers hope that better days will come. When rejoicing, the Psalter not only provides songs of praise to sing but cautions that life in this world will not always be so. Life on earth is to be viewed in the long-term because no single day with its emotions dictate one's experience for all time. Reading the Psalter as a book enables the reader to do so as it asserts that nothing one faces is unique and nothing one faces will last forever. Book Three's oscillation

[39] Frederick E. Greenspahn, "The Number and Distribution of Hapax Legomena in Biblical Hebrew," *VT* 30 (1980): 16.

[40] Cole notes that while רְשָׁעִים ("wicked ones") is common in the Psalter, it is the combination that is unique. See Cole, *Shape and Message of Book III*, 236 n. 2.

[41] Cole concedes that this verb form occurs four times in the Psalter (2:12 and 60:3 being the other two occurrences). He argues, however, that only here does it appear in the second person masculine singular imperfect. See Cole, *Shape and Message of Book III*, 238. This is perhaps an occasion of special pleading.

[42] Evidently the intention here is to draw a contrast with the apparently transitory nature of Jerusalem.

[43] Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, "The Meta-Narrative of the Psalter," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 371; J. Clinton McCann Jr., "The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter: The Psalms in Their Literary Context," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 355.

[44] Michael D. Goulder, "Asaph's History of Israel (Elohist Press, Bethel, 725 BCE)," *JSOT* 20 (1995): 74.

between lament and hope exemplifies such a balance.[45] Life, like the Psalter's narrative impulse, ebbs and flows. To see this, however, it must be viewed in its entirety.

A seismic shift occurs in Book Three. The expectations established and expanded in Books One and Two are unceremoniously halted. The king is gone, Zion lies in ruins, and Israel's enemies are apparently triumphant. Is there a resolution for such tragedy?

2.4. Book Four: Seeds of Hope

Book Four seeks to answer the question left lingering at the end of Book Three: YHWH himself is the solution to the tragedy. The appearance of Moses in the superscription of Psalm 90 may at first appear curious, but this voice from the past carries significant import. Psalms 90–92 possess a variety of wilderness imagery; it implies that YHWH remains his people's refuge whether in the Promised Land or in the wilderness wanderings (90:1).[46]

The core of Book Four consists of the YHWH *Malak* psalms (93–100).[47] The repetition of יהוה מלך ("YHWH reigns"; 93:1; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1) reasserts YHWH's kingship. The designation, "YHWH reigns," is substantiated by the themes of creation power (93:1, 3–4; 94:9; 95:4–6; 96:5; 97:1–4), sovereignty (93:2; 95:3; 96:7–9; 99:1–3), justice (94:1–2; 96:10, 13; 97:8; 98:9; 99:1–5), and defense of the lowly righteous (94:3–7, 14–23; 95:7; 97:10–11). Intriguingly, both Psalms 96 and 98 open with the call to sing a new song to YHWH which echoes Moses's and Miriam's songs from Exodus 15. Thus, wilderness allusions persist and are now connected to redemption. There is confidence that YHWH directs human history: "God has a saving master plan that underwrites the entire biblical story."[48]

David reappears in Book Four (101, 103).[49] Psalm 101, in particular, echoes the two-part introduction as it too portrays an idealized, torah-abiding Davidic king—especially when considering the Zion emphasis in Psalm 102:14–22. David's re-emergence is quickly followed by a series of Psalms that reiterate YHWH's faithfulness, even in the face of Israel's persistent disobedience (104–106). YHWH's faithfulness not only confronts the reader of these psalms throughout Israel's history, but also throughout creation's history. Book Four therefore fosters hope that the exile is not the end. YHWH remains enthroned above all and faithful to his promises. Indeed, there is even a fresh glimpse of Davidic kingship. Even so, it ends with the plea: save us, YHWH (106:47).

2.5. Book Five: A New Davidic King

Book Five opens with praise for an answer to the plea that closed Book Four (107:1–3). Praise and rejoicing are the dominant theme in this final book. It anticipates a glorious, imminent future. Three topics of concern make this so: David, Zion, and victory.

---

[45] Ellison, "Hope for a Davidic King," 67–69.

[46] Particularly noteworthy are the attaching of Moses's name to Psalm 90 which alludes to journeying, the perpetuating of the journey imagery alongside protection from evil in Psalm 91, and the jubilance at the cessation of wilderness wanderings in Psalm 92. See the fuller defence of such a reading in Ellison, "Hope for a Davidic King," 73–76.

[47] Psalm 94 is conspicuous among the other psalms in this group, but "its plea for God to judge the world invokes a well-known function of the great king-God" (deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Psalms*, 687).

[48] Bullock, *Theology from the Psalms*, 151.

[49] For a fuller consideration of this, see David A. Gundersen, "The Future David of Psalm 101: Davidic Hope Sustained in Book IV of the Psalter," *JBTS* 4 (2019): 82–112.

Throughout Book Five David is prominent once again. He is ascribed authorship of psalms near the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of Book Five (108–110; 122; 124; 131; 133; 138–145). Davidic influence permeates the final book. That David should appear in such a way, post-exile in the Psalter's narrative impulse, is remarkable and must foster hope for a new David. Indeed, individual psalms such as Psalms 110 and 132 appear to explicitly point in that direction. YHWH's reign will be manifested in a Davidide. At the very least interest in the Davidic dynasty continues, suggesting that YHWH has not abandoned David's descendants nor his promises to David concerning those descendants. This hope for a new Davidic king is the primary driving force in shaping the Psalter.

Sensitively reading the Psalter as a book therefore causes its reader to anticipate a new Davidic king. In the journey through the Psalter's story, the invested reader glories in David's triumph in the early books, winces at the horror of exile, and longs for the arrival of the David described in Psalms 110 and 132. Canonical theological reflection presses the reader towards the New Testament, making it clear that the long-awaited Davidic king the Psalter expects is Jesus.[50] For example, Jesus himself (Matt 22:41–46; 26:64) and the book of Hebrews (1:13; 5:6; 7:17) both apply Psalm 110 directly to Jesus.

From the present vantage point in redemptive history, the Davidic king has come. To this the New Testament testifies. Nonetheless, the king has not yet completed his work, for he is to come again. The Psalter joyfully anticipates the certain coming of the long-awaited Davidic king and attunes the reader to the fitting manner in which to await *the* Davidic king's second coming. Living in the last days is tumultuous, not unlike the history of YHWH's people in the Old Testament. Even so, there is certain hope, and to this the Psalter gives voice.

After the devastation of Book Three, Book Five paints a markedly positive picture of Zion.[51] This is concentrated in the Songs of Ascents (120–135), which depicts Zion as a place of peace and prosperity. Zion, and temple, appear to be rebuilt in this collection. As Zenger helpfully summarizes, from these psalms emerge "a coherent theological view which acclaims Zion as the place of blessing and salvation to which Israel should go in 'ascents' or 'pilgrimage' (executed as a second Exodus from exile or foreign lands)."[52] Thus interest remains not only in Davidic kingship but also in Zion. The Psalter, when read as a book, teaches its reader to anticipate the arrival of a new Zion. When the long-awaited Davidic king returns, he will establish the new heavens and the new earth. He promises a global renovation (2 Pet 3:7–13), and at its centre will be the heavenly Jerusalem descended to earth—Zion.[53]

Throughout the Psalter there is a general movement from proportionately more lament in the earlier books to proportionately more praise in the latter books. This movement prepares the reader for the world yet to come in which there will be no pain, sickness, sorrow, or sin—a world in which YHWH's anointed is enthroned and will be seen to be enthroned. Bullock suggests that "the Psalms are our maestro as we listen to, repeat, and repeat again God's praises as recorded in the Psalter.… [The

[50] See, for example, S. D. Ellison, "Old Testament Hope: Psalm 2, the Psalter, and the Anointed One," *Themelios* 46.3 (2021): 534–45; S. D. Ellison, "Seeing Christ in the Shape of the Psalms," *TGC*, 6 April 2021, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/seeing-christ-shape-psalms/.

[51] See the discussion in S. D. Ellison, "Children of Zion: Home and Place in the Psalter," *The Round Tower Review*, December 2022, https://theroundtowerreview.wordpress.com/2022/12/27/david-ellison/.

[52] Erich Zenger, "The Composition and Theology of the Fifth Book of Psalms, Psalms 107–145," *JSOT* 80 (1998): 92.

[53] Bullock, *Theology from the Psalms*, 32.

Psalms] tutor us in the language of praise."[54] Book Five, in particular, serves as a travel guide for that world yet to come in which there is nothing to cause lament and everything to provoke praise.

The note of victory throughout Book Five is evident in the repeated—and almost exclusive to Book Five—refrain: הַלְלוּ־יָהּ ("Praise the Lord" 111:1; 112:1; 113:1, 9; 115:18; 116:19; 117:2; 135:1; 21; 146:1, 10; 147:1, 20; 148:1, 14; 149:1, 9; 150:1, 6). Psalms 111–118 reflect YHWH's salvation, Psalm 135 reaffirms that that salvation is over foreign nations (vv. 8–12), and Psalms 146–150 function as "memorable vignettes that point to a better reality."[55] The Psalter's narrative impulse continues to advance as the reader is encouraged to look beyond the exile towards a more hope-filled future.

2.6. Summary

The reading of the Psalter presented here acknowledges a narrative impulse pulsating through the five books. Book One generates expectations that YHWH will establish his chosen king in Zion for the good of the righteous. Book Two extends these expectations, depicting the nation functioning as it should, and culminating in Levitical and royal zeniths. Book Three brings the narrative to an abrupt halt by reflecting on the theodicy of the exile. Hope re-emerges in Book Four with YHWH's sovereign rule reasserted and the new shoots of Davidic hope. Finally, Book Five erupts with praise as confidence in a new and glorious future causes a triumphant and jubilant conclusion to the Psalter. A rich theology emerges from such a reading of the Psalter, as intimated by the above brief theological reflections. The Psalter poetically retells the story of Israel in a way that assures its reader that YHWH directs human history, the entirety of human experience is accounted for, a new Davidic king will return, and a new Zion will accompany him. Each of these perspectives is present throughout Scripture, but they are all enhanced when the Psalter is read as a book. Thus, steps two and three are complete.

3. Conclusion

Like a snowflake, each psalm is a masterpiece of its own, worthy of concentrated study. Piecing each psalm together with the other 149, just like adding a single snowflake to a billion others, reveals a new landscape—a world with a beauty of a different order. For that reason, we must learn how to read the Psalter as a book, and embrace doing so, for "this is the story that no one but the redeemed can sing, so let us engage in tuning our voices to the language of the Psalms and other biblical praises, preparing ourselves for what may be only the beginners' choir in heaven."[56] This article is by no means the final word on the Psalter's shape and message, rather it intends to provoke a fresh impetus in "the continued refinement in assessing how the structure of the Psalter shapes its theology… especially in efforts to derive theological implications from the book- and psalm-group levels."[57]

[54] Bullock, *Theology from the Psalms*, 172, 173.

[55] W. Dennis Tucker Jr., "'How Good It Is to Sing Praises to Our God' (Ps 147:1): The Final Hallel in Light of Utopian Literary Theory," *PRSt* 44 (2017): 234.

[56] Bullock, *Theology from the Psalms*, 175.

[57] Dunham, "Psalms through the Lens of Theology," 472.

Themelios 49.3 (2024): 618–31

Who Was Philemon, What Did Paul Want from Him, and Why?

– Joel White –

Joel White is professor of New Testament and Director of International Partnerships at the Freie Theologische Hochschule in Gießen, Germany.

****

Abstract: Scholars are divided on whether Paul wrote the letter to Philemon with the aim of securing Onesimus's manumission or not. Often, discussion centers on Paul's rhetoric or on the nature of slavery in the ancient world and his attitude toward it. In this article I seek to complement those approaches. First, I situate Philemon within the two social networks in which he enjoyed status and esteem—the Christ association on the one hand and the wealthier landowners/slaveowners in Colossae on the other—and posit what their expectations would have been regarding Philemon's response to Onesimus's return. Second, I examine the theological presuppositions that inform Paul's rhetoric to see if they can help us determine the nature of his request. I conclude that Paul did, in fact, want Philemon to free Onesimus in order to strengthen the bonds between the three of them and the church in Colossae.

****

One of the most intensively debated topics in scholarly discussions of Philemon is Paul's purpose in writing the letter.[1] This comes as a surprise to many "non-professional" Bible readers in the West. Having internalized the values of their social context, they tend to assume that Paul is seeking the manumission of Onesimus, and they are taken aback when they learn that many scholars, perhaps even the majority, do not share their view.[2] Modern commentators are in fact divided on the question of whether Paul wants Philemon to set Onesimus free.[3]

[1] N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 5 (London: SPCK, 2013), 1:7.

[2] My evidence for this is based on discussions of my research with friends and acquaintances and is thus purely anecdotal.

[3] A glance at recent articles and commentaries on Philemon suffices to prove this. The following scholars are among those who argue that Paul's intent is to obtain freedom for Onesimus: F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians,* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 217; Sara C. Winter, Paul's Letter to Philemon, *NTS* 33 (1987): 1–15, esp. 11; Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Kolosser, Der Brief an Philemon,* ÖTK 12 (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1993), 271–72; Eckart Reinmuth, *Der Brief des Paulus an Philemon* ThHNT 11/II (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006), 47–48; Ben Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

Of course, interpretation of Philemon did not begin in the modern era, and one might wonder whether ancient commentators could help us determine whether Paul was asking for the manumission of Onesimus. After all, the earliest among them would have shared Paul's cultural context, broadly speaking, regarding slavery, and they would have been more familiar with the rhetorical conventions he employed. Their view of his purpose in writing would thus deserve a careful hearing. As surprising as it might seem, however, ancient readers of the letter do not address the issue explicitly. It was only in the modern era that the institution of slavery came to be viewed as a moral problem and only then that commentators begin to show interest in the question of Onesimus's status as a slave and whether Paul wanted to effect a change in it.[4]

Thus, what seems like a simple question turns out to be a complex task, since the apostle's rhetoric reflects the conventions of his time. These demanded more oblique modes of discourse, especially in the public arena, and we must not forget that Paul's letter was intended to be read aloud to the church that met in Philemon's house. Although Paul claims apostolic authority over the church, he is at pains to avoid pressing that claim for reasons we will discuss below, so he employs a subtle rhetoric of deflection in pursuit of his goal.

That is why Paul does not "come out and say" what he wants Philemon to do. This irritates modern readers of the letter, who are both chronologically and culturally far removed from members of its original audience. The problem, however, is entirely ours, not theirs. We can assume that the illocutionary force of Paul's rhetoric was clear enough to them. We can even surmise that it had its intended effect; it is hard to imagine that the letter would have been incorporated into the NT canon as an exemplar of failed communication.[5] Yet all these considerations still leave us asking the question: What did Paul want from Philemon?

2007), 76–80; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon,* PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 373–74; G. Francois Wessels, "The Letter of Philemon in the Context of Slavery in Early Christianity," in *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter,* ed. D. F. Tolmie, BZNW 169 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 164–66; Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1:10–15; G. K. Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 370–73; Stephen E. Young, *Our Brother Beloved: Purpose and Community in Paul's Letter to Philemon* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021), 125–35.

Other scholars argue that it was, at most, a matter of indifference to Paul whether Onesimus obtained the legal status of a *libertinus*. This group includes Eduard Lohse, *Die Briefe an die Kolosser und an Philemon,* KEK 9/2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968), 282–83; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Der Brief an Philemon,* revised ed., EKK 18 (Zürich: Benzinger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1981), 42–43; Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon,* ECC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 412–22; Peter Arzt-Grabner, *Philemon*, PKNT 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 275–77; John G. Nordling, *Philemon,* ConcC (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2004), 249; Robert McL. Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary,* ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 325; Peter Müller, *Der Brief an Philemon,* KEK 9/3 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 121–23; David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon,* ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 395–96; Martin Ebner, *Der Brief an Philemon,* EKK 18 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; Ostfildern: Patmos, 2017), 143; Scot McKnight, *The Letter to Philemon,* NICNT (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2017), 44. James G. D. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon,* NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 334, leaves the question open.

[4] D. Francois Tolmie, *Pointing Out Persuasion in Philemon: Fifty Readings of Paul's Rhetoric from the Fourth to the Eighteenth Century*, History of Biblical Exegesis 1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 274–75.

[5] N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon,* TNTC 12 (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 174. For this reason, John Knox's contention that Onesimus was manumitted, later became the bishop of Ephesus, and was instrumental in collecting Paul's letters, including the Letter to Philemon, strikes me as intrinsically more prob-

1. Reconstructing the Narrative behind the Letter

There is no need to throw up our hands in despair. If we delve below the surface of the letter, it may be possible to recover some important information that has bearing on the question. This becomes conceivable when we remember that Paul's letter to Philemon is an artifact of a complex series of social interactions between two people who knew each other for at least a couple of years when the letter was written. As such it gives us access to an implied narrative up to a particular point in time. Reconstructing that narrative from data in the letter should facilitate correct interpretation of the letter and especially Paul's aims in writing. It is to that task that we now turn.

Norman Petersen helped lay the methodological foundation for this approach in a 1985 study of what he refers to as the "sociology of narrative worlds."[6] He helpfully differentiates between the referential and poetic sequences of a text. The referential sequence denotes the chronological order of events in the real world that are explicitly or implicitly referred to in the text. The poetic sequence is the order in which these events are referred to in the text. Except in banal texts, these sequences are not identical; good literature mixes them up to powerful effect.[7] Reconstructing the referential sequence is usually a straightforward task, however, since common sense will dictate a logical flow to the narrative behind the text.

Felicitously, Petersen himself applied his method for uncovering the implied narrative behind a text to the letter of Philemon. His results may be summarized as follows:[8]

1. Onesimus becomes a slave in the household of Philemon (v. 16).
2. Philemon becomes a believer in Jesus through Paul (v. 19b).
3. Paul is imprisoned (v. 9).
4. Onesimus leaves Philemon's house and finds Paul in prison (v. 15).
5. Onesimus becomes a believer in Jesus through Paul (v. 10).
6. Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon with a request (vv. 17–20).

That is as far as the narrative behind the text of Philemon takes us. We know that Paul's request entailed, at the least, Philemon sending Onesimus back to him (vv. 12–14), but we do not know whether he wanted Philemon to set Onesimus free. Above all, we do not know how the story ends. We have a narrative, though, and we know the main characters: Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon.

able than the other speculative elements in his hypothesis regarding the situation behind the letter. See John Knox, *Philemon among the Letters of Paul,* revised ed. (Chicago: University Press, 1959), 91–108.

[6] Norman Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1985).

[7] Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul*, 48: "It is possible that the two sequences may be identical, that a narrator will describe events in a strictly chronological order. His textual sequence would still be poetic because it is a concrete representation of the abstract referential sequence. But it would not be *very* poetic, in the sense of being very artful" (italics original).

[8] Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul*, 65–78.

2. Getting to Know Philemon

Exegetes and theologians have studied Paul extensively, of course, since he is accessible to us not only in this letter, but in twelve others, in Acts, and perhaps other non-canonical works.[9] Onesimus's status as a slave has also been the subject of extensive inquiry, especially due to the attention scholars have recently devoted to the topic of slavery, both in its ancient and modern manifestations. There is no question that these approaches have yielded important interpretive insights. Philemon, on the other hand, has received comparatively less attention. Though we know little about him as an individual, I think it will prove possible, on the basis of the narrative Petersen has helped us uncover, to situate him fairly well within his social environment.

Doing so will, it is hoped, allow us to hear Philemon's side of the story. That, however, requires us to overcome our modern Western bias against slave-owners. Perhaps that is one reason he has so seldom been the object of careful inquiry. The emphasis on Onesimus's plight in recent literature is laudable and entirely understandable given the recent emphasis on postcolonial readings of the New Testament that seek to demonstrate how earlier exegesis often served to legitimate slavery in Christian communities to extremely deleterious effect.[10] Still, as we will see, Paul himself shows some sympathy for Philemon's predicament—what John Barclay has perceptively referred to as the "dilemma of Christian slave-ownership."[11] Even if we, from our vantage point in human history, feel no such sympathy for Philemon, we must align ourselves hermeneutically with Paul's view of him, if we hope to understand his rhetorical strategy and epistolary aims.

From Paul's letter to Philemon, we are able to glean the following information about him:

1. Philemon owned a large house; it had at least one guest room (v. 22), and a church of perhaps twenty or thirty members was meeting there (v. 2).[12]
2. Philemon owned at least one slave—Onesimus (vv. 10, 16).
3. Philemon was a prominent member (and likely the leader) of the church that met in his home (v. 1).

Assuming the authenticity of Colossians, or at least granting that it contains reliable tradition about Philemon,[13] we can add the following:

---

[9] This is true regardless of whether the letters are deemed authentic or pseudepigraphic and whether Luke's portrait of Paul is considered historically accurate or legendary. To my knowledge, no one argues that the disputed Paulines and Acts are completely devoid of links to the historical Paul.

[10] See, for example, Matthew V. Johnson, James A. Noel, and Demetrius K. Williams, eds. *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012).

[11] John M. G. Barclay, "Paul, Philemon, and the Dilemma of Christian Slave-Ownership," *NTS* 37 (1991): 161–86.

[12] Estimating the size of house churches in the first century is a tricky business and has lately been the subject of much scholarly discussion. See John Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 97–123.

[13] For a defense of the Pauline authorship of Colossians, see Joel White, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Kolosser,* HTA (Witten: SCM Brockhaus, 2018), 16–28.

1. Philemon lived in Colossae,[14] a small town in the Lycus valley in Phrygia, near the more important first-century cities of Hierapolis and Laodicea. No one seems willing to hazard a guess as to the population of Colossae at that time, but based on the size of the unexcavated mound under which the city lies buried, it could not have been more than a few thousand in Paul's day.[15]
2. Philemon had the means to travel. Paul never visited the church in Colossae, so he and Philemon must have met elsewhere, perhaps in Ephesus or earlier in Pisidian Antioch where Paul spent some time on his first missionary journey.[16] The most likely reason for Philemon to travel was that he was a merchant. Since the Lycus valley was well known for the production of much-desired Colossian wool and textile manufacturing thrived there,[17] we can venture a guess (though it can be no more than that) that he was a manufacturer and purveyor of textiles.

3. Situating Philemon in His Cult Association and His Guild

All this implies that Philemon was a person of at least modest wealth and high social standing in a small provincial town in Asia Minor. He was likely well placed within a network of relationships that, as John Kloppenborg demonstrates in a recent study of the function of Greco-Roman associations, were the true determinants of status in antiquity. Kloppenborg reminds us that

> in imagining ancient Roman society, we should not think of it as a series of horizontal layers defined by income levels but instead as vertical integrated pyramids with the elite at the top, connected through patronage and benefaction to multiple associations of non-elite, including freeborn, freedmen and freedwomen, and slaves, citizens, resident aliens, and foreigners.[18]

These associations were the most important mediators of "connectivity"—the true currency for determining status among non-related individuals in the ancient world. According to Kloppenborg we should think of associations

---

[14] Generally, this is accepted even by those who reject the authenticity of Colossians (see especially Ulrich Huttner, *Early Christianity in the Lycus Valley,* Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity 85 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 81. Other locations have been discussed (Arzt-Grabner, *Philemon*, 81, postulates a town on the route from Ephesus to Philippi; Ebner, *Philemon*, 25, thinks it is somewhere near Rome), but these proposals are speculative. Early church tradition uniformly locates Philemon in Colossae (see Tolmie, *Pointing Out Persuasion in Philemon*, 261).

[15] According to Bahadir Duman and Erim Konackçi, "The Silent Witness of the Mound of Colossae: Pottery Remains," in *Colossae in Space and Time, Linking to an Ancient City,* ed. Alan H. Cadwallader and Michael Trainor, NTOA 94 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 247–81, esp. 248, the mound covers an area of 9.24 hectares (22.84 acres), though the urban area would have been larger than that.

[16] This latter option is seldom considered, but it is a reasonable conjecture since trade routes went East as well as West, and Colossae was closer to Pisidian Antioch than to Ephesus. See White, *Kolosser*, 15.

[17] On the importance of the woolen textile industry and the wealth it generated in the cities of the Lycus Valley, see Hatice Erdemir, "Woollen Textiles: An International Trade Good in the Lycus Valley in Antiquity," in *Colossae in Space and Time*, 104–29.

[18] Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, 35.

> as social networks—arrays of people related to one another by multiple connections…. Each network has its own ecology, creating social space in which individuals are arranged in categories to foster interactions of various sorts. Network structure facilitates the flow of certain properties, most importantly social capital, trust, a sense of belonging and worth, and competences or skills relevant to the nature of the network.[19]

There were several different types of associations—guilds, cultic associations, immigrant associations, neighborhood associations, familial associations.[20] Importantly for our inquiry, Ulrich Huttner cites abundant epigraphic evidence documenting "a dense concentration" of associations in the Lycus Valley.[21] We can say with certainty that Philemon was a member, likely the most prominent member, of a cultic association devoted to a god imported from Palestine named "Christos"; that is how the church in Colossae would have been viewed from an etic perspective.[22] As a well-off businessman in a small town like Colossae, he likely would have had a prominent position in a guild, as well, since guilds played an oversized role not only in the organization of trade but also of civic life in general.[23]

This brief look at the role of guilds and cultic associations in ancient society reminds us that there were two separate social networks observing the drama that was playing itself out between Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus. One was the church in Colossae, before which Paul's letter to Philemon was publicly read. Recent studies have analyzed the impact this performative aspect of the letter would have had on the discourse between Paul and Philemon and how it shaped Paul's rhetoric as he anticipated that performance.[24] Onesimus had left, perhaps after wronging Philemon in some way (v. 18).[25] For whatever reason, the relationship between them needed repair.[26] Now Onesimus is back with a letter of recommendation from none other than the great apostle himself.[27] Philemon would have been very aware that the congregation in which he had a prominent position was listening in, wondering how he would respond.

The other social network observing the events—from a greater distance, to be sure, but with no less vested interest—was what today we would call the business community in Colossae, prominent

---

[19] Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, 56

[20] The demarcation lines between types of associations cannot be as neatly drawn as these labels suggest, but they do describe their main functions. See Philip A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans, and Cultural Minorities* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 31.

[21] Huttner, *Early Christianity in the Lycus Valley*, 30.

[22] Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*, 42–44.

[23] Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, 32–37. Most people would have been a member of only one association, if only due to the costs that membership entailed (dues, contributions to communal meals, etc.), but wealthier individuals could and in fact often did belong to more than one association. See Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*, 156–60.

[24] See for instance Adam White, "Visualising Paul's Appeal: A Performance Critical Analysis of the Letter to Philemon," *Oral History Journal of South Africa* 5 (2018): 1–16.

[25] Strictly speaking, Paul only alludes to the possibility that this could be the case. See Young, *Our Brother Beloved*, 28.

[26] Nijay Gupta, "Cruciform Onesimus? Considering How a Slave Would Respond to Paul's Call for a Cross-Shaped Lifestyle," *ExpTim* 133 (2022): 325–33, esp. 330.

[27] Peter Head, "Onesimus the Letter Carrier and the Initial Reception of Paul's Letter to Philemon," *JTS* 71 (2020): 628–56.

members not only of Philemon's guild, but of all the guilds. Like Philemon these were people of at least moderate wealth, landowners and slaveowners, who ran cottage industries out of their homes. In a small town like Colossae, they would not have been numerous (certainly less than one hundred), but they were the most influential inhabitants of the city. It would not have escaped their notice (or anyone else's, for that matter) that Onesimus was suddenly gone, and they would have cared little about the exact circumstances under which he did so.[28] Likewise, everyone would have heard the news that he had returned.

I am not aware of any studies that analyze the impact of this second network and its expectations on the dynamics of the situation Paul addresses in his letter or on the rhetorical strategy he opts to pursue in response to that dynamic. I hope to provide this missing piece in attempts to position Philemon in what follows. He must have known that his slave-owning peers in the merchant class were "listening in," eager to hear how Philemon would respond. Paul, a canvas manufacturer by trade and certainly familiar with the guilds, would have anticipated this.

Unfortunately, as we noted above, we do not know how Philemon responded. We can assume, however, that apart from Paul's influence his response would have been dictated, as a matter of course, by the norms and mores of the all-important honor/shame dynamic that mediated and regulated relationships in the ancient Mediterranean world.[29] The accrual and maintenance of honor and the avoidance of shame, its binary opposite, was a primary goal of the participants in virtually all social interactions.[30] The value of all non-familial relationships was assessed primarily in terms of the honor one accrued from one's opposite and the honor one owed him or her in return.[31]

4. Philemon's Response to Onesimus's Return: The Guild's Expectations and Paul's

This concern with the maintenance of honor would have meant that Philemon's slave-owning peers had clear expectations about how a slave-owner should respond to a slave who returned of his own accord. We can gain some sense of what these expectations entailed by examining the well-known letter of Pliny the Younger to Sabinianus, his "friend" (which probably means "client" here).[32] A freedman from Sabinianus's household sought out Pliny and asked him to intercede on his behalf. He had caused Sabinianus some grave offense or injury, and he begs Pliny to take up his cause. Pliny agrees and writes a letter to Sabinianus, explaining to him that the man has shown genuine remorse and asking him to refrain from torturing him. Here we gain a sense of how the ideal slave-owner would be expected to act, accepting back his wayward but remorseful freedman with a measure of severity but also magnanimity.

---

[28] For a thorough review of the major theories regarding Onesimus's status and the reasons for his departure, see Young, *Our Brother Beloved*, 23–60.

[29] On the importance of honor and prestige in the ancient world, see for example Kunio Nojima, *Ehre und Schande in Kulturanthropologie und biblischer Theologie* (Wuppertal: Arco, 2011), 143–246; David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*, revised ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2022), 11–37.

[30] Halvor Moxnes, "Honor and Righteousness in Romans," *JSNT* 32 (1988): 61–77, esp. 63.

[31] J. E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 30–106, esp. 73.

[32] Pliny, *Epistulae* 9.21. See Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1:3–7.

He must be punished, of course, but not too harshly. The thought of simply releasing him from his obligation would have occurred neither to Pliny nor to Sabinianus.

The letters of Paul and Pliny are strikingly similar in some ways, but there are also marked differences. First, Pliny is pleading for a freedman, and Paul is pleading for a slave. Surprisingly, at least for modern readers, the difference in status does not imply much difference in the treatment they can expect. Both the freedman and the slave are obligated to their superiors, and both have failed to fulfill their obligations. Both can expect to be punished as a result.[33]

Second, Pliny emphasizes the remorse felt by Sabinianus's freedman, and he clearly expects that the latter's rueful demeanor will move Sabinianus to show a measure of leniency when he metes out punishment. Paul, by comparison, does not mention any remorse on the part of Onesimus. Much is made by some scholars of this omission in Philemon,[34] but I am not sure how much weight this argument from silence can be made to bear. If Onesimus is the actual bearer of the letter to Philemon (see above), then his ritual performance of remorse would have been much more effective than any mention of it by Paul, and perhaps the apostle anticipated this.

Third, Pliny and Paul clearly enjoy different levels of status vis à vis their letters' recipients. Pliny is an equestrian and a senator, a wealthy nobleman moving through the ranks to the highest levels of imperial power. He does not mention this, but he does not have to. Everyone knows who Pliny is. His rhetoric is pleasant in tone, but it is also designed to make sure that Sabinianus knows his place. Pliny is acting as a patron, not a peer, and he treats Sabinianus like the subordinate he is. He consciously exerts considerable pressure on Sabinianus to take a certain course of action. This rhetoric would have constituted a shameful affront to Sabinianus's honor if it were coming from a social equal, but the pecking order here is quite clear. As we learn from a subsequent letter,[35] Sabinianus followed Pliny's instructions. Whether his heart was in it or not, we can be sure that he made a great show of his eagerness to fulfill Pliny's wishes. In terms of the power dynamics among patrons and clients, he really had no choice.

Paul's situation vis à vis Philemon is more complex. As the apostle who founded the Christ cult in Asia Minor, he would have enjoyed the highest possible status in the Christ association in Colossae even though he was not a member of that chapter. He makes clear that he would have had authority on this basis to command Philemon to do "what is required" (v. 8). Yet in that situation, even an explicit request, to say nothing of an outright command, would have set up a zero-sum game in which Paul would accrue honor and Philemon would lose it, if the latter acceded to the request/command, and it would bring about the opposite result, if he refused. No one in the church would have been served well by either of those outcomes.[36]

Further, as we noted above, the church was not the only social network waiting to see how Philemon would respond to Paul's request. His position as a slave owner gave him absolute authority to deal with Onesimus as he saw fit. His peers in the business community would expect him to mete out proper punishment to his slave. Paul would have known this. He also would have understood that in this

[33] Craig S. de Vos, "Once a Slave, Always a Slave? Slavery, Manumission and Relational Patterns in Paul's Letter to Philemon," *JSNT* (2001): 89–105, esp. 98–100.

[34] See for example Gupta, "Cruciform Onesimus," 329.

[35] Pliny, *Epistulae* 9.24.

[36] For a thorough discussion of the rhetorical dynamic at work here, see Joel White, "Philemon, Game Theory, and the Reconfiguration of Household Relationships," *EuroJTh* 26 (2017): 32–42.

network he had no influence whatsoever. He was not a member of any guild, and he was Philemon's social equal, at best. He could not, like Pliny, issue a directive from his high social position with any expectation that Philemon would follow it. Without that power dynamic in place, doing so would have brought about a situation in which Philemon would have felt pressure *not* to comply in order to preserve his standing in this network.

This is where we encounter Philemon in the narrative: situated between two networks and considering a request from Paul concerning his slave Onesimus. On the one hand, there was the church, where Philemon enjoyed high status as the patron of the community. Paul, though absent (or perhaps because of his absence; see 2 Cor 10:10), would have been held in even higher esteem. We can assume that this network was hoping for an outcome that would have allowed the integration of Onesimus, a new believer, into the community on the basis of a restored relationship with his master.

On the other hand, there was the business community in Colossae. Here Philemon was among peers, and Paul had no standing whatsoever. They would have expected that Philemon restore the status quo ante: Whatever Philemon's actions—taking the slave back after punishing him, selling him, executing him—they were interested in an outcome in which Onesimus became an exemplum of the power of slave-owners over their slaves and which reinforced the social hierarchy from which this power flowed.

As for Philemon, we can be sure that he would have weighed the impact of Paul's request in terms of the effect it would have on his standing in both networks. The crucial question for us is whether Paul was aware of Philemon's predicament? Was he sensitive to Philemon's situation, and did he choose his rhetorical strategy accordingly? I think there is abundant evidence that he did. Paul could be quite clear when he wanted to, and he generally displays no reticence in telling his congregations what he expects of them. In fact, most other letters echo Pliny's tone: They are generally cordial and friendly, at times stern, occasionally severe. Whatever his manner, it is almost always clear what Paul wants. His letter to Philemon is palpably different in this regard, and this lends credence to Barclay's conclusion that its opacity is intentional.[37]

Though Paul does not come out and say what he wants, he does exert subtle (and in at least one instance—v. 19b—not so subtle) pressure on Philemon to accede to his request.[38] By hinting at what he wanted, Paul avoids a zero-sum game (see above) and sets up a situation in which everyone gains something if Philemon acts on his own accord in conformity with Paul's wishes: Paul by being wise and magnanimous, Philemon by being generous and forgiving, Onesimus by being accepted into the Christ community in Colossae, and even the church, because a potentially serious conflict between its patron and its apostle is averted.

5. Interpreting Paul's Response: A Theological Approach

What outcome does Paul hope for, then? The very subtlety of Paul's rhetoric makes it impossible to draw a definitive conclusion based on an analysis of it. There is, however, another avenue of approach: by examining the implicit theology that undergirds the letter. Though the divines of earlier ages felt that there was not much in the way of theology to examine,[39] we can detect at least three fundamental

[37] Barclay, "Paul, Philemon, and the Dilemma," 164.

[38] Barclay, "Paul, Philemon, and the Dilemma," 171–72.

[39] So J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (New York: MacMillan, 1879), 316–17.

theological convictions below the surface of the text. In each case we find Paul implicitly replacing a core conviction of the ancient world with a new one he expects the community of Christ followers in Colossae to live by. Taken together, they leave little doubt, at least to my mind, as to what Paul was coaxing Philemon to do.

5.1. Paul Replaces the Ancient World's Ethic of Honor with One of Obligation

Against the background of Philemon's networks analyzed above, Paul's rhetorical strategy comes as a complete surprise. He completely ignores the expectations and constraints of the honor/shame dynamic, identifying himself not once but repeatedly as a prisoner (vv. 1, 9–10, 23). There was no reason he should have mentioned this, much less emphasized it, since it accorded him the lowest status possible in ancient honor hierarchies.[40] Being in prison was considered "deeply, perhaps irredeemably, degrading."[41]

In terms of its effect on Paul's standing with respect to the guilds and Philemon's position within them, this could have been a disastrous rhetorical move. It would have allowed Philemon to reject Paul's appeal at no social cost whatsoever. Indeed, it would have had the effect of making it harder for Philemon to comply, since to be seen as taking orders or even advice from a prisoner would have meant risking a loss of esteem. Even in the church, where Paul had standing on other grounds, this rhetorical strategy was a risky one. Members would naturally have been concerned about the Christ association's reputation among their friends and neighbors. The news that the cult's founder was in prison could easily have discredited it and led some to reconsider their allegiance to it.

Paul, it seems, is consciously deconstructing antiquity's conceptions of honor. He does so based on one of the most deeply held convictions of the early church: that Christ himself modeled this path, giving up all his rightful claims to status recognition and becoming a slave (Phil 2:5–11; see also Mark 10:42–45). His goal is to move the church away from the worldly ethic of honor to a Christian conception of koinonia, which entails, in the words of N. T. Wright, "sharing the very life of the Messiah" and "striving for *messianic unity across traditional boundaries.*"[42] Paul is showing the believers in Colossae what it looks like to follow Christ in a situation where the entire discourse is framed in terms of competition for honor and prestige. The old script that comes to light in Pliny's letter was clear: Onesimus should come creeping back with a convincing performance of deep remorse. Philemon should respond with magnanimous leniency, but not too much. The point, after all, was to reinforce the existing social order and everyone's place within it.

Paul throws out that script[43] and replaces it with one of mutual obligation. If Philemon grants Paul's request, Onesimus will be indebted both to Paul and Philemon. Paul, for his part, puts himself in the position of receiving undeserved benevolence from Philemon by claiming the status of a prisoner. Further, he takes on any financial obligation that Onesimus might have to Philemon (vv. 18–19a). On the other hand, Paul is quick to remind Philemon that he is much more deeply in Paul's debt, since

[40] Young, *Our Brother Beloved*, 87–88.

[41] Ryan Schellenberg, *Abject Joy: Paul, Prison, and the Art of Making Do* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 66.

[42] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1:11, italics original.

[43] Wright insightfully argues that this explains why Paul, unlike Pliny, dispenses with assurances that Onesimus regrets his actions or feels genuine remorse. That would "*merely serve to reinscribe the existing relationships*" and "Paul is attempting something radically different" (*Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1:9, italics original).

he owes the apostle his very soul (v. 19b). This is a move that shocks everyone, it seems,[44] but ancient readers, who understood the rhetoric of obligation, probably would have affirmed that Paul had every right to "call in his chips" in this manner.

Protestants have always been wary of framing ethics in terms of obligation and positively allergic to the idea since Kant. Grace has come to be understood as altruistic giving without any expectation of reward. Thankfully, in a study that has the potential to reframe the entire conversation about grace, John Barclay has convincingly shown that this understanding of gifting was not operative prior to the modern era. He demonstrates that gifts in antiquity were based on what he calls "circularity"—they always placed the recipient in the debt of the giver.[45] The unique thing about Paul's understanding of grace within the early Jewish cultural context was not its presumptive "non-circularity," but rather its incongruity; it was offered to people who were entirely unworthy of it. That is what sets the apostle's teaching apart.[46]

The use Paul makes of the Christ Hymn in Philippians would seem to confirm Paul's belief that even—or rather especially—Christ's gracious gift of himself obligates its recipients. Those who acknowledge Jesus's death on the cross and confess him as Lord (Phil 2:8, 11) owe him their obedience (Phil 2:12). This leaves no room for the ancients' preoccupation with accruing honor. Believers were to render it to Christ and to imitate him by "regarding others as better than themselves" (Phil 2:3). In the ancient world this would have meant not just the cultivation of an attitude, but recognition of others' higher standing in the community.

How did Paul envision this playing itself out? It was not simply a matter of Philemon releasing Onesimus from slavery. Contrary to the assumptions of modern readers, the manumission of slaves in the ancient world did not free slaves from all obligations to their masters. The *libertini* did gain legal jurisdiction over their own persons, but they were expected to demonstrate gratitude to their former owners by continuing to perform certain servile duties for them.[47] The manumission of Onesimus would also entail new obligations to the Christ association in Colossae. As a slave, Onesimus was merely part of Philemon's retinue. As a freedman he would be expected to contribute his fair share to the life of the community, not least in terms of finances.[48] It seems unlikely that Paul's aim would be that Onesimus move from the status of slave to that of freedman only to incur a new subservient role in the power hierarchy with a new set of one-sided obligations.[49]

On the other hand, we misunderstand Paul if we describe his goal as "freedom" for Onesimus in terms of the modern Western understanding of what that term entails: individual autonomy, the ability to do exactly as one chooses. Paul does not want to relieve Onesimus (or any of the other believers in Colossae) of obligations to each other. Rather, he wants to place those obligations on a new foundation.

---

[44] In my experience teaching Philemon, students from honor/shame cultures can identify with the deferential nature of Paul's rhetoric and generally don't object to his subtle application of pressure to achieve his aims, but even they find this hard to take, since it would shame Philemon in front of his congregation.

[45] John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 11–65.

[46] Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 562–66.

[47] Young, *Our Brother Beloved*, 136–37.

[48] On the financing of the earliest churches through membership contributions, see Timothy J. Murray, "F(r)ee Membership of Christ Groups," in *Greco-Roman Associations, Deities, and Early Christianity,* ed. Bruce W. Longenecker (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022), 141.

[49] Young, *Our Brother Beloved*, 110.

This is expressed potently in v. 17: "Receive him as you would receive me."[50] How did Paul expect to be received? As an equal partner in a relationship defined by a mutual and ongoing debt of love (Rom 13:7–8).

5.2. Paul Replaces the Language of Social Hierarchy with That of Familial Relationships

Paul uses familial language far more frequently than other early Christian writers,[51] and in his letter to Philemon he resorts to it more frequently than in any other letter (relative to its length). The following list makes this clear:

- Verse 1: Timothy is "the brother" (ἀδελφός).
- Verse 2: Apphia is "the sister" (ἀδελφή).
- Verses 7, 20: Philemon is Paul's "brother" (ἀδελφός).
- Verse 10: Onesimus is "my child" (τό τέκνονἐμοῦ).
- Verse 16: Philemon should receive Onesimus as a "beloved brother" (ἀδελφόςἀγαπητός).

Wayne Meeks argued that this was a unique feature of Christian communities compared with associations in the Greek and Roman world, but the work of Philip Harland has made that position untenable.[52] Still, there is a "thickness" to the familial language Paul employs that we do not see in the associations. It seems less formal, more personal, like Paul really means it. He is not simply adding family terms on top of the usual social descriptors we find in the membership lists of the associations—citizens, freedmen and freedwomen, slaves, metics, patrons, etc. He wants to replace the old categories with new ones; Christ followers are no longer masters and slaves, but brothers and sisters (v. 16).

Paul, it seems, is working toward the reconfiguration of all social relationships based on a new principle. Paul wants members of the Christ association in Colossae to understand that they are now part of Messiah's family and reimagine their relationships accordingly. Status counts for nothing in families (at least in good ones). Family members regularly and willingly accept a loss of standing to help another family member. They often put others' needs above their own. Specifically, Paul wants Philemon to receive Onesimus "no longer as a slave, but as more than a slave, a beloved brother" (v. 16). If this is more than just a platitude on Paul's lips, and there is every reason to believe it was, it entails a change in status.[53] In antiquity the ethics of family are not discussed as extensively as those of friendship, but it seems clear enough that there is an obligation to help a brother or sister who has fallen into need.[54] No one enslaved family members; to do so would have amounted to "an extreme instance of sibling

[50] Wright perceptively calls this "the rhetorical climax and main appeal of the letter" (*Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1:18), and I agree with him that Paul its implications are not vague, but "straightforward and unambiguous" (*Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1:10).

[51] Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 87.

[52] Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*, 61–96.

[53] Young, *Our Brother Beloved*, 123–35, makes an especially convincing case that Paul is asking for Onesimus's manumission.

[54] Pieter G. R. de Villiers, "Love in the Letter of Philemon," in *Philemon in Perspective: Interpreting a Pauline Letter,* ed. D. F. Tolmie, BZNW 169 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 185.

treachery, which in the ancient sources is portrayed as the epitome of societal breakdown."[55] On the contrary, they would work to obtain their release.

The extent to which Paul is serious about reconfiguring the Christ cult in Colossae in terms of family relationships can be seen in the one instance of his use of rhetoric that strikes many as manipulative (see n. 44) and in ancient times would have been viewed as "heavy-handed" or even "shameful."[56] In v. 19, he reminds Philemon that "you owe me your very life" (σεαυτόν μοὶπροσοφείλεις).[57] There is one context, however, in which this degree of obligation rhetoric is universally regarded as legitimate, if not always wise: the family. Children do quite literally owe their parents their lives, and parents in all cultures sometimes resort to telling them so, if they believe the stakes are high enough. Paul obviously thought they were in the case of Onesimus, and he reminds Philemon of his debt to his spiritual parent.

5.3. Paul Replaces the Concept of Fate with Election

If we were to ask Philemon why he was a landowner and slaveowner or Onesimus why he was a slave (before they met Paul and had their worldviews realigned) or, for that matter, Pliny why he was a senator, they would all have chalked it up to fate. Social order was fixed and what little movement up and down the social scale did occur was all a function of the caprices of fate. Tyche smiled, and one's lot improved. Tyche frowned, and one landed on the auction block in the slave market. Paul sees a different principle at work here. In a trope vaguely reminiscent of Mordecai's words to Queen Esther (Esther 4:14), Paul employs a divine passive to admonish Philemon that perhaps Onesimus was separated from him so that he might be reunited with him not as a slave, but as a beloved brother (Phlm: 15–16).[58]

Paul's appeal to the purposes of God behind the twists and turns of fate is consequential. The interactions between Philemon and Onesimus before their respective conversions were based on a well-known script that prescribed clearly defined roles for slaves and their masters in a deeply entrenched social hierarchy. In the meantime, however, God had adopted both into his family. He was their father, and they were now brothers through no choice of their own, whether they liked it or not. (Siblings often do not like it!)

Paul's subtle stress on God's election clearly implies that he expects a thoroughgoing change in their interactions. This is because he views election as much more than simply the mechanism by means of which individuals come to faith. It grounds the narrative of God's relationship with his people into which individuals are taken up. It was the reason Paul encouraged the Gentile believers in Corinth to see themselves as now integrated into Israel's story (1 Cor 10:1–11).[59] Paul would have enjoined Philemon and Onesimus to do the same. He would have insisted that the repeated injunction of Moses to his people in Deuteronomy (5:15; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18, 22)—"You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt"—become the basis for a new ethic for regulating slavery within the community. In Israel

[55] Young, *Our Brother Beloved*, 134.

[56] Thomas R. Banton, IV, "The Benefactor's Account-Book: The Rhetoric of Gift Reciprocation according to Seneca and Paul," *NTS* 59 (2013): 396–414, esp. 404.

[57] It is generally acknowledged that this debt refers to Philemon's conversion through Paul. See for example Dunn, *Colossians*, 340; Nordling, *Philemon*, 276

[58] Young, *Our Brother Beloved*, 125.

[59] Richard B. Hays, "The Conversion of the Imagination: Scripture and Eschatology in 1 Corinthians," *NTS* 45 (1999): 391–412, esp. 398–402.

a Hebrew slave would be set free after a period of indenture (Deut 15:12–18). It is likely that Paul expected a similar outcome here.

6. What Did Paul Want?

This brief assessment of the theology just below the surface in Paul's letter to Philemon demonstrates that he wants two things. First, and more importantly, he wants to help Philemon to reimagine the church in Colossae. It is certainly not a guild; it is not even just another cultic association, though outsiders would have viewed it as such. It is—or should be—a community where true *koinonia* (vv. 6, 17) is practiced. For Paul this entails a "new way of life" that demands "new patterns of thinking,"[60] what Richard Hays refers to as a "conversion of the imagination."[61] Paul wants Philemon "to *think within the biblical narrative*, to see themselves as actors within the ongoing scriptural drama; to allow their erstwhile pagan thought-forms to be transformed by a biblically based renewal of the mind."[62] He envisions a community in which the old norms are replaced by new ones. He is aware that this will destabilize Philemon's position in the guild, but loyalty to his god—none other than Jesus the Messiah—demands it.

He also wants Philemon to manumit Onesimus. This goal is not as immediately important to Paul as his overarching goal of identity formation described above. That comes as a surprise to modern readers for whom slavery is an unmitigated evil, but it reflects the ambiguity of slavery in the ancient world. Paul's attitude was not "Onesimus must immediately be released at all costs," but rather "other things being equal, it is a good thing for a slave to gain freedom" (see 1 Cor 7:21).

That Paul wants this follows from the theological convictions we identified behind his rhetoric. First, we noted that Paul replaces the ethic of honor with one of obligation. If anything, he wants to heighten the sense of obligation that the members of the church in Colossae would feel toward each other. This would be quite clearly the result of Onesimus's manumission. Second, Paul replaces the language of social hierarchy with that of family. We noted that if Philemon begins to regard Onesimus as his brother, it becomes impossible to hold him as a slave. People of integrity did not treat their siblings like that in the ancient world. Third, Paul replaces the concept of fate with that of election. He wants Philemon and Onesimus to understand that God chose them to be part of his people. They have been "taken up into Israel in such a way that they now share in Israel's covenant privileges and obligations."[63] As we saw above, Israel's very identity centered around its self-understanding as a once enslaved people liberated by their God. Paul wanted Philemon to do for Onesimus what faithful Israelites were expected to do to their kinsmen: set him free in order to strengthen the bonds between them.

[60] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1:6.

[61] Hays, "The Conversion of the Imagination."

[62] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1:15 (italics original).

[63] Hays, "The Conversion of the Imagination," 411.

Themelios 49.3 (2024): 632–42

"Made Lower than Angels": A Fresh Look at Hebrews 2:5–9

– Jared Compton –

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

****

Abstract: How does the author of Hebrews understand Psalm 8? It is a question scholars and other careful readers continue to ask. A lot of the discussion turns on whether Hebrews thinks Psalm 8 applies to Jesus alone or to Jesus *and other humans*. An equally important question, however, is often overlooked. *If* Hebrews applies the psalm to Jesus and other humans, does Hebrews think the psalm describes humanity *before* or *after* the fall? It is a question full of implications for Hebrews' Christology, which everywhere asserts both Jesus's blamelessness and his close identity with those (post-fall humans) he represents. The following essay takes up this latter question and argues that Hebrews reads Psalm 8 as a description of what humanity lost in the fall—an original superiority to angels, glory, and dominion. Only by reading Hebrews in this way can we do justice to Hebrews' argument and, at the same time, fully appreciate Hebrews' extraordinary Christology.

****

Hebrews 2:5–9 cites Psalm 8:4–6 (8:5–7 LXX). This is at once obvious and, perhaps, the *only* point of consensus yet reached on this part of Hebrews. I can worry, in fact, that a Google search might quickly overturn even this small consensus, were it to return results arguing for a Hebrew rather than Greek *Vorlage*! I mention the scholarly debate not with any intention to survey it further. One may find that done in any number of places.[1] I mention it to justify my present aim, which is to offer a fresh reading of the citation. After all, it is one thing to claim fresh insight about an existing muddle, such as this, and quite another to claim it for a long-established given. Clever students (and, perhaps, Richard Bauckham!) might attempt the latter, while the rest of us should probably content ourselves with the former.

In what follows, I want to return to a minority report I offered in an earlier work.[2] There I claimed that Hebrews reads Psalm 8:5a as a description of what humans *lost in the fall*. That is, when humans

[1] See, e.g., Jason Maston's recent account (and the literature he cites) in "'What Is Man?' An Argument for the Christological Reading of Psalm 8 in Hebrews 2," *ZNW* 112 (2021): 89–104, esp. 90 n. 3.

[2] Jared Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, LNTS 537 (New York: T&T Clark, 2015).

sinned, according to the psalm, they were "made lower than angels."[3] In that earlier work I insisted that this was a *possible* reading of Psalm 8; here I want to suggest that it is the *best* reading of Hebrews 2.

1. Argument

To justify this claim—to prove that Hebrews reads Psalm 8:5a (*angels*; see "Table 1" below) as a description of what humanity lost in the fall—I will make four arguments about Hebrews 2:5–9. Each builds on the one before it and focuses on how Hebrews reads Psalm 8, (mostly) leaving to the side whether this is how others read Psalm 8 before or after Hebrews.

I will show, *first*, that Psalm 8 describes humans. It is about Jesus, of course, but not just about Jesus. *Second*, I will show that Psalm 8 does not describe humanity's experience now. The descriptions used in the psalm once did, but they no longer do. *Third*, I will show that Psalm 8 describes instead humanity's future status. It is a status Jesus has already achieved, if only in part, and it is one to which he is "leading many sons and daughters" (Heb 2:10). *Fourth*, I will show that Psalm 8 turns humanity's protology (his original status at creation) into eschatology (his future status at the new creation), by reading Genesis 1–2 in light (or, better, against the *dark backdrop*!) of Genesis 3.

Table 1: Snapshot of Psalm 8:5–6 in Hebrews 2:5–9

Psalm	*Text*	*Summary*
8:5a	"made … lower than the angels"	*angels*
8:5b	"crowned … with glory and honor"	*glory*
8:6b	"put everything under … feet"	*dominion*

1.1. Psalm 8 Describes Humanity (Heb 2:8c–9a)

"[8c]Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them. [9a]But we do see Jesus…."[4]

Hebrews reads Psalm 8 as a description of humanity. This is the so-called "anthropological" reading of Hebrews 2:5–9. It contrasts with the "Christological" reading, which claims that Hebrews applies the psalm to Jesus exclusively or uniquely. There is no need to enter that debate fully here.[5] It is enough simply to re-assert that the "anthropological" approach better aligns with a straightforward reading of the psalm and of Hebrews, the latter especially seen in the author's transition between 2:8c and 2:9: "We do not see everything subject to [αὐτῷ]. But we do see Jesus." Had Hebrews intended to apply the psalm to Jesus only, then we would expect the order of αὐτῷ and "Jesus" to be reversed. We would expect to read: "We do not see everything subject to *Jesus*. But we do see him [αὐτόν] … crowned." The present syntax, however, points to Jesus not as the psalm's *only* referent but as its *representative* referent, one representing but not replacing a larger referent.

[3] Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, 51.

[4] Bible quotations are from the New International Version, unless otherwise noted.

[5] Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, 38–53.

This is why we are not surprised when Hebrews goes on to name this larger referent at the end of Hebrews 2:9. There we are told that "Jesus … [is] crowned with glory … because he suffered death … *for* [ὑπὲρ] *everyone*." The preposition may, of course, rule out representation if it refers exclusively to Jesus's substitutionary death, but Hebrews suggests this is a false choice. Just a few lines later the author says that Jesus's death allows him to substitute for (2:17) *and* identify with (i.e., represent) others (2:18). Also, if Hebrews thought the psalm's promise terminated on Jesus, then one wonders why he so quickly goes on to talk about the glory promised to so many besides Jesus (2:10).

Here we may also note that Hebrews reads Psalm 8 as a reflection on Genesis 1–2 and, as such, a reflection on *humanity's* creation. There was precedent for reading the psalm this way, to say nothing of the overlap between the psalm and the Genesis account (cf. Ps 8:6 with Gen 1:28).[6] Beyond this, Hebrews everywhere cites OT texts that are themselves reflecting on other, earlier OT texts.[7] Hebrews cites (1) Psalms 2:7 and 110:1, which reflect on God's earlier covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7;[8] (2) Psalm 95:7–11, which reflects on Israel's earlier wilderness experience, described in Exodus 17:7, Numbers 14:21–23, and Deuteronomy 12:9;[9] (3) Psalm 110:4, which reflects on the only other place Melchizedek appears in the OT: Genesis 14:17–20;[10] and (4) Jeremiah 31:31–34, which reflects on Israel's "first" covenant (see τὴνπρώτην, Heb 8:13) in Exodus 19:4–6 and Deuteronomy 29:1–4.[11] Not only are there clear linguistic ties connecting these later and earlier OT texts, but Hebrews *occasionally cites these earlier texts too*, indicating the author not only used OT texts that reflected on earlier OT texts but that he did so deliberately. We need not look far for proof, considering the author's very first citation, Psalm 2:7 (Heb 1:5a), reflects on *and is immediately followed by* 2 Samuel 7:14 (Heb 1:5b; for another example, see Gen 14:17–20 in Heb 7:1–3).[12]

In short, according to Hebrews, Psalm 8 describes not just Jesus's experience, but humanity's as well, not least since the psalm's language is borrowed from Genesis 1–2.

1.2. Psalm 8 Does *Not* Describe Humanity's Present Experience (Heb 2:8c)

"[8c]*Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them.*"

Psalm 8 describes humanity, but, according to Hebrews, not humanity's present experience. What this means is that while the language of the psalm might be drawn from Genesis 1–2, humanity's *experience* in the psalm and in Hebrews is not. The author highlights the incongruity when he says in Hebrews 2:8c, "yet at present we do not see everything subject to them."

It is not just the reality of Psalm 8:6b (*dominion*), however, that is out of step with humanity's present experience, so too is the reality of Psalm 8:5b (*glory*). After all, humans will, but do not presently,

[6] Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, 42, including n. 100.

[7] Gabriella Gelardini's table points to this, even while it serves another purpose ("Israel's Scriptures in Hebrews," in *Israel's Scriptures in Early Christian Writings: The Use of the Old Testament in the New*, ed. Matthias Henze and David Lincicum [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023], 470–72).

[8] See Gary Edward Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use of Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Guide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021), 471; see also the "Davidic covenant" network he summarizes later on (p. 879).

[9] Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use of Old Testament*, 471.

[10] Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use of Old Testament*, 472; also 879.

[11] Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use of Old Testament*, 259; see also 878.

[12] See also Genesis 2:2 in Hebrews 4:4, 10; and Exodus 25:40 and 24:8 in Hebrews 8:5 and 9:20.

experience the "glory" of Psalm 8:5b (Heb 2:10). Even Jesus did not experience the psalm's "glory" until he died (2:9). Thus, were Psalm 8:5b a present reality for humans, as it was in Genesis 1–2, then why is it not true of humans now (Heb 2:10) and why was it not true of Jesus until he died (2:9)?

What Hebrews implies about Psalm 8:5a (*angels*) is another matter. So much turns on what βραχύ τι implies about humanity's original status, a point we shall return to below. Here we might simply note, *first*, that if βραχύ τι refers to humanity's *original* inferiority ("made a little lower"), Hebrews could deny this present reality only by somehow insisting that humans are now still or, perhaps, *even more* inferior to angels. Or, second, if βραχύ τι refers to humanity's original, if temporary inferiority ("made for a little while lower"),[13] then Hebrews could deny this reality only by insisting that humanity's original, temporary status has been extended: we are made lower *even longer*. Or, third, if βραχύ τι describes humanity's post-fall reality ("made a little lower" or "made for a little while lower" *as a result of the Fall*), then the language of Psalm 8:5a already points to the incongruity between humanity's original and present experience.[14]

For now, we can set aside the ambiguity of Psalm 8:5a (*angels*) and note that Hebrews suggests the psalm's two other descriptions (*dominion* and *glory*) do *not* describe humanity's present experience. The language once did, when used in Genesis 1–2, but it no longer does, according to Psalm 8—or, at the least, according to Hebrews' reading of Psalm 8.

1.3. Psalm 8 Describes Humanity's Future Experience (Heb 2:9a)

"[9a]*But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while…"*

According to Hebrews, Psalm 8 describes, instead, humanity's future experience. We see this right on the surface of Hebrews 2:8c, when the author says, "We do not *yet* see everything in subjection to them" (NRSV). Were Hebrews reading Psalm 8:6b (*dominion*) simply as a description of what humanity no longer experiences, we would expect ἔτι ("still")[15] not οὔπω ("yet").[16] Similarly in Hebrews 2:5, the author links Psalm 8:6b (cf. ὑπέταξεν in v. 5, with ὑπέταξας in v. 8, citing Ps 8:7b LXX) with a future experience in "the world *to come*." Hebrews claims, in other words, that Psalm 8:6b creates an expectation for humanity that has yet to be fulfilled. When the author then says that Jesus experienced "glory" only after death (Heb 2:9) and, moreover, that humans have yet to experience this same glory (2:10), Hebrews implies something similar about Psalm 8:5b (*glory*).

---

[13] So, e.g., Cyril of Alexandria, "Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews (Fragments)," in *Commentaries on Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, and Hebrews*, ed. Joel C. Elowsky, trans. David R. Maxwell, Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 115.

[14] Thus, if Hebrews insists on humanity's present inferiority to angels in Hebrews 2:2, the claim by itself does not allow us to say anything about humanity's original status. The law's authority ("binding"), owing to its angelic mediation, might, in other words, support any of the readings we have sketched for βραχύ τι above. Something similar could be said about Hebrews 1:14. There Hebrews says, "angels … serve those who will inherit salvation." This text could imply that (1) humanity's—at least redeemed humanity's ("those who will inherit salvation")—temporary inferiority has ended, perhaps, in light of Hebrews 2:2, with the advent of the new-covenant era (cf. Heb 2:2 with 1:1–2) or (2) humanity's inferiority, temporary or not, has not changed—after all, angels might serve humans but they are "sent" by God (cf. Heb 1:6).

[15] See, e.g., ἔτι in Hebrews 7:10, 11; 8:12 [10:17]; 9:8; 10:2, 37; 11:4, 32.

[16] See οὔπω in Hebrews 12:4.

One might, of course, wonder why Hebrews answers the unfulfilled expectation of dominion (Ps 8:6b) with Jesus's present (and humanity's future) experience of glory (Ps 8:5b). Why match unrealized dominion with present glory? One might expect, instead, for Hebrews 2:8c to say, "Yet at present we do not see humanity *crowned with glory*," or for Hebrews 2:9a to say, "But we do see *everything subject to* Jesus"?

It certainly cannot be the case that Hebrews 2:9a implies that Jesus has not also fulfilled Psalm 8:6b (*dominion*), even if only in part (ἕως, Heb 1:13, with καταργήσῃin 2:14–15), considering the clear linguistic ties between the fulfilled Psalm 110:1 ("Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool") and the expectation of Psalm 8:6b.[17] Rather, the author draws our attention to the unrealized promise of Psalm 8:6b (Heb 2:8c) because it provides him with the clearest link between the psalm's vision and humanity's status in Genesis 1–2 (see, esp., Gen 1:28)[18] and the clearest incongruity between the psalm's vision and humanity's present status.

While the audience's suffering (see, esp., Heb 10:32–35; also 11:1–40)[19] may have raised questions about the unrealized promise of Psalm 8:5a (*angels*) or Psalm 8:5b (*glory*), it certainly raised questions about the painfully unrealized promise of Psalm 8:6b (*dominion*), especially in light of the psalm's mention of "enemies" (Ps 8:2).[20] The author knew that if his audience did not feel the incongruity between their present experience and the psalm's vision (cf. e.g., a similar observation in 4 Ezra 6:59),[21] they would fail to see the fittingness of his argument (cf. διὰ τὸ πάθημα τοῦθανάτου, Heb 2:9, with ἔπρεπεν, 2:10) and continue to stumble over their Christian confession.[22]

---

[17] On the connection between these two texts, see Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, 40–41.

[18] Dominion, of course, has been given to Jesus uniquely, but it is this evident link with Genesis 1:28 that once more cautions against an exclusively Christological referent, not least as an explanation for why the author has left off Psalm 8:6a (for this alternative, see Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989], 71). This is one reason, therefore, that I cannot go along with Maston's otherwise stimulating proposal ("What Is Man?," 102–3; see, similarly, Amy L. B. Peeler, "The Eschatological Son: Christological Anthropology in Hebrews," in *Anthropology and New Testament Theology*, ed. Jason S. Maston and Benjamin E. Reynolds, LNTS 529 [London: T&T Clark, 2018], 162–63; for an even more plausible alternative, see R. B. Jamieson, *The Paradox of Sonship: Christology in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Studies in Christian Doctrine and Scripture [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021], 132–33).

[19] It is the audience's situation that explains the examples selected in Hebrews 11, each of which highlights either social alienation or death (see 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: IVP Academic, 2020], 164–79).

[20] On the eschatological potential of the Greek text of Psalm 8, see Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, 47–48.

[21] For a discussion of 4 Ezra, esp. in light of Hebrews 2:5–9, see Felix H. Cortez, "4 Ezra and Hebrews 2:1–9: Suffering and God's Faithfulness to His Promises," in *Reading Hebrews in Context: The Sermon and Second Temple Judaism*, ed. Ben C. Blackwell, John K. Goodrich, and Jason Maston (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023), 32–38.

[22] Both the first and second arguments of Hebrews—Hebrews 1–4 and Hebrews 5–10—raise problems from the Old Testament that only a *crucified* messiah can solve. Thus, in Hebrews 5–10, the author raises the "problem" of Jeremiah 31:31–34: how could humans experience the unrealized promises of Jeremiah's anticipated new covenant (see "better promises," Heb 8:6b), if the covenant could be inaugurated only by an extraordinary sacrifice (see "for [ὅτι]," 8:12, citing Jer 38:34 LXX)? The author answers the implied question by pointing to Jesus's *necessary* death. Jesus, he claims, "entered the Most Holy Place … by his own blood" because "it was *necessary* [ἀνάγκη] … for … the heavenly things themselves [to be purified] with better sacrifices" (Heb 9:12, 23). In other words, the sac-

Hebrews also implies that Psalm 8:5a (*angels*) creates an as-yet unrealized expectation for humanity. When Hebrews 2:9 says, "we … see Jesus crowned," the author implies that Jesus is also no longer lower than angels, especially if we follow the NIV (or the NRSV, ESV, CSB, NET, et al.) and translate the βραχύ τι in Psalm 8:6a LXX (8:5a ET)/Hebrews 2:7, 9 as "a little while lower" instead of "a little lower." Hebrews' earlier argument, in fact, requires this translation, for at least two reasons.

First, in Hebrews 1, Jesus's enthronement leads to his superiority to angels. In Hebrews 1:3–4, the author says, "After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became [γενόμενος] as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs." Jesus "sat down," which is to say, he was enthroned (see 1:13) or "crowned" (2:9) and, as such, "*became* … superior to … angels." Just a few lines later, the author says something similar. According to Hebrews 1:8–9, Jesus "*has* [*been*] *set* … above [his] companions," precisely because he has been "anoint[ed] [ἔχρισεν]" and, thus, enthroned (citing Ps 44:7–8 LXX [45:6–7 ET]). These "companions" may not refer to angels, but the statement is from a series of similar honorifics (see Heb1: 5a, 5b, 6, 8–9, 10–12, 13) given as proof of Jesus's superiority to angels (see γάρ, 1:5).[23] It is just two verses earlier, in fact, that Jesus's installation in (over?) the world to come (see περὶ ἧς λαλοῦμεν, 2:5) results in God's explicit command that angels "worship him" (1:6, citing Deut 32:43). If Jesus's enthronement leads to his superiority to angels in Hebrews 1, it then surely leads to the same result in Hebrews 2.

Second, Hebrews suggests that the same event that led to Jesus's enthronement in Hebrews 2, led to his enthronement in Hebrews 1. In Hebrews 2:9, Jesus is "crowned … *because* he suffered death [διὰ τὸ πάθημα τοῦθανάτου]." Similarly, in Hebrews 1:9, Jesus is anointed *because* ("this is why [διὰτοῦτο]" [CSB]) of his character (i.e., "You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness"), which Hebrews later says was forged through suffering (i.e., death). "He learned obedience from what he suffered" (5:8). In both Hebrews 1 and Hebrews 2, therefore, faithful and obedient suffering led to Jesus's enthronement.

---

rifice needed to inaugurate the new covenant—here symbolized by the necessary consecration of the covenant's sacred space—was precisely the sacrifice Jesus offered ("his *own* blood"). The author, as I have argued above, does something similar in his first argument. In Hebrews 1–4, the author raises the "problem" of Psalm 8, appealing to the incongruence between the psalm's descriptions and the audience's present experience (Heb 2:8c), before going on to say that Jesus—here mentioned for the *first* time in Hebrews—secured the psalm's promises only "*because* he suffered death" (2:9). Once again, Jesus's death—messiah's death—is necessary for solving a problem created by an OT promise. Thus, take away the promise of Psalm 8 or Jeremiah 31, and we miss the author's apologetic for Jesus's necessary death and, thus, misunderstand his argument.

On this way of reading the author's argument, see Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, esp. 165–71; Bruno, Compton, and McFadden, *Biblical Theology According to the Apostles*, 151–59; and Jared Compton, "Can a Christian Fall Away? How to Hear the Warnings in Hebrews," *Desiring God*, 14 May 2022, https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/can-a-christian-fall-away; cf. also R. B. Jamieson, *Jesus' Death and Heavenly Offering in Hebrews*, SNTMS 172 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 104–9.

It is this link, moreover, between the promise of Psalm 8:6b and Jesus's *necessary* death that suggests the paragraph cannot be about the incongruity between the claims of Psalm 110:1 and of Psalm 8:6b *only*, as, e.g., in George H. Guthrie, "Hebrews," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. D. A. Carson and G. K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 947; see, similarly, George H. Guthrie, "Hebrews, Letter to The," in *Dictionary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale, D. A. Carson, Benjamin L. Gladd, and Andrew D. Naselli (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 295.

[23] Cf. e.g., Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 124; and William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, WBC 47A (Dallas: Word, 1991), 30, who see a reference to angels in Hebrews 1:9

It would make nonsense of the author's argument for the *same* enthronement caused by the *same* event to lead to Jesus's exaltation over angels in Hebrews 1 but not in Hebrews 2.[24]

According to Hebrews, Psalm 8 anticipates humanity's future glory (Heb 2:9a, 10), dominion (2:8c; cf. 2:5), and superiority to angels (2:9a, in the light of 1:3–4, 5–14). Each—and, especially, dominion—is something "we do not *yet* see," but each has been secured by humanity's representative, Jesus.

1.4. Psalm 8 Describes What Humanity Lost (Heb 2:9b)

"[9b]*now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death*"

According to Hebrews, when Psalm 8 uses the language of Genesis 1–2 to talk about humanity's *future* superiority, glory, and dominion, the psalm implies that such realities were, at some point, lost. We see this in the connection Hebrews draws between Jesus's death and the fulfillment of Psalm 8's promise.

Jesus was "crowned [ἐστεφανωμένον]" only "because [δία] he suffered death" (Heb 2:9).[25] And he was crowned in this way "so that … he might taste death for everyone" (2:9). As noted above, the idea of a "death *for* [ὑπέρ]" others implies substitution and anticipates the sacrificial logic Hebrews develops most fully in Hebrews 9:16–17. Though the interpretation of this text is disputed, on at least one reading,[26] Hebrews insists that sinners cannot be restored to a relationship with God without first dying, if only—and "by the grace of God" (2:9)—vicariously.[27] It is the reason so much attention is given in Exodus 24 and Hebrews 9:18–22 to the role of sacrificial blood in the inauguration of (sinful) Israel's covenant at Sinai. It also explains the author's summary note in 9:22b that "without the shedding of blood"—*without death*—"there is no forgiveness" (cf. Lev 17:11).

To say that Jesus fulfilled Psalm 8:5b (*glory*) only "because he suffered death … for" others implies that sin stood in the way of Psalm 8's promise and that Jesus's death was the sacrificial means of removing that sin.[28] The fact that Hebrews and Leviticus, on which Hebrews so clearly depends (see, esp., Heb 9:1–10), insist that sacrifices must be blameless further clarifies that the sin requiring Jesus's death was not his own—which is, in any case, a claim Hebrews elsewhere explicitly makes (cf. ἄμωμοςin Heb 9:14 with, e.g., LXX Lev 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6, 9; 4:3, 14, 23, 28, 32; 5:15, 18, 25; 9:2, 3; 12:6; 14:10; 22:19, 21; 23:12, 18; see also Heb 4:15; cf. 1:8–9; 3:2; 5:7–10; 7:26; 10:5–10; et al.).

According to Hebrews, Psalm 8 implies that humanity's original status is out of step with his present experience *and* expected to be restored. Hebrews also insists that this restoration is accomplished by Jesus's sacrificial death. This implies that humanity's original and now promised status was lost when

[24] Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, 45; see, e.g., Gareth Cockerill's different conclusion (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012], 133).

[25] On the relationship between ἐστεφανωμένον and δία in Hebrews 2:9, see Dana M. Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2019), 49–50.

[26] For this reading, see Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, 128–32; see also Jared Compton, "Where There's Not a Will: The Covenant Theology of Hebrews 9," *Desiring God*, 20 June 2023, https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/where-theres-not-a-will.

[27] This runs contrary, therefore, to those who think Hebrews fails to make the connection explicit, even while I recognize the connection here is less than straightforward. Moreover, if Genesis 3 is in the background of Psalm 8, then perhaps the (contested) connection between sin and death in Hebrews 9:16–17 simply brings to the surface what was already implied in 2:5–18 (see the slightly different take in Peeler, "The Eschatological Son:," 165–66.).

[28] NB: Like Israel's covenants, Psalm 8's promises include access to God (cf. Heb 2:18 with 4:14–16).

humanity sinned in Genesis 3. How else might we explain the "not yet" in Hebrews 2:8c? That is, what other event might Hebrews point to that could explain the psalm's transformation of humanity's protology into eschatology?

It is worth noting, in any case, how often elsewhere, both in Judaism and in Christianity, the events of Genesis 1–2 were read in light of Genesis 3.[29] Hebrews, in fact, goes on to describe Jesus's death, not, at least at first, as the means of forgiving sin (2:17; cf. 9:15–22) but rather of destroy[ing] … the devil" (2:14, NRSV; διὰ τοῦ θανάτου),[30] humanity's first and greatest enemy, who is, in both Jewish and Christian tradition, linked with the serpent of Genesis 3.[31]

If Psalm 8 implies that humanity's original status has been lost, this presumes a certain understanding of Psalm 8:5a (*angels*). If sin stands in the way of humanity's superiority to angels, as it does for his restored glory (Ps 8:5b) and dominion (Ps 8:6b), then Hebrews reads Psalm 8:5a not only as a promise of humanity's future superiority ("a little while") but as an implicit description of his original superiority and, moreover, of how such superiority was lost.

Let me offer three further observations to justify—or, at the least, clarify—this conclusion. *First*, if Psalm 8:5a does not imply humanity's original superiority but refers instead to humanity's original inferiority, then it is hard to explain how the implicit promise of Psalm 8:5a fits with the promises of Psalm 8:5b and 8:6b. In the latter, Hebrews promises the restoration of *original* realities—humanity's glory and dominion are restored. But, in the former, such a promise would anticipate simply the restoration of humanity's inferiority, if only temporary inferiority. This, however, would be out of step with the fulfillment Hebrews describes. Jesus is crowned, exercising dominion, *and* superior to angels. If we are to make Psalm 8:5a's fulfillment parallel with Psalm 8:5b and 8:6b, then, on this reading, we would expect Jesus's continued inferiority to angels, not his present superiority over them.

Table 2: Restoration of Original Inferiority Denied

Original	*Restoration (Expected)*	*Restoration (Hebrews)*
Inferior	*Inferior*	*Superior*
Crowned	Crowned	Crowned
Dominion	Dominion	Dominion

Second, if Psalm 8:5b and 8:6b describe what humanity lost, then it is likely that Psalm 8:5a also describes something that humanity lost. In what way, however, could humanity's original inferiority

[29] For Christian precedent, see, e.g., 1 Timothy 2:13–14; 2 Corinthians 11:3; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, 45; Romans 5:12–21. For Jewish precedent, see 4Q422; cf. also 1QS IV, 23; CD-A III, 20; 2 Enoch 30.10–12; 32.1; 4 Ezra 6.54, 59; 7.9; cf. 3–8, 12–15. For a discussion, see Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, 46–47.

[30] On the relationship between sin and the devil, see, e.g., G. K. Beale, *Union with the Resurrected Christ: Eschatological New Creation and New Testament Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 227–28.

[31] On the association of "the devil" (or Satan; διάβολος translates הַשָּׂטָן in, e.g., Job 2:1; cf. BDAG, "διάβολος") with the serpent in early Judaism, see, e.g., b. Soṭa 9a and b. Sanh. 29a (cf. e.g., Chad T. Pierce, "Satan and Related Figures," in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010], 1200). For the connection in early Christianity, see Revelation 12:9. The "fear of death," in Hebrews 2:14 also recalls Genesis 3 (see, e.g., v. 19, esp. in light of 2:17; 3:3, 4). For a similar line of argument (and one rightly pointing to the "objective soteriological significance [of] the death of Christ"), see Jamieson, *Jesus' Death and Heavenly Offering in Hebrews*, 102; also 98.

be lost? If, for example, Hebrews thinks Psalm 8:5a implies only the present continuation of original inferiority ("you made them lower … *and they still are*"), then this would be out of step with how Hebrews reads Psalm 8:5b and 8:6b. In both of these cases, something is *lost*. Or, if Hebrews thinks Psalm 8:5a implies the extension of an original, if temporary inferiority ("you made them *for a little while lower … and they still are*"), one still wonders how such a loss would be demonstrable? In the case of both Psalm 8:5b and 8:6b, humanity's status is *conspicuously* lost (2:8c). How could this be true if Psalm 8:5a refers to humanity's original inferiority, temporary or not?

Table 3: Loss of Original Inferiority Implausible

Original	*Fall*
Inferior	Inferiority *Maintained* or *Extended*
Crowned	Not crowned
Dominion	Diminished Dominion

Third, if Psalm 8:5a describes humanity's original inferiority, temporary ("you made them for a little while lower") or not ("you made them a little lower"), then the fulfillment of Psalm 8:5a would be out of step with the fulfillment of Psalm 8:5b and 8:6b. In the latter, humanity's original status is restored; whereas, in the former, humanity's original status is *reversed*. Reclaimed glory and dominion are somewhat ill-fitting matches with *reversed* inferiority.

Even if Hebrews implies the future escalation of humanity's original status, the escalation of Psalm 8:5a would still be out of step with the escalation of Psalm 8:5b and 8:6b. In the latter, humanity's original status is restored *permanently*. Humans are made, to borrow from Augustine, *not* able to lose glory and *not* able to lose dominion.[32] But this is surely different from the escalated reality of Psalm 8:5a, where humanity's original status is not simply *restored* permanently but is *reversed* permanently.[33]

[32] See Augustine, *City of God* 22.30.3.

[33] While it is true that Hebrews everywhere insists on the escalation, not simply restoration, of first-covenant realities (i.e., *better* cult [incl. priest, sacred space, and sacrifice] and covenant), this kind of escalation need not be demanded for pre-first covenant realities (i.e., for humanity's original, pre-fall state). Further, while it is possible that Hebrews, in one or two places, implies a necessary escalation for even pre-fall humanity (e.g., entering God's "rest," in, e.g., Heb 4:4, or the unshakeable, not-of-this-creation "kingdom," in, e.g., 12:27–28; on the relationship between this unshakeable kingdom and the believer's resurrected bodies [11:35; cf. 7:16], see Bruno, Compton, and McFadden, *Biblical Theology According to the Apostles*, 174–75), even in these an argument could be made that such experiences merely confirm pre-fall human experiences. Had Adam and Eve obeyed, such experiences would have been granted permanence, with any possibility of loss forever removed. As Augustine puts it, Adam was created able *not* to die, sinned and became *not* able *not* to die, and, when restored, becomes not only able *not* to die, as Adam was originally, but actually *not able* to die (see Augustine, *City of God* 22.30.3). There is real escalation, but such escalation involves a confirmation rather than a change of humanity's original status. Cf. G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), whose list of "heightened" (p. 916) or "escalated" (p. 917) blessings emphasize escalation by *confirmation* more than by *new experiences* (i.e., *continued* superiority to angels vis-à-vis *exaltation* above angels *for the first time*): "1. no more threats from evil; 2. *eternal* and incorruptible physical and spiritual life; 3. an *unending* and absolute kingship; 4. *unending* physical and spiritual rest; 5. living in the context of an incorruptible creation [i.e., incorruptible because of humanity's *eternal* and incorruptible physical and spiritual life; see p. 41]; 6. he, his

Table 4: Escalation of Original Inferiority Unparalleled

Original	*Restoration (Hebrews)*
Inferior	*Superior*
Crowned	Crowned
Dominion	Dominion

The way Hebrews reads Psalm 8 implies the author thought humanity's original status included glory (8:5b), dominion (8:6b), *and* superiority to angels (8:5a). To suggest anything else would fail to take on board the reason Hebrews gives for why Psalm 8 turns humanity's original status into his future status (sin) and the parallelism Hebrews implies between the psalm's promises, not least the manner in which each is fulfilled in Jesus (restoration, if also permanent). All this suggests why the best reading of Hebrews affirms that in Psalm 8:5a we see both judgment and promise: "*because of sin*, God made humans lower than angels, if also *only for a little while*." According to Hebrews, the reversal of status promised in the psalm is surprisingly accomplished through the sacrificial death of the Messiah, whom the Christian confession identifies as Jesus.[34]

2. A Concluding Reflection

In conclusion, I will leave to the side the correspondence between my reading and early Jewish thought and what this correspondence (rightly!) implies about Hebrews' hermeneutical strategy.[35] Suffice it to say that Hebrews is not the first to promise humanity's superiority over angels nor to tie his present inferiority to Genesis 3.[36]

Instead, I want to conclude by drawing attention to the correspondence between my reading and Hebrews' Christology. If we don't read Hebrews in this way, we may overlook an important part of the letter's central theme. In Hebrews 2:7a and elsewhere, Hebrews wants us to see how thoroughly Jesus identifies with fallen humanity (κατὰ πάντα… ὁμοιωθῆναι, 2:16).[37]

It is of course true that Hebrews insists upon Jesus's sinlessness (4:15). Were he not, then his sacrifice would not have been "blameless" (9:14), he would not have been raised from the dead (i.e., "heard," 5:7–

progeny, and the cosmos in their consummated state reflecting more greatly the glory of God" (pp. 916–17, emphasis added; see also pp. 29–46).

[34] I think this is why Jesus's name is withheld until its dramatic revelation in Hebrews 2:9: *Jesus*, the one Christians claimed to be messiah, is the one who fulfills the expectations of Psalm 8 (Heb 2:8c), precisely through the surprising means of a cross (2:9)!

[35] See Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, esp. 16–17.

[36] See Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, 49–51. For a similar (if not identical) early Christian angelology, see Gerald Hiestand's analysis of Irenaeus, in "'Passing beyond the Angels': The Interconnection between Irenaeus' Account of the Devil and His Doctrine of Creation" (PhD diss., University of Reading, 2017), and Jonathan King's illuminating case against angels as divine image-bearers, in "Are Angels Created in the Image of God?" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the ETS, Denver, 15 November 2022).

[37] Cf. Romans 8:3: Jesus was sent "in the likeness of sinful flesh [ἐν ὁμοιώματι σαρκὸςἁμαρτίας]." On the reception of this text in the Christian tradition, 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), 302–6.

9),[38] and he would not have been appointed a Melchizedekian priest (5:10).[39] Still, Hebrews everywhere also insists that Jesus identifies with sinful humans, to the extent that he experienced our "fear of death" (2:15; 5:7–8) and "weaknesses" (4:15), along with the "suffer[ing]" associated with "tempt[ation]" (2:18). In this way, Hebrews implies, especially in its use of Psalm 8:5a, that Jesus's experience was so very much like our own and so very different from (pre-fall) Adam's.[40] The weakness Jesus experienced was out of step with the "very good" world God made in Genesis 1.[41]

If we fail to see how Hebrews reads Psalm 8:5a, then we may miss the fullness and, indeed, profound goodness of Hebrews' Christology (see 2:18; 4:14–16). If Jesus ran his race to heaven *from the depths of Psalm 8:5a*, this suggests just how truly "fitting" he is to be our "pioneer[ing]" example (2:10; see also 12:1–3).[42]

[38] See Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews*, 70–75; also Jared Compton, "The Function of Divine Christology in Hebrews: Critical Reflections on a Recent Proposal," *Themelios* 48.2 (2023): 361–62.

[39] See προσαγορευθείς, in Hebrews 5:10.

[40] Cf. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 3:311: "Jesus assumed a weak human nature and in that respect differed from Adam."

[41] See Compton, "Function of Divine Christology," 361, including n. 53, following Duby's discussion of Christ's *defectus poenae*. "But, under the decision to take up a human nature in which he would suffer for our sin and lead us to glory, the Son had to take up a nature with these defects. While the Son did not have in himself any cause of incurring such defects [*defectus culpae*], 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* (*Jesus and the God of Classical Theism*, 282, incl. n131; emphasis added). See also Brandon Crowe, who similarly notes, "This [i.e., Christ's human nature] was different from Adam before the fall, in that Adam was created without a nature weakened by sin. However, this does not mean that Christ had a fallen human nature. It is instead to say he came *into a world*, as a real man, *that had been affected by sin*" (*The Lord Jesus Christ: The Biblical Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ*, We Believe 3 [Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2023], 229; emphasis added).

[42] See, similarly, John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. William H. Goold, The Works of John Owen 21 (Edinburgh: Johnstone & Hunter, 1854), 4:511–12.

Themelios 49.3 (2024): 643–55

Baptist Catholicity in the Ecclesiology of John Gill (1697–1771)

– Christopher Green –

Christopher Green is an adjunct instructor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri, where he is pursuing a PhD in systematic theology.

****

Abstract: Throughout his writings, but especially in the presentation of his ecclesiology, John Gill exhibits a steadfast commitment to a theological sensibility today referred to as Baptist catholicity. Gill's ecclesiological writings are thoroughly catholic in their method and content, as evidenced by a robust engagement with patristic sources, creative and positive use of Reformation and post-Reformation era paedobaptist theologians, and a refusal to resort to Baptist authors even in support of Baptist distinctives. As such, Gill provides a model for contemporary proponents of Evangelical Baptist catholicity and ought to be retrieved to strengthen a distinctively Baptist theology in the twenty-first century.[1]

****

The scholarly attainments and expansive self-education of the eighteenth-century Baptist theologian John Gill (1697–1771) have long garnered praise from those who have read his vast corpus of writings.[2] Gill wrote and published more than 10,000 pages of theological and exegetical material in his life, including the first verse-by-verse commentary on the whole Bible written by a Baptist, the first complete systematic exposition of Christian doctrine written by a Baptist, and one of the most notable apologies for Calvinistic soteriology written in the eighteenth century.[3] In recent decades, a

[1] This paper adapts a presentation delivered at the 2023 Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in San Antonio, TX.

[2] The Anglican minister and hymn writer Augustus Toplady, a personal friend of Gill's, is often quoted as saying, "If any one man can be supposed to have trod the whole circle of human learning, it was Dr. Gill. His attainments, both in abstruse and polite literature, were (what is very uncommon) equally extensive and profound." John Rippon, *A Brief Memoir of the Life and Writings of the Late John Gill* (London: Bennett, 1838), 137.

[3] John Gill, *An Exposition of the Old Testament*, 6 vols., reprint ed. (Paris, AK: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 2006 [1810]); John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 3 vols., reprint ed. (Paris, AK: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 2006 [1809]); John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity: Or a System of Evangelical Truths Deduced from the Sacred Scriptures*, reprint ed. (Paris, AK: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 2007 [1809]); On Gill's status as the first Baptist to complete a whole-Bible commentary and systematic theology, see Timothy

strand of scholarship has focused on Gill's wide-ranging use of sources.[4] These scholars agree that John Gill's knowledge of the church fathers and Reformed orthodox theologians was expansive, and his widespread use of them significant, such that Gill cannot be properly understood except as a student of the traditions from which he drew.[5] This paper aims to contribute to this strand of scholarship by examining Gill's use of sources in his ecclesiological writings. I will argue that Gill intentionally made use of patristic and Reformed paedobaptist sources instead of credobaptist sources in the presentation of his ecclesiology. Thus, his ecclesiological writings exhibit a spirit of Baptist catholicity that takes seriously a broader tradition of Christian theological reflection, even in reference to the Baptists' most controversial distinctives. Though the present paper is not the first study to ascribe catholicity to Gill's theological writings,[6] it will propose his ecclesiology as a particularly instructive example of this sensibility. Gill steadfastly maintained a positive engagement with the catholic tradition in light of his Baptist distinctives, a methodological approach in which we may discern a certain depth of commitment to catholicity. Gill thus provides a helpful model for contemporary Baptist theologians, charting a path that, I will argue, is worthy of emulation.

1. Tradition and Theological Method in Gill's Theology

David Mark Rathel has laid the groundwork for subsequent discussion of catholicity in Gill's theology by examining the introduction of the *Body of Doctrinal Divinity*, in which Gill briefly articulates his understanding of the nature and task of theology. Programmatic to this introduction is Gill's acknowledgement, "Systematical Divinity, I am sensible, is now become very unpopular."[7] Making several appearances throughout the introduction are those who advocate for articles and confessions of faith to be expressed only "in the bare words of the sacred Scriptures."[8] While Gill does not maintain too strong a polemic against this group, the introduction nevertheless functions as a defense of the discipline of "Systematical Divinity" in light of such objections.

George, "The Ecclesiology of John Gill," in *The Life and Thought of John Gill (1697–1771): A Tercentennial Appreciation*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin (New York: Brill, 1997), 225.

[4] Richard A. Muller, "John Gill and the Reformed Tradition," in *The Life and Thought of John Gill (1697–1771): A Tercentennial Appreciation*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin (New York: Brill, 1997), 51–68; David Mark Rathel, "A Case Study in Baptist Catholicity: The Scriptures and the Tradition in the Theology of John Gill in the Theology of John Gill," *The Baptist Quarterly* 24.3 (2018): 108–16; Hong-Gyu Park, "Grace and Nature in the Theology of John Gill (1697–1771)" (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 2001); Steven Godet, "The Trinitarian Theology of John Gill (1697–1771): Context, Sources, and Controversy" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015). Colton Strother, "Reconsidering John Gill as a Baptist Heir of Reformed Orthodoxy: A Historical and Theological Account" (PhD diss., Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2023).

[5] Muller has said that Gill must be understood in light of "his appropriation of a vast array of older traditionary materials and of specific elements of an already diverse Reformed tradition" (Muller, "John Gill and the Reformed Tradition," 53). Park's entire dissertation aims to advance this understanding of Gill as a corrective to the understanding of Gill as a hypercalvinist ("Grace and Nature in the Theology of John Gill," 24–25).

[6] See Rathel, "A Case Study in Baptist Catholicity," for a previous discussion of Baptist catholicity in Gill's theology.

[7] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, xxxv.

[8] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, xxxix.

One of the reasons Gill gives for the necessity of a systematic divinity is that it represents the product of a Christian tradition which has developed in response to a continuing proliferation of errors in the history of the church. Accordingly, the articles of faith of the early church were few and opposed the errors faced by the primitive Christians.[9] But in short order, these ancient errors "were increased by new errors that sprung up, which made an increase of articles necessary; otherwise the same articles of faith were believed by the ancients as by later posterity."[10] Gill finds Thomas Aquinas in agreement with him on this point, citing the scholastic as saying, "Articles of faith, have increased by succession of times, not indeed as to the substance, but as to the explanation and express profession of them; for what are explicitly and under a greater number believed by posterity, all the same were believed by the fathers before them, implicitly and under a lesser number."[11]

Consistent with this view of theological development, Gill argues that a *rule of faith*, preserved in the early church, assists Christians in interpreting scriptures according to *the analogy of faith*. The purpose of this analogy of faith is "so that the interpretation of Scripture we bring is analogous to the articles of faith, that is, agreeing with them and consenting to them, and not repugnant to them."[12] It is in this concept of a "rule of faith" that Rathel sees evidence of a spirit of catholicity in Gill's thought.[13] Gill rightly identifies the rule of faith very early in the church in the writings of Tertullian, whose definition of the rule of faith Gill quotes at length.[14] This definition, found in Tertullian's *On the Veiling of Virgins*, identifies the rule of faith as "truly one, solely immoveable and irreformable" and has as its content a form of the apostles creed.[15] Gill concludes his reflections on the rule and analogy of faith by noting that such a foundational articulation of Christian orthodoxy functions "to shew our agreement with other Christians in the principal parts of them, and to distinguish ourselves from those who oppose the faith once delivered to the saints."[16]

Against the thesis that Gill uses historical sources with a spirit of catholicity, one might object that his aims are primarily polemical. Indeed, Gill's sourcing was often overtly polemical, but his comments on tradition and the rule of faith make clear that polemics and catholicity are not mutually exclusive in his use of the traditional sources. Rather, Gill advocates for a twofold use of tradition in "systematical divinity." It simultaneously serves to connect one's confession to that of other Christians and to repudiate the heterodox beliefs of those opposed to the true faith. Therefore, Rathel is justified in concluding that, in regards to Gill's use of the *rule of faith* and *analogy of faith*, "He conveys with these terms *something* akin to what such figures as Irenaeus and Tertullian propose with the concept; that is, he refers to the

[9] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, xxxvii.

[10] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, xxxvii.

[11] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, xxxvii; Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 22 vols. (London: Washbourne, 1911–1925), II-II q.1 a.7.

[12] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, xxxviii.

[13] Rathel, "A Case Study in Baptist Catholicity," 3–5.

[14] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, xxxviii. Rathel, "A Case Study in Baptist Catholicity," 3.

[15] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, xxxviii. Cf. Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins* 1; Tertullian, *Prescriptions against Heretics* 13.

[16] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, xxxix.

received tradition of the church catholic."[17] The sections below outline how Gill applied his reflections on theological tradition to his doctrine of the church.[18]

2. The Catholicity of John Gill's Ecclesiological Writings

Gill interacted widely with the Christian tradition throughout his body of work, dialoguing almost exclusively with sources that were paedobaptist in their theological orientation. This tendency is as true of his ecclesiological writings as it is of his broader work. Despite his well-earned reputation as an apologist for Particular Baptist distinctives, Gill used these sources as more than just foils against which to highlight Baptist theology. Rather, Gill continued to exhibit a positive and constructive use of paedobaptist sources in his ecclesiological writings, strongly indicating a thoroughgoing spirit of catholicity which extended even to Baptist distinctives. In this section, I argue that we may observe this methodological catholicity in Gill's use of patristic sources, his use of Reformed paedobaptist sources, and his lack of interaction with Baptist authors.

2.1. Gill's Use of Patristic Sources

Whereas Gill elsewhere in his *Body of Divinity* interacts principally with sixteenth and seventeenth-century Reformed Orthodox theologians, in his ecclesiological writings he mainly utilizes the writings of the church fathers. As has been commonly observed, Gill's use of these sources evidences a thorough knowledge of the material.[19] In presenting a distinctively Baptist ecclesiology, Gill allows scarcely a single point of doctrine to flow from his pen without noting that it aligns in some way or another with the faith and practice of the primitive church. Below I assess key examples of Gill's interaction with patristic sources in his ecclesiological writings.[20]

---

[17] Rathel, "A Case Study in Baptist Catholicity," 4.

[18] Still, Gill has significant criticisms to level against the early and medieval church. The early fathers exhibited "a purity in their lives, but a want of clearness, accuracy, and consistence in their doctrines" (Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, li). The medieval scholastics, whose theology "lay in contentious and litigious disputations," chiefly supported "antichristianism" and increased "popish darkness," nearly banishing Christian divinity from the world (Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, li). These statements stand in tension with Gill's earlier comments in his introduction. But a single paragraph cannot undo Gill's widespread positive use of the broader Christian tradition, and it is possible to read Gill without contradiction. One possible solution to this apparent discrepancy is that Gill, having already thoroughly commended the early church and cited Aquinas positively, finds it necessary to acknowledge the problems of the early fathers and medieval church in order to designate his own project as thoroughly reformational. In so doing, he acknowledges significant deficiencies without necessarily stripping the church in these eras of its status as a confessor of the catholic rule of faith.

[19] Curt D. Daniel, "Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1983), 47; Muller, "John Gill and the Reformed Tradition," 54; Michael A. G. Haykin, "'We Trust in the Saving Blood': Definite Atonement in the Ancient Church," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 57; Rathel, "A Case Study in Baptist Catholicity," 2; Steven Godet, "The Trinitarian Theology of John Gill (1697–1771)," 122–80.

[20] I will be using Gill's *Body of Divinity* as my primary conversation partner throughout the remainder of this paper, using his polemical ecclesiological treatises as a supplement where they are illuminating.

2.1.1. Patristic Sources and the Nature of the Church

In the *Body of Divinity*, Gill offers as part of the definition of a church, "Not the place, but the congregation of the elect."[21] This is a direct quotation of Clement of Alexandria from book seven of the *Stromata*.[22] Here Clement compares the Christian notion of a church with the pagan notion of a temple. Clement's argument flows from the very nature of God. He asks, "What work of builders, and stone-cutters, and mechanical art can be holy? Superior to these are not they who think that the air, and the enclosing space, or rather the whole world and the universe, are meet for the excellency of God?"[23] Having deconstructed the pagan notion of a temple, Clement offers the Christian alternative: "For it is not now the place, but the assemblage of the elect, that I call the Church. This temple is better for the reception of the greatness of the dignity of God."[24] Gill's use of Clement thus begins his ecclesiological presentation with a strong connection to early Christian theology.

Further defining the nature of a church, Gill introduces the category of the *catholicity* of the church. He says,

> There is another sense in which the church may be said to be *catholic*, or *general*, as it may consist of such in any age, and in the several parts of the world, who have true faith in Christ, and hold to him the head, and are baptized by one Spirit into one body; have one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all, and are called in one hope of their calling.[25]

For Gill, even the very concept of catholicity demands support from the writings of the fathers. Gill references letters from Polycarp and Origen as recorded by Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*.[26] These citations refer to incidental statements which merely establish the antiquity of the term "catholic" and the concept of universality. More significant is an accompanying citation of Irenaeus's *Against Heresies*.[27] Gill cites the phrase, "The church scattered throughout the whole world to the ends of the earth."[28] This statement occurs within the broader context of an entire chapter in which Irenaeus defends, on the basis of its received apostolic doctrine, the unity of the catholic church against the diverse multitude of Gnostic sects.[29] It is unclear whether Gill had this context in mind when he cited Irenaeus, but it is clear that he uses the father appropriately. We should not import contemporary discussions about Baptist Catholicity back into Gill's definition without any qualification. Nevertheless, we can safely note that Gill explicitly defines catholicity as a category in his dogmatic system, that this catholicity describes the church in every age, and that it includes a oneness of faith.

---

[21] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 852.

[22] Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata, Or Miscellanies* 7.5 (*ANF* 2:530–31).

[23] Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata* 7.5 (*ANF* 2:530).

[24] Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata* 7.5 (*ANF* 2:530).

[25] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 853.

[26] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 854; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.15.3, 6.25.4.

[27] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.10.1.

[28] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 854.

[29] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.10.1–3.

2.1.2. Patristic Sources and Baptist Distinctives

Gill's use of the fathers takes on a polemical tone when he defends Reformed Protestant and Baptist distinctives. For example, Gill cites Jerome's commentary on Titus to support equating the offices of "bishop" and "elder."[30] Commenting on Titus 1:5, Jerome says, "It is therefore the very same priest, who is a bishop…. The churches were governed by a common council of the priests. But after each one began to think that those whom he had baptized were his own and not Christ's, it was decreed for the whole world that one of the priests should be elected to preside over the others."[31]

Gill enlists a bevy of church fathers in support of congregational polity. He cites Clement of Rome's first epistle as saying, "the apostles appointed proper persons to the office of the ministry, *with the consent or choice of the whole church*."[32] He quotes Eusebius's account of Fabian's ascension to the office of Bishop of Rome by the unanimous vote of the gathered brethren.[33] Gill perhaps stumbles in quoting Theodoret's ecclesiastical history, which probably has an electing council of clergy in view.[34] On the other hand, Gill's use of Sulpitius Severus's *Life of St. Martin* is both accurate and contextually sensitive.[35] In his account of the ordination of St. Martin, Severus speaks of "an incredible number of people" who had "assembled to give their votes" on whether Martin was worthy of the episcopate.[36] Gill's support of congregationalism from the church fathers is imperfect. His quotation of Eusebius depends on a particular understanding of the vague term "the brethren," and his use of Theodoret is likely entirely inaccurate. Nevertheless, in Clement of Rome and Severus, Gill identifies a tradition of democratic polity in the early church with which he can associate his own theory of church government.

One of the most impressive examples of Gill's use of the fathers comes from his apologetic treatise *The Argument from Apostolic Tradition, In Favour of Infant-Baptism Considered*.[37] In addition to illustrating Gill's wide reading of the fathers, this treatise furnishes us with a critical example of how Gill understands his use of tradition in relation to the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. Gill is responding to Micaiah Towgood, who argues for the apostolicity of infant baptism.[38] Gill's response illuminates his

[30] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 864.

[31] Jerome, *St. Jerome's Commentaries on Galatians, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 289.

[32] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 867. Cf. Ehrman's translation of 1 Clement 44.3: "Thus we do not think it right to remove from the ministry those who were appointed by them or, afterwards, by other reputable men, with the entire church giving its approval" (*The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Bart D. Ehrman, 2 vols., LCL 24–25 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[33] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 867. Cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.29.3. Gill's accuracy in his use of Eusebius here depends on whether "the brethren" was constituted by a gathering of the congregation or of the clergy.

[34] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 867. Cf. Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical* 1.8.

[35] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 868.

[36] Sulpitius Severus, *On the Life of St. Martin* 9 (*NPNF* 11:8).

[37] John Gill, *The Argument from Apostolic Tradition, In Favour of Infant-Baptism, With OTHERS, Advanced in a Late Pamphlet, Called, The Baptism of Infants a Reasonable Service, &c. Considered,* in *A Collection of Sermons and Tracts*, 2 vols. (London: Keith, 1773), 2:317–47.

[38] Micaiah Towgood, *The Baptism of Infants, A Reasonable Service; Founded upon Scripture, and Undoubted Apostolic Tradition: In Which Its Moral Purposes and Use in Religion Are Shewn*, 3rd ed. (London: Woolmer & Grigg, 1791), 40–43. Towgood argues, "In his controversy with Pelagius, about original sin; to prove infants to be

general approach to the fathers. He wields Towgood's own criteria against him, arguing that if he is to place so great a weight upon what Augustine considered to be apostolic, he will be constrained to accept numerous other doctrines "of which there is equally as *full*, and as *early* evidence of apostolic tradition, as of this."[39] Gill then quotes Augustine and a host of other fathers to demonstrate their support for infant communion, the sign of the cross in baptism, the form of "renouncing the devil and all his works" in baptism, exorcisms and exsufflations as rites in baptism, threefold immersion, the consecration of the water, anointing with oil at baptism, and feeding the baptized person a mixture of milk and honey after the administration of the rite.[40]

Gill here demonstrates both an impressive breadth of knowledge of the fathers and an awareness that they do not universally support him on every point. Against Towgood, Gill proclaims, "This Gentleman should know that we, who are called Anabaptists, are Protestants, and the Bible is our religion; and that we reject all *pretended apostolic tradition*, and every thing that goes under that name, not found in the Bible, as the rule of our faith and practice."[41] And a little later, he says of infant baptism,

> If it is founded upon scripture, then not upon tradition; and if upon tradition, then not on scripture; if it is a scriptural business, then not a traditional one; and if a traditional one, then not a scriptural one: if it can be proved by scripture, that is enough, it has then no need of tradition; but if it cannot be proved by that, a cart-load of traditions will not support it.[42]

Gill's words here should be read carefully and weighed alongside the evidence already considered. We have seen that Gill eagerly employs tradition in defense of a scriptural dogmatic system, and so he should not be construed as articulating a simplistic biblicism that resists any appeal whatsoever to the history of Christian doctrine. Rather, Gill resists, first, a theological methodology that places too high an authority upon tradition, which is what he perceives Towgood to be doing, and second, he resists *pretended* apostolic tradition.

Later in this same treatise, along with two other places in the corpus of his writings, Gill advances arguments in support of credobaptism from the tradition of the church fathers. Gill makes the point against Towgood that "*Tertullian* is the first man that ever made mention of infant-baptism, that we know of; and as he was the first that spoke of it, he at the same time spoke against it, dissuaded from it, and advised to defer it."[43] In *The Divine Right of Infant-Baptism, Examined and Disproved*, Gill catalogs the Christian writers of the first and second centuries, noting that they make no mention of

tainted with it, Austin [i.e., Augustine] frequently and with great triumph urges their baptism; demanding—'Why infants are baptized for the remission of sin, if they have none?'" (p. 40).

[39] Gill, *The Argument from Apostolic Tradition*, 330–31.

[40] Gill, *The Argument from Apostolic Tradition*, 331–338. Other than Augustine, Gill quotes Innocent I, Cyprian, Basil, Cyrsostom, Tertullian, the *Clementine Constitutions*, Origen, Gregory Nazianzen, Opatus of Milevis, Cornelius of Rome, Sozomen, Ambrose, Jerome, and *The Epistle of Barnabas*.

[41] Gill, *The Argument from Apostolic Tradition*, 319. Emphasis added.

[42] Gill, *The Argument from Apostolic Tradition*, 319.

[43] Gill, *The Argument from Apostolic Tradition*, 324. Cf. Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 909; Gill, *The Divine Right of Infant-Baptism, Examined and Disproved*, in *A Collection of Sermons and Tracts*, 2 vols. (London: Keith, 1773), 2:270–71.

infant baptism.[44] Furthermore, in the *Body of Divinity*, Gill quotes both Athanasius and Jerome as early supporters of credo-baptism.[45] Both authors, drawing on Matthew 28:19, connect baptism heavily with faith. Though he firmly adhered to the Protestant principle of *Sola Scriptura*, Gill did not feel that he had to entirely abandon tradition for exegesis when confronted with church fathers who contradicted his views. He instead confronted pretended apostolic traditions with what he considered to be genuine apostolic traditions.

2.1.3. Conclusion

To conclude our survey of Gill's use of the fathers, Gill defined the catholicity of the church as applying to the church in all ages and including a unity of faith. Accordingly, he read the fathers extensively and used them often in his ecclesiological writings. Though Gill stumbled at times, these citations reflect a relatively high quality of patristic scholarship, especially given the era in which he wrote. He used the fathers in his ecclesiological writings to connect his doctrine with the confession and faith of the early church. Nevertheless, the fathers always took second place in his methodology to the position of highest authority given to the scriptures.

2.2. John Gill's Use of Reformation and Post-Reformation Paedobaptist Sources

Other than patristic sources, Gill interacts with Reformation and Post-Reformation era Reformed paedobaptist authors in the presentation of his ecclesiology. Here again, Gill displays a spirit of catholicity, and he is eager to demonstrate a level of commonality between his own doctrine and that of Reformed paedobaptist ecclesiological traditions wherever possible.

Gill's use of the Church of England's *39 Articles* is a creative defense of congregational Baptist distinctives. Gill quotes the articles twice in the ecclesiological chapters of the *Body of Divinity*. In the first instance, he quotes the *Articles* in defense of a regenerate, believing church membership. Describing "the persons who are fit materials of a visible gospel-church," he says, "They are described as *the faithful in Christ Jesus*, or believers in him: so in the articles of the church of England, a church is defined, 'A congregation of faithful men, in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments duly administered.'"[46] In the second instance, he creatively quotes the *Articles* against an episcopal church structure in favor of congregationalism, saying, "But a particular visible gospel-church is congregational; and even the church of England, which is national itself, defines a 'visible church to be a congregation of faithful men.'"[47] It would be an uncharitable reading of Gill to write off these quotations as dubious or deceptive. Writing to a post-Reformation English audience in the heart of London, he could hardly have

[44] Gill, *The Divine Right of Infant-Baptism*, 268–70.

[45] Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 901–2. Gill quotes Jerome as saying, "First they teach all nations, then dip those that are taught in water; for it cannot be that the body should receive the sacrament of baptism, unless the soul has before received the truth of faith" (cf. St. Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, The Fathers of the Church 117 [Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008], 327). And he quotes Athanasius as saying, "Wherefore the Saviour does not simply command to baptize; but first says, teach, and then baptize thus, *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost*; that faith might come of teaching, and baptism be perfected" (cf. Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians* 2.18.42). Significantly, both quotes are accurate and contextually sensitive. While Jerome advocates for infant baptism elsewhere in his writings, Gill correctly identifies that this quote is in tension with his views on infant baptism.

[46] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 855. *Thirty-Nine Articles*, XIX. Emphasis original.

[47] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 858.

expected his readers to mistake the Church of England for a congregational Baptist church. And in fact, before the second quotation, Gill acknowledges the Church of England's disagreement with him on the point he is defending. Instead, the effect of Gill's citation of the *Articles* is to connect Baptist distinctives with the confession of the most prominent paedobaptist tradition in his context, while simultaneously proposing the practice of Baptist churches as a *more faithful* implementation of the sounder principles of the Church of England's ecclesiology.

Similar is Gill's use of John Calvin. Gill appeals to him against the argument commonly employed by paedobaptists that the Gospel scene in which Jesus instructs his disciples to allow little children to come to him (Matt 19:13–15) provides warrant for infant baptism. Gill says, "The reason given for suffering little children to come to Christ, *for of such is the kingdom of heaven*, is to be understood in a figurative and metaphorical sense; of such who are comparable to children for modesty, meekness, and humility, and for freedom from rancour, malice, ambition, and pride."[48] Gill enjoins his readers to see Calvin's commentary on Matthew, where we read, "taking occasion from the present occurrence, he intended to exhort his disciples to lay aside malice and pride, and put on the nature of *children*."[49] Gill likewise employs Calvin in support of plunging as the proper mode of Baptism, citing Calvin's commentary on Acts 8:38.[50] We should note that a closer look at either of these citations reveals that Calvin contradicts Gill in the immediate context of the quoted material. The most charitable reading of Gill would suggest that he finds Calvin's conclusions incongruous with his exegetical observations. Even on this reading, however, Gill lacked transparency. Yet, that flaw does not detract from the fact that Gill takes pains only to cite Calvin positively as he presents a Baptist theology of baptism.

Additionally, Gill cites Girolamo Zanchi, to support the validity of the baptisms administered by the first English credobaptists;[51] John Owen, positively, to support the notion that only pastors are to administer the ordinances,[52] and negatively, to oppose the office of archdeacon;[53] and Thomas Goodwin, on the Lord's Day being the proper time to administer the Lord's Supper.[54]

It is significant that, when defending Baptist distinctives, Gill only interacts positively with, for lack of a better word, the "greats" of the Reformed paedobaptist tradition. With rare exceptions, theologians of the caliber of John Calvin, John Owen, Thomas Goodwin, and Girolamo Zanchi are only ever cited positively in Gill's ecclesiological writings.[55] He takes pains never to attack their ecclesiologies directly.

---

[48] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 901.

[49] John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke: Volume 1*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 391. Emphasis original.

[50] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 911. Cf. John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Henry Beveridge, trans. Christopher Fetherstone (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 364.

[51] Gill, *The Divine Right of Infant-Baptism,* 266–67.

[52] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 876. Cf. John Owen, *The True Nature of a Gospel Church*, ed. William H. Goold, The Works of John Owen 16 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1753), 80.

[53] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 885. Cf. Owen, *The True Nature of a Gospel Church*, 147.

[54] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 923. Cf. Thomas Goodwin, *The Constitution, Right Order, and Government of the Churches of Christ*, The Works of Thomas Goodwin 11 (Edinburgh: Nichol, 1865), 388–409.

[55] Where there are exceptions, they concern minor points of doctrine and do not represent points of contention between Baptists and Reformed paedobaptists. For example, Gill disputes with Owen's speculation that

Instead, when he cites a Reformed theologian with exceptional influence in their theological tradition, he only does so to demonstrate continuity and accord between their writings and his own teachings, even concerning the most controversial Baptist distinctives. When he needs to polemicize a Reformed paedobaptist argument or position, he chooses theologians of significantly less prestige and influence as his foils, such as Micaiah Towgood and David Bostwick.[56] As such, Gill's consistently positive use of Reformation and Post-Reformation paedobaptist sources furnishes us with further evidence of the catholic character of his ecclesiological writings.

3. Baptist Sources in John Gill's Ecclesiology

One of the single most surprising features of John Gill's ecclesiological writings is that they lack a single citation to a Baptist source. Gill's citations of Baptists are noticeably sparse throughout his writings. Curt Daniel, whose dissertation contains the most comprehensive catalog of Gill's sources to date, only comments on the strange absence of references to John Bunyan and the scarcity of references to Benjamin Keach, two of the most prominent seventeenth-century Particular Baptists.[57] As such, we can only speculate as to the extent to which these and other Baptists influenced Gill's ecclesiology. Keach, a previous occupant of Gill's pulpit, wrote an ecclesiological treatise called *The Glory of a True Church, And Its Discipline Display'd*.[58] While it shares many features in common with Gill's ecclesiological writings, it is impossible to determine which, if any, of these features indicate direct influence, which are incidental, and which reflect a common reliance on Congregationalists such as Owen and Goodwin.[59] In the *Body of Divinity*, a chapter on the singing of Psalms might reflect a major controversy on the propriety of singing in worship among Particular Baptist churches in the last decade of the seventeenth century.[60] Gill's vociferous opposition to the laying on of hands at the ordination of church officers might similarly be explained by some seventeenth-century Particular Baptists, including Keach, who contended that the laying on of hands was a third ordinance.[61]

However, it is significant that we have to speculate at all on Gill's use of Baptists in the development of his ecclesiology. Ecclesiology is the locus of theology that most distinguishes Baptists from other theological traditions. Furthermore, given the fact that Gill's ecclesiology is thoroughly and undoubtedly Baptist, we cannot help but infer that he relied in no small measure upon the teachings of the seventeenth-

deacons sat on a raised platform in the early church, but he is careful to note his depth of respect for Owen as a theologian while doing so. Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 885; Cf. Owen, *The True Nature of a Gospel Church*, 147.

[56] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 903.

[57] Daniel, "John Gill and Hyper-Calvinism," 47.

[58] Benjamin Keach, *The Glory of a True Church, and Its Discipline Display'd* (London, 1697).

[59] Keach, *The Glory of a True Church*, iv.

[60] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 957–64. For an outline of this controversy, see James Renihan, *Edification and Beauty: The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675–1705* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 146–53. George Ella argues that this controversy accounts for Gill including an article on Psalm singing in his confession of faith. George M. Ella, *John Gill and the Cause of God and Truth* (Durham: Go Publications, 1995), 84–90.

[61] Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 868–70. See Renihan, *Edification and Beauty*, 145–46.

century Baptists who preceded him. Yet, despite Gill's frequent footnoting and use of sources, he does not mention either their theological writings or confessional material. For the purposes of this study, we might conclude from the above that Gill's avoidance of Baptist sources in his ecclesiological writings provides further evidence of their catholicity. At any given point in his exposition of a distinctively Baptist ecclesiology, Gill could have easily appealed to the seventeenth-century Baptist sources for support. Instead, he nearly always chose to present his Baptist theology as consistent with the faith and practice of the early church, and as a more faithful expression of the theological and exegetical principles underlying Reformed paedobaptist ecclesiologies.

4. Retrieving Gill for a Catholic Baptist Ecclesiology

Recently, Evangelical Baptist and Reformed theologians have shown an increased interest in the prospect of a more catholic doctrine. For our purposes, we might define an Evangelical Baptist catholicity as a commitment to the unique authority and sufficiency of Scripture, Nicene and Chalcedonian orthodoxy, and a Reformational doctrine of the Gospel of grace, accompanied by a concern to locate a distinctively Baptist theology within the context of a broad and ancient Christian tradition, both learning from and contributing to the ongoing story of Christian theology.[62] Evangelicals advocating for catholicity include Craig Carter, who has written two books on "Interpreting Scripture" and "Contemplating God" with "The Great Tradition of Christian Orthodoxy." Reformed theologians Michael Allen and Scott Swain have articulated a program for theological retrieval from historical sources in their book *Reformed Catholicity*.[63] Their chapter "Learning Theology in the School of Christ" is among the most rigorous defenses of an Evangelical catholicity to date, predicated upon a theology of the Holy Spirit's anointing of the church as the "School of Christ" and "Seedbed of Theology."[64] Many more evangelicals could be categorized within this movement. Moreover, behind them stands a movement of moderate and progressive Baptists articulating various strands of Baptist catholicity.[65]

Among modern proponents of an evangelical Baptist catholicity, Gill finds his closest affinity with the perspective outlined in the valuable collection of essays, *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Towards an Evangelical Catholicity*, edited by Matthew Emerson, Christopher Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps. Significantly, Gill is lauded in this book as an example for Baptists on account of his adherence to both classical Trinitarianism and classical Christology.[66] Furthermore, Gill's use of tradition, as exemplified in his ecclesiological chapters, finds a close though imperfect parallel in the paradigm for Baptist catholicity outlined in the conclusion of *Baptists and the Christian Tradition.* While many (but not all) of the eleven theses could be used to describe Gill's theology, points four and five provide a striking parallel to the methodology explored in this paper:

---

[62] See the 11 theses for Evangelical Baptist catholicity in Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps, eds., *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Towards an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), 352–55.

[63] Michael Allen and Scott Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).

[64] Allen and Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*, 18–19, 25.

[65] For a helpful bibliography of non-Evangelical catholic Baptists, see Emerson, Morgan, and Lucas, *Baptists and the Christian Tradition*, 2n5.

[66] Emerson, Morgan, and Stamps, *Baptists and the Christian Tradition*, 70–72, 92, 102.

1. We affirm the distinctive contributions of the Baptist tradition as a renewal movement within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. These contributions include an emphasis on the necessity of personal conversion, a regenerate church, believers' baptism, congregational governance, and religious liberty.
2. We encourage a critical but charitable engagement with the whole church of the Lord Jesus Christ, both past and present. We believe Baptists have much to contribute as well as much to receive in the great collection of traditions that constitute the holy catholic church.[67]

Although Gill would certainly not have called himself a catholic Baptist, I have endeavored to demonstrate in this paper that Gill's theology exemplifies the vision for an Evangelical Baptist catholicity cast in the above quote. While we must be careful not to draw a one-to-one comparison between modern approaches and Gill's method, nevertheless, Gill was already doing in the eighteenth century much of what Baptists, captivated by a vision of catholicity, are contending for today.

Accordingly, this paper proposes that Gill's ecclesiology can instruct the contemporary Baptist theologian. Evangelical Baptists readily embrace something akin to catholicity when we present the doctrines of God, the Trinity, Christ, and other such topics on which we can easily find friendly voices throughout church history. Often, however, when we present our ecclesiologies, we abandon substantive positive interaction with the primary sources of the Christian tradition. Gill, on the other hand, challenges us not only to retain but double down on a robust Evangelical catholicity in the presentation of a distinctively Baptist ecclesiology. If catholicity is an important consideration in the articulation of a dogmatic system—as many contemporary theologians have become convinced—then we cannot pick and choose where to apply it without sacrificing consistency. Baptist ecclesiology must be catholic if Baptist theology as such is to be catholic in any meaningful sense. Employing his extensive acquaintance with the primary sources, Gill has already charted a course for such a thoroughly catholic expression of the Baptist faith. I propose that to retrieve and emulate the theological methodology in Gill's ecclesiological writings can only strengthen Baptist theology in the twenty-first century.

5. Conclusion

As noted above, David Mark Rathel has already argued that Gill's writings exhibit a spirit of catholicity in that they "attempt to employ the resources of the broader Christian tradition in [their] overall theological project."[68] Rathel demonstrated catholicity in Gill by observing that he commended the ancient church's rule of faith as helpful for the proper interpretation of scripture and relied heavily upon the early church fathers in his defense of the Trinity against Socinian attacks. This paper has attempted to build upon Rathel's scholarship, proposing Gill's ecclesiology as particularly illustrative of the catholicity apparent in his theological writings. By maintaining his positive engagement with a largely paedobaptist tradition even in the presentation of a distinctively Baptist ecclesiology, Gill places great importance on understanding his theology as the best possible expression of the Christian apostolic tradition. Gill, therefore, provides an excellent model for contemporary attempts to develop an Evangelical Baptist catholicity. He exhibited an erudite command of the primary sources of the Christian

[67] Emerson, Morgan, and Stamps, *Baptists and the Christian Tradition*, 353.

[68] Rathel, "A Case Study in Baptist Catholicity," 2.

tradition and unwavering commitment to Baptist principles. Always affording the Scriptures their proper place, he nevertheless took seriously the long tradition of Christian ecclesiological reflection and integrated it into his own doctrine. Each of these points make Gill a valuable voice for understanding Baptist theology and its relationship to the catholic Christian tradition.

Themelios 49.3 (2024): 656–66

Why a Purely Natural Theology Could Lead Us Astray: Karl Barth's Response to the Theology of Gender and Marriage Sponsored by the Nazi Party

– T. Michael Christ –

T. Michael Christ directs the Nairobi Institute of Reformed Theology, a division of Ekklesia Afrika that trains pastors and church leaders in Nairobi, Kenya.

****

Abstract: In response to the erosion of the biblical paradigm of gender and marriage in modern Western society, some believers are inclined to support any promotion of heterosexual monogamous marriage as a positive moral force. However, this impulse can be dangerous, as certain conservative ideologies, while outwardly compatible with biblical values, are fundamentally incompatible with Christian teachings. One example is the National Socialist view of gender and marriage in 1930s and 1940s Germany. Despite superficial similarities with Christian values on gender and marriage, Nazi ideology rooted these values in nationalism and racial purity, distorting them for nefarious purposes. The German Christian Church initially embraced National Socialism. Theologian Karl Barth, however, recognized these dangers and opposed the Nazi regime's redefinition of marriage and gender, warning that any version of marriage not rooted in Christology leads to destruction. This article examines Barth's critique and explores its relevance in guarding contemporary Christian ethics from similar distortions.

****

In the wake of widespread departure from the biblical paradigm of gender and marriage in Western society, those who follow the Bible's teachings often find themselves in the minority. These lone voices in the wilderness can be tempted to champion any promotion of heterosexual monogamous marriage as a beacon of biblical faithfulness and a positive good for society. However, this inclination carries risks, for there exists a brand of conservatism that superficially aligns with certain aspects of biblical truth but is rooted in principles and priorities fundamentally opposed to Scriptural teaching. If this kind of conservatism is accepted as true Christianity, the overall biblical message becomes grossly distorted and extreme harm can come to society. A case in point is the version of marriage and gender promoted

by the National Socialists in Germany during their ascent to power in the 1930s and 1940s. While few today would identify the Nazis with anything remotely biblical, this was not the case when they were rising to power. They courted the German Christian Church, which, in turn, embraced and promoted them.

But there were some who refused to fall in line, including one Karl Barth. Barth saw through the Nazis' superficial correspondence with the Christian view of gender and marriage to a deeper—and darker—antithesis. My goal is to explore where Barth identified the problem and what he proposed as the solution. I do not endorse all aspects of Barth's theology and certainly do not commend his own practice of marriage. But the problem that Barth saw with a non-Christologically defined natural theology of marriage could be worth considering for our own day.

1. Gender and Marriage in German Romanticism

The National Socialists' view of gender and marriage arose from a constellation of social, political, and philosophical realities. Dietrick Bonhoeffer's pre-conversion lectures to expatriate Germans in Spain offer a good example of the nationalistic eschatology deeply woven into the consciousness of the German people. Bonhoeffer compares peoples (*Volker*) to a young man struggling to overcome the forces against him and carve out a place for himself in a hostile world. He sees this aspiration to greatness as God's will for nations and how nations reflect God, who is "eternally young and powerful." This Nietzschean "will to power" justifies—we could even say *sanctifies*—aggressive war. Bonhoeffer asks, "Now, should a people experiencing God's call in its own life, in its own youth, and in its own strength … be allowed to follow that call even if it disregards the lives of other peoples?"[1] Bonhoeffer answered "yes."

This Fascism grew in the soil of German Romanticism. A Romantic movement had swept Europe since around the turn of the century. As Enlightenment confidence in reason waned, people latched onto pre-Enlightenment identities, which, for Germans, meant the folk-farmer/warrior who struggles with a sublime and unruly natural world. This was captured in the important slogan, "Blood and soil." It was a move to a simpler mode of life, tied to one's homeland and away from the cities. The Nazis did not invent this aesthetic (it was more of an aesthetic than an ideology),[2] but as Bonhoeffer's lectures show, they succeeded in transferring it to a national identity.

This aesthetic had implications for gender and marriage. The National Socialists opposed the progressive and urban "New Woman" movement of the 1920s, which presented women as "slender, erotic, and amaternal."[3] Women dressed more like men and occupied traditionally male spaces.[4] The National Socialists also challenged modern abstract portrayals of the body, which the Nazis labeled "degenerate art."[5] For example, Schultze-Naumburg said, "Woman has probably never been depicted so

[1] Detrick Bonhoeffer, "Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic," in *The Bonhoeffer Reader,* ed. Clifford J. Green and Michael P. DeJonge (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 86.

[2] See Frederick Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* (New York: Overlook, 2003).

[3] Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 305.

[4] Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 305.

[5] See for example Hannah Höch, *Peasant Wedding Couple* (Galerie Berinson, Berlin, 1931) or Höch, *The Bride* (Berlinische Galerie, Berlin, 1933). Hitler said that this art "stood for decadence and internationalism, Jewishness, homosexuality, bolshevism, big city capitalism." Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Boston: Mifflin, 1943), 397.

disrespectfully and in so unappetizing a way as in the paintings we have been obligated to put up with in German exhibits of the last twelve years…. They convey not the slightest trace of the sacredness of the human body…"[6] Nazi-supported artists responded by rooting the woman in the land and family, with a perfectly proportioned (Aryan) form.[7] Hitler tried to retrieve the Greek idea of beauty because, in contrast to "degenerate art," he wanted the German people to connect the beauty of German bodies to their noble souls.[8]

Salvation—it would not be a stretch to use that word—came from both the man and the woman working together. Hitler himself affirmed the importance of marriage: "It is therefore our highest task to enable two companions for life and comrades in work to form a family … [for] the ultimate destruction of the family would mean the end of all higher forms of human life."[9]

The man's role was the heroic warrior who would purify the homeland of all impure (read non-Aryan) elements. The Führer himself embodied this militaristic commitment to the "*Father*land," modeling the kind of masculinity that men must aspire to. *Jünger*, a principal source of Nazi masculinity, describes man as being "a compulsive sexual being who proves himself in war."[10] A man showed his masculinity in willingness to fight ruthlessly, kill without mercy, and die without fear. The symbol of a muscular, often nude, young male became emblematic of Nazism, and it served as a kind of religious iconography by which the Nazis worshiped their own strength.[11]

The woman, while enjoying the land carved out by the male warrior, would provide salvation through the bearing of children.[12] This was her opportunity for risk and sacrifice. The maternal work of repopulating the nation after the devastating losses of WWI and declining birth rates during the Weimar Republic would rescue the German people from extinction. But deeper salvation came from the Aryan woman breeding with pure Aryan men to bring about the race of the "new man." The masculine expansion for Germany's borders would create space for the feminine task of nurturing the superior Aryan race. Remarking on the progress already accomplished by the 1936 Olympics, Hitler said, "This new type of man who, in all his glistening, glorious human strength, made his spectacular debut at the Olympic Games last year—this, dear sirs … is the model of man for the new age."[13] We should note the connection between the emergence of the "new man" and the "new age." The salvation that the man and woman would accomplish entailed a specific Aryan eschatology.

Thus far in our survey of the Nationalist Socialist use of gender and marriage, we see some ostensibly biblical values, especially as they opposed progressive movements that blurred the categories of man

[6] Berthold Hinz, *Art in the Third Reich* (New York: Random House, 1979). 151.

[7] See examples in Hinz, *Art in the Third Reich,* 132–33.

[8] Johann Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans: How the Nazis Usurped Europe's Classical Past* (Oakland: University of California Press), 32.

[9] Hitler in his NSDAP campaign appeal for the presidential elections of 1932, cited in Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism,* trans. Vincent Carfagno (New York: Noonday, 1970), 95–96.

[10] Bernd Weisbrod and Pamela E. Selwyn, "Military Violence and Male Fundamentalism: Ernst Jünger's Contribution to the Conservative Revolution," *History Workshop Journal* 49 (Spring 2000): 80.

[11] See, for example, Josef Thorak, *Comradeship* (1937), in Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich* (New York: Abrams, 1992), 177.

[12] Nicole Loroff, "Gender and Sexuality in Nazi Germany," in *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 98.

[13] Hinz, *Art in the Third Reich*, 142.

and woman. The German Christian church embraced the National Socialist Party because they believed that a group had finally arisen with the strength to make these biblical ideas a reality. But our survey also reveals massive contradictions to biblical values, especially in the Third Reich's racism and statism. Of course, we also know of the sadistic acts of cruelty the Nazis committed in the concentration camps, including sexual violence used to dehumanize those the Nazis deemed inferior. But there were also more subtle contradictions, revealing that even among their own people the ostensibly biblical values were undermined by the very principles they used to sustain those values.

Arguments can be made that German Fascism was essentially anti-woman.[14] George Mosse explains that the only way to reconcile the values of marriage and femininity with militaristic masculinity was for the man to rule despotically in his household.[15] Thus the woman—who was not a warrior—could not exist on equal terms with this man and, therefore, related to him only as an inferior. Berthold Hinz explains, "Because of the woman's high degree of alienation, man could compensate for the loss of his own identity by dominating her. Women were forced in a role that robbed them of solidarity with men…"[16]

The man, too, found himself isolated. Because the race of the "new man" would be, like Nietzsche's overman, the source and standard of all ethical reality, he could not really connect with anything else, especially the woman. Like Frankenstein's monster, he found solidarity with nothing; therefore, he must destroy everything.[17] The new man is not really Casper Fredrick's wanderer, who stares into the void of nature but is also, in some sense, part of that nature. He is, rather, a statue, standing all alone—like the solitary statues that pervaded so many public places in Nazi Germany. The man stands disconnected from nature and, therefore, disconnected from the woman. He relates to woman as something wholly unlike himself and, thus, as something to be used.[18] Formally, the Nazis opposed pornography. They aimed to give back the dignity that women had lost during the progressive '20s. But given the way women existed to serve men, the value of the woman was always seen from the male's (voyeuristic) point of view. Hinz rightly concludes: "The national Socialist artist was interested in blatant prostitution."[19]

Blatant prostitution was not merely an element of their art. The *Lebensborn* (literally, "fount of life") program began as a place for unwed mothers to have children away from the public view, but it turned into an initiative to support pure Aryan young women in maternity camps, where they would be impregnated by pure Aryan soldiers when they returned briefly from battle. The program aimed to boost the morale of the soldiers and increase the Aryan population in Germany. The increased importance of the Lebensborn program as the war progressed shows the degree to which the Nazis turned away from marriage and family as the structure of society. It also shows the degree to which women—many of

[14] See George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). This does not discount the NSDP's massive popularity among women.

[15] Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality*, 166.

[16] Hinz, *Art in the Third Reich*, 149.

[17] The monster says, "If I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear." Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (London: Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor & Jones, 1818), 137. For the philosophical connection between Mary Shelley and Nietzsche see Linnell Secomb, *Philosophy and Love: From Plato to Popular Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 24–39.

[18] See for instance Schmitz-Wiedenbruck's *Workers, Farmers, and Soldiers* (1941) or Ferdinand Steager's *Political Front—Impressions of the Party's Day of Honor* (1936).

[19] Hinz, *Art in the Third Reich*, 150

whom were held in the camps against their will—were harmed by the same group of people who sought to return them to their dignity.[20]

2. Barth's Theological Assessment

Barth called the breakdown of rightly ordered gender relationships a "disaster," the root cause of which was "the humanity of man without the fellow man."[21] Conceiving of humanity as fellow humanity meant embracing that it is "not good for man to be alone" and that the suitable helper is someone like him but also other than him. Thus, humanity is constituted as being with and for another who is unlike oneself. This complementary fellowship is paradigmatic for society at large. Barth explains: "The radical sexuality duality of man [and woman] … is the root of all other fellowship,"[22] including, Barth says, between the "Semite and the Aryan."[23]

In contrast to the biblical paradigm, Barth traces a common theme of man understood in isolation through Nietzsche, Goethe, and the Greeks. Although he does not mention the way these sources contributed to Fascist use of gender, he likely chose them for this reason.[24]

Barth recognizes Nietzsche's "almost brutal contempt for woman."[25] Nietzsche speaks of women as weaker, more servile, tending to fear. They are not brave enough to face truth head-on. The overman *him*self—whether thought of as an individual or a new stage of humanity—must be free from sentimentality and thus separate from the feminine. It *is* good that the overman be alone.[26] Thus, Nietzsche clearly opposes the idea of humanity constituted as fellow-humanity.[27]

---

[20] This reality is well documented. See, for example, Beverley Chalmers, *Birth, Sex and Abuse: Women's Voices under Nazi Rule* (Tolworth: Grosvenor House, 2015)

[21] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), III/2:291.

[22] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1:324.

[23] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2:292.

[24] Elsewhere Barth links Nietzsche with National socialism.

[25] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2:290. In Nietzsche, see, for instance, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1978), 67.

[26] This is captured in a striking way in the recent movie Paradise (Pan) directed by Andrey Konchalovskiy. Helmut, a high-ranking SS officer sees a woman in the concentration camp that he once loved. He wants to save her and start a new life with her, but this would mean turning his back on all that he thought he was. In a moment of crisis, he says to himself, "I am an *Übermensch*. I am self-reliant." If he were truly an *Übermensch* he would not need this woman. But he chooses instead to save the woman he loves. And when she flatters him by telling him that he is the master race, he rebukes her saying that that is all lies. Helmut has not extinguished (and cannot extinguish) his true nature as fellow-humanity. Concerning human's creation as fellow-humanity, Barth writes, "He can forget it. He can misconstrue it. He can despise it. He can scorn and dishonor it. But he cannot shake it off or break free from it." Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2:285.

[27] I am aware that there are ways of interpreting Nietzsche that do not take his disparaging remarks about women at face value. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche positively compares truth to a woman. But I don't think this interpretation of Nietzsche would really alter Barth's use of the German philosopher because Barth's argument only requires that the overman stands alone and is not constituted as fellow-humanity. In the movie *Arrival,* Amy Adams character Louise Banks movingly captures the essence of the overman as it relates to Nietzsche's idea of the Eternal Reoccurrence of the Same, without interpreting the overman as masculine. Banks stands against the

Goethe may at first appear as the antithesis of Nietzsche. In Goethe's *The Sufferings of Young Werther*, Werther despairs of life without Charlotte. Goethe's own life is a series of passionate love affairs with various women. But in all this Barth sees Goethe as having no real covenant partner. Barth sees evidence for this in Goethe's abrupt departure from his beloved wife Charlotte von Stein to study Greek in Italy and to the distance he placed between himself his next wife Christiana Vulpius. While Goethe does not show Nietzsche's same disdain he is, Barth says, "a man who is finally emancipated from women."[28] Through Goethe, Barth shows that a desire for a passionate connection with a woman is not, in itself, sufficient to ground human nature as fellow-humanity.[29]

The Greeks demonstrate the "profoundest symptom of sickness in the world" because "for all the eroticism of theory and practice, it was a man's world in which there was no real place for woman."[30] Barth gives no evidence for this claim, but he is probably describing the Greek culture as the homoerotic.

I suspect that Barth's language was carefully chosen to reinterpret the Nazi's use of these sources. Barth labels as "sick" the very peoples that the Führer instated were the standard of health, namely the Greeks. Hitler also proclaimed a high value of marriage by "emancipating women from all emancipation." Yet Barth sees in the roots of National Socialism the "emancipated man," which also undermines the stability of the family. Humanity conceived of as isolated individuals (rather than co-humanity designed for fellowship) leaves a vacuum, which Barth says will be filled with a despotic man, creating a "daemonic and tyrannical world."[31] Barth states that "Humanity that is not fellow-humanity is inhumanity."[32] It is hard to find a better description of the Third Reich.

3. Barth's Solution

Barth explains: "The only safeguard against these disasters is Christology and a little knowledge of life."[33] A Christological starting point solves the problem because it recognizes humanity's constitution as fellow-humanity.

We first need to understand how these two things—Christology and a little knowledge of life—relate to each other. Barth does not work out a theology of gender and marriage directly from creation, as though creation itself possessed some independent authority that could be understood and obeyed

major governments in the world, with only her future husband supporting her, until finally, her husband leaves her because he is not strong enough to face the tragic future of their daughter's death. This illustrates the isolation of the overman without necessarily requiring a masculine type.

[28] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2:290. There is, of course, a glaring problem with this sort of critique of a man's philosophy through his personal life. Barth himself kept a mistress to the great harm and shame of his wife Nelly.

[29] Thomas Xuton Qu has shown the importance of Goethe for Barth. The liberal theology Barth learned under Harnack presented Goethe as a source of truth outside the church. However, Barth's mature work, like his volume on Creation, casts a critical eye to Goethe. *Barth und Goethe: Die Goethe-Rezeption Karl Barths, 1906–1921* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Theologie, 2014). For access to Xuton's ideas in English, see the Review article by Clifford Anderson, review of *Barth und Goethe*, by Thomas Xuton Qu, *Cultural Encounters* 10.2 (2014): 118–120.

[30] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2:290.

[31] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2:290.

[32] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4:117.

[33] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2:390. Later Barth restates this idea: "Christian life and Christian theology, with its doctrine of man [read humanity], ought to be secure against those disasters…"

purely on its own terms. Constructing such a natural theology was the project of liberal theology, which Barth resolutely rejected, in part, because it had no resources to stand against fascism. Rather, Christology—and more specifically Christ and the Church—determines the meaning of being made male and female. Any other starting point leads to disaster.

Yet, we also need "a little knowledge of life." By this Barth means that we need the existential encounter between men and women in this world. The monastics, Barth says, went astray because they withdrew from this encounter.[34] Barth's point is not that all need to be married,[35] but that all need to be conscious of their participation in gendered humanity as a man or a woman and aware of the possibility of encounter with the other. This "knowledge of life" is clearly existential and resonates with the account of marriage we read on the pages of Genesis. But at a deeper level this existential/natural knowledge is structured along Christological lines because the instillation of humanity as fellow-humanity—that is, as male and female—exists only because of the church's covenant with Christ.

To state this another way, creation is important. It is the "external basis of the covenant";[36] without creation, God could not relate to anything outside of himself.[37] Moreover, the knowledge that one has of the creation ordinance of marriage vis-à-vis one's experience in creation and creation's ordinances is true knowledge. But the deepest explanation for the fact of creation—including the fullest explanation of the man, the woman, and marriage—can only be found through the covenantal structure *for which it was created*. If this covenantal structure were taken as foundational for gender and marriage, there would be no vacuum for male despotism to fill.

4. Genesis 2 and Song of Solomon

Genesis 2 and Song of Solomon are key texts for Barth's understanding of the Christological starting point for gender and marriage. Barth reads Song of Solomon literally, not allegorically, but he sees that a literal meaning ultimately refers to the eschatological hope of Christ's gracious covenant with the church; this is the only way that the Song makes sense in the canon.[38] Barth says, "The most natural exegesis might well prove to be the most profound."[39] Because the Song itself refers to Christ and the church, the encounter between the man and the woman, of which the Song speaks so passionately, must also be christologically defined. Barth points to three aspects of Song of Solomon in relation to the canon that show its eschatological and christological character.

---

[34] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2:290, "When doing theology in solicitude, one tends to project oneself as an 'I' without a 'thou.' Thus, the monastics failed to see the fittingness of God's covenant partner also having a covenant partner."

[35] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4:144–48. Here Barth shows the dignity of singleness.

[36] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2:94. "Creation as the External Basis of the Covenant" is a 125 page chapter. Christopher Roberts explains Barth well when he says, "The Father created for the purpose that this covenant of love might exist between him and his children." *Creation and Covenant: The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 140.

[37] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1:43.

[38] Of course, Barth thinks that everything is christologically defined. Whether or not this is the case (at least in the way that Barth supposes it is) is not really my concern. I only seek to show how Barth uses the connection between Genesis 2 and Song of Solomon to show how gender and marriage are christologically defined.

[39] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2:294.

First, Barth points out a link between Genesis 2 and Song of Solomon because of something conspicuously missing in these passages, which is the main issue for marriage in the rest of Scriptures, namely "the problem of posterity, human fatherhood and motherhood, the family, the child, and above all the son."[40] In Genesis 2 the climax of the creation is the man and the woman together naked and without shame. Genesis 2 emphasizes the goodness of the gift of the woman to the man, and, thus the goodness of humanity as man and woman together.[41] Barth explains, "No mention is here made of child or family. The relationship of the man and woman has its own reality and dignity."[42] This motif recedes into the background for most of the OT, as marriage becomes dominated by the need to pass on of the family line. But it intrudes again in the Song of Solomon where we find the man and the woman once again naked and not ashamed and marriage celebrated for its own dignity, without children immediately in view. The Song also makes explicit an element only implied in Genesis 2, namely that now the woman happily receives the man as God's gift to her.[43]

Second, Barth reads Song of Solomon christologically because of the connection made throughout Scripture between sexuality and the people's covenant with God. Normally Scripture connects people's unfaithfulness and their sexual sin, such as in Ezekiel 16. Barth explains, "[The] Old Testament prophecy everywhere presupposes the sin of man, Israel's apostasy and therefore the law and judgment of God."[44] This coincides with the fact that normally in Scripture

> the "erotic" notes are few. Everything is controlled by the Law, and especially the danger and prohibition of adultery. In this respect, too, we are in the world of sin and infamy and shame, in which the love-song must always have a rather dubious sound, and the original of the covenant between man and woman, the covenant between Yahweh and Israel, is continually broken on the part of Israel and has still to be properly constituted.[45]

But in Song of Solomon the encounter between the man and woman is spoken positively. While this alone would point to a positive relationship between God and his people, Barth also points out that the Song itself hits at this positive connection in 8:6 where "'the flame of the Lord' and the very different flame of love are necessarily mentioned together and openly and distinctly compared and related."[46] This positive connection between the covenant and eros begs the question, What solution was found for human sin that everywhere else breaks the covenant and robs the joy of the encounter between the man and the woman?

Third, Barth recognizes that the christological reading is eschatological. This is the case for two reasons. Frist, because it is *Solomon's* Song, Barth says that we are dealing with a representation of the

---

[40] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1:312. In my estimation, Barth disconnects Genesis 2 a bit too much from Genesis 1 (probably because he is influenced by higher critical models) and fails to see that God's provision for Adam's "partner" has something to do with the statement in 1:28, "Be fruitful and multiple and fill the earth," which would have been impossible for Adam to have done alone. That said, I think much of Barth's point is still valid because these concerns stand in the background of Genesis 2, not the foreground.

[41] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1:312.

[42] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2:293.

[43] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2:294.

[44] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2:297.

[45] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2:294.

[46] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1:314

Last-Days King in his glory, as Solomon was a pointer to the eschatological reign of Christ. Thus, Barth understands that the Song has an eschatological character, even as we must "take seriously their very concrete content."[47] Second, regarding that concrete content, it is the consummation of the covenant love between the man and the woman. Thus, Genesis 2 "sets at the beginning that which in the Song of Songs is the goal."[48] Barth describes the Song as "one long description of the rapture, the unquenchable yearning and the restless willingness and readiness, with which both partners in the covenant hasten toward an encounter."[49] The Song is eschatological in the sense that it speaks of the telos of humanity created as male and female.

Crucial to this point is that this telos is unaffected by human sin. Between Genesis 2 and Song of Solomon, sin has entered the picture. However, the Song realizes the goal that was sent for the man and woman in their supralapsarian state. This is a shockingly different concern from the rest of Scripture, which constantly presents the risk, pain, and sometimes violence of the encounter between man and woman. Again, we are led to ask, What is the reason for this optimism about marriage?

Barth believes the ultimate reason for the Song's joyful exaltation in the encounter between the man and the woman can only be the eschatological covenant of grace between Christ and the church, in which God alone solves the problem of human sin and takes the people into covenant fellowship with himself. The covenant of grace realizes that which the encounter between the man and woman points to, and thus the covenant of grace infuses the meaning of the encounter between the man and the woman with hope and joy, even though the actual experience of marriage in the fallen world is often far less glorious. The Song's exuberant exaltation of the goodness of marriage is not naive, sentimental, or a denial of the harsh realities of life East of Eden, but a witness to God's covenant and the fact that God's grace is stronger than man's sin. Barth explains,

> The authors of Gen 2 and the Song of Songs speak of man and woman as they do because they know that the broken covenant is still for God the unbroken covenant, intact and fulfilled on both sides; that as such it was already the inner basis of creation, and that as such it will again be revealed at the end.[50]

This could be called Barth's "eschatological realism."[51] That which comes at the end is real and should be used as the interpretative grid by which we understand life now. While it would be an over-realized eschatology to expect the sustained joyful encounter of the Song to be normative now (at the very least children will interrupt the sustained focus on the husband and wife's communion), it would be an under-realized eschatology to expect no impact on real marriage. It's worth lamenting that Barth did not conform his own marriage and sexual life to this partially realized eschatological reality, which resulted in pain and anguish for his wife Nelly.[52] In view of Barth's personal failure, we do well to remember that the indicative implied in the partially realized eschatology must give way to the

[47] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2:294.

[48] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1:313.

[49] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1:313.

[50] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1:314–15; cf. *Church Dogmatics* III/2:299.

[51] See Ingolf Dalferth, "Karl Barth's eschatological Realism," in *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, ed. Stephen Sykes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 208), 24–55.

[52] See Gibert Meilaender, "The Continuing Relevance of the Donatist Controversy," *First Things,* June 2023, https://www.firstthings.com/article/2023/06/the-continuing-relevance-of-the-donatist-controversy.

imperative, that is, the need to actually live in light of this new reality. This is an imperative that anyone could at any time fail to obey.

In sum, the progress of the covenant of grace—which Barth sees implied in the literal reading of the Song—reconciles humanity to God and, in so doing, rehabilitates humanity's constitution as fellow-humanity, enabling them to participate in the joyful encounter as man and woman.

5. Concluding Contrast between Barth and the Third Reich

Neither Karl Barth nor the Third Reich would have agreed with the blurring of gender and downgrade of marriage that occurred in the progressive movement of the 1920s. But that's about where their agreement ended. Barth's christological starting point made it possible to realize humanity's constitution as fellow-humanity, whereas the Third Reich, notwithstanding all their talk about the importance of marriage, presented the man and the woman as ultimately alone.

The Third Reich recognized a fundamental distinction between man and woman and the goodness of marriage because of the way they saw marriage and gender rooted in creation. In line with German theological liberalism, Nazi-sponsored theologians emphasized natural theology, from which they understood certain laws of nature, including those laws that regulated gender. However, because creation was subject to the higher authority of the inevitable expansion and triumph of the Aryan people, whatever they discerned from creation served that higher political authority. Thus, gender and marriage served the State. Hitler was explicit about this.[53] The highest value of marriage was to bring into the world pure Aryan children, which would expand Germany's borders and eventually result in the race of the new man. For both the man and the woman, gender manifested human strength. It was for the strong (only pure Aryans were encouraged to marry), and it made them stronger. Also, because gender served the state, the roles for men and women were clearly defined. But, in the end, their own philosophy undermined the emphasis on marriage. The need to provide salvation through marriage burdened marriage beyond what it could bear.[54] Their philosophy has no real opportunity for fellowship between the man and the woman. The man was ultimately alone, and so was the woman. Barth connects this solitude to all the many horrors of the Nazi regime.

Conversely, Barth's christological starting point revealed an entirely different perspective on marriage and gender. There was a givenness to gender and marriage in creation. To live in the created world is to encounter being made male or female and thus to be confronted with the need to find a meaning to this experience. This is Barth's "little knowledge of life" discussed above. But this meaning can only be found in the covenant between Christ and the church, which is the ultimate meaning of history. Thus, in Barth's system, we cannot look at the goal of gender and marriage apart from this christological definition, and consequently, it becomes difficult to deploy marriage and gender for a purely secular agenda. Also, because the man and the woman serve as an analogy for Christ and the church, marriage also falls under the umbrella of "mystery," and thus resists rigid definition. To be a man is to live in a way that points to the eschaton differently than the eschatological trajectory of the woman (and vice versa). The roles are not reversible, but neither are they entirely transparent.

[53] See, for example, Hitler's 1934 Party Day speech to the *Frauenschaft*, quoted in Leila Rupp, "Mother of the '*Volk*': The Image of Women in Nazi Ideology," *Signs* 3 (1977): 364.

[54] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4:122.

Moreover, the only responsible way to act within the covenant of marriage is to come to that covenant through the covenant of grace. This means that we do not come to gender and marriage to manifest human strength, but as a witness to our weakness and our need of grace. Salvation comes not through marriage, but through Christ. Having received salvation in Christ, we then approach marriage with a kind of playfulness, not requiring it to bear more than it can. We also approach it with a lack of confidence in ourselves. Barth acknowledges, "Sooner or later each man must discover that in regard to the command of God [regulating his sexuality] he is a failure, that measured by it we all belong to the category of fools, bunglers and impious who can only cling to the promise hidden in the command, but who certainly cannot congratulate themselves upon nor live in the strength of its fulfilment."[55] We experience the encounter between man and woman as a double gift. It is gift in creation—God brought the woman to the man in Genesis 2—and gift in the new creation, because it is God who solves the problem of human sin that had prevented fellowship in marriage. Barth's christological starting point maintains stable gender categories, as witnessed in creation, *and* it ensures that these categories remain in the service of the gospel.

While our approach in this paper has been historical, this project naturally suggests a few questions for the theological ethics. Is a purely natural theology of gender susceptible to coming under another authority? And might it be possible for theologians to come under another authority without realizing it, such that they think they are proclaiming a biblical reality, but are really serving another agenda? Is it possible to develop a cogent theology of gender and marriage that has a christological starting point (or to put it another way, some version of christological supralapsarianism), while also recognizing that there are certain given realities in creation that we confront as creatures in God's world? In other words, is Barth's project tenable, and even if we disagree with some of his assumptions, is it possible to sustain his basic theological construct on different grounds? Might it be that Barth's concept of coming to know the covenant of marriage through the covenant of grace provides a pastorally sensitive approach to sexual and marital problems that invariably arise in our fallen world? Might it provide a conceptual framework to deal with difficulties—same-sex attraction, an unfaithful or uncaring spouse, prolonged singleness, etc.—in such a way that one can authentically rejoice in one's gendered condition and the reality of marriage as a gift, without placing one's hope in substantial change in one's own situation in this life? While these questions are obviously leading in a certain direction, their answers are not obvious in what we have explored. More work must be done.

As the Christian position becomes increasingly the minority, we can be tempted to look for hope in any presentation of heterosexual monogamous marriage. This is how many German Christians in the 1930s responded to the degradation of gender and marriage of the 1920s. They sought help from a purely natural theology and found common cause with the National Socialists. This resulted in great harm to the Christian witness and to society at large. To avoid a similar disaster today, the church needs the insight to look beyond mere superficial correspondence to the deeper reality of the gospel.

[55] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4:130.

Themelios 49.3 (2024): 667–76

Making the Lion Lie Down Hungry: Forgiveness as Preventative Spiritual Warfare in 2 Corinthians 2:5–11

– Scott D. MacDonald –

Scott D. MacDonald serves as associate professor of theology and assistant dean at the Canadian Baptist Theological Seminary and College in Cochrane, Alberta.

****

Abstract: While Christians should understand and practice forgiveness, many of them have not experienced forgiveness from others within the church. This situation leaves the church vulnerable to the schemes of Satan. After a brief introduction to the rampant problem of unforgiveness, this article stakes out prevention as a category of spiritual warfare, with forgiveness as an essential action of spiritual warfare to limit Satan's work. To demonstrate forgiveness as preventative spiritual warfare, 2 Corinthians 2:5–11 is analyzed, outlining the occasion that required the Corinthians' forgiveness and revealing how forgiveness countered the scheme of Satan in the Corinthian church. Thus, the present church must avoid a mere façade of forgiveness and publicly exercise the forgiveness she has received in Christ, thereby preventing demonic schemes against God's people.

****

"Unity among the cattle makes the lion lie down hungry." While this African proverb has a significant breadth of meaning, the sentence states the obvious: the isolated, the straggler, the young, and the wounded are vulnerable. A disunited herd is susceptible, and conversely, a united herd thwarts a predator's intentions.

The Christian herd, the church, lacks unity, and we are vulnerable. Despite our best intentions and efforts, we have never perfectly presented ourselves as the "one holy, catholic, and apostolic church" that we recite in the Nicene Creed. The reasons for our disunity are numerous, ranging from serious doctrinal divisions to common personality conflicts. At a minimum, the church often perceives itself as lacking unity.[1] But throughout the entire history of the church, one issue persistently remains as a source of disunity: a lack of forgiveness.

[1] "Pastors Say They Often Preach on Church Unity—Christians Disagree," *Barna*, 23 November 2022, https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-christians-unity/. In this 2022 poll of US Christians, only 35% of Christians said that they are "most experiencing unity" in their local church.

Forgiveness is inherently a reaction, a response to wrongdoing. Drawing from the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21–35, Timothy Keller proposes a four-fold process for forgiveness. He says,

> To forgive, then, is first to name the trespass truthfully as wrong and punishable, rather than merely excusing it. Second, it is to identify with the perpetrator as a fellow sinner rather than thinking how different from you he or she is. It is to will their good. Third, it is to release the wrongdoer from liability by absorbing the debt oneself rather than seeking revenge and paying them back. Finally, it is to aim for reconciliation rather than breaking off the relationship forever. If you omit any one of these four actions, you are not engaging in real forgiveness.[2]

Divine forgiveness, as pictured in the king, is the model for Christians. Yet unforgiveness among the king's servants is not uncommon.

Considering our faith rests upon God's costly and drastic forgiveness of sinners through the sacrifice of His own Son, recent Barna poll results are a bit disheartening. They asked over 1,500 Christians in the United States in 2018 about their experiences with forgiveness.[3] While we do not know all the circumstances, 27% of practicing Christians have "someone that they do not want to forgive," and only 55% have "received unconditional forgiveness." Christians are struggling to forgive, and receiving forgiveness is not a universal Christian experience. This lack of forgiveness impacts the church**,** for consequences follow such disunity!

The church is vulnerable. She is prey. God's people remember that an enemy seeks to devour them. The apostle Peter warns, "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."[4] The church cannot ignore the danger.

This vulnerability demands a response. Therefore, let us examine 2 Corinthians 2:5–11 as an example, wherein Paul identifies a vulnerable member and prescribes forgiveness to repel Satan's intentions. To further equip the church in remedying her disunity, we must first recognize prevention as an appropriate (and biblical) way to engage in spiritual warfare. Second, we must reflect on the actual occasion for forgiveness in Corinth. Third, we must uncover Satan's scheme in Corinth. Fourth, we must pay attention to the nature of forgiveness in Corinth since it operates as preventative spiritual warfare. Finally, we must receive a warning against merely maintaining a façade of forgiveness, that the church may aim to live in forgiveness and unity, shielded from Satan's attacks.

---

[2] Timothy Keller, *Forgive: Why Should I and How Can I?* (New York: Viking, 2022), 9–10. Braun's review of Keller's *Forgive* states that this robust definition of forgiveness is a strength of the book. Chris Braun, "Tim Keller's New Book Tackles the Central Subject of the Christian Life," *TGC*, 14 November 2022, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/forgive-tim-keller/.

[3] "1 in 4 Practicing Christians Struggles to Forgive Someone," *Barna*, 11 April 2019, https://www.barna.com/research/forgiveness-christians/.

[4] 1 Peter 5:8. Michaels explains the commands of this text, saying, "These strong imperatives are simply a call to the readers to prepare themselves in mind and spirit for decisive battle with their one great enemy, the devil" (J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, WBC 49 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988], 297).

1. Prevention as a Category for Spiritual Warfare

Spiritual warfare is not merely a synonym for exorcism. Tradition defines spiritual warfare as our human conflict with the flesh (the inner desire, temptation, and disposition toward sinful rebellion against God), the world (the fallen systems of familial, cultural, economic, and political evil), and the devil (the demonic host with their schemes to corrupt and enslave humanity in sin).[5] Thus, despite the prevalence and publicity of exorcism in many Christian communities throughout the world, exorcism is only a small slice of the spiritual warfare pie.

Let us reorient ourselves toward spiritual warfare with the demonic. Our trifold response to the enemy consists of disposition, prevention, and action.[6] Concerning disposition, one example includes the disciples after their kingdom mission in Luke 10. Jesus issues a correction to their joyful report of successful exorcisms, refocusing their joy on their salvation.[7] Another example includes Jesus's instructions to the church of Smyrna in Revelation 2:8–11, when he commands them to not fear suffering that would result from an imminent Satanic attack.[8] Concerning action, the example of Paul's commissioning stands out, as he testifies before Agrippa in Acts 26. Jesus gives Paul an action to perform, to set people free "from the power of Satan to God."[9] With this disposition/prevention/action paradigm in mind, the breadth of our conflict with the demonic becomes clearer.

Prevention merits further consideration. Certain texts seem to describe this form of spiritual warfare. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7:1–5, Paul attempts to regulate the sexual rights and practices of married Christians in the Corinthian church. The section culminates in Paul commanding in verse 5, "Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control." Ciampa and Rosner comment, "Paul has the realistic concern that abstinence may make the Corinthians susceptible to sexual temptation, the solution to which, if you are married, is to 'drink water from your own cistern.'"[10] Evidently, Satan (or more generally, Satan's realm) aims to tempt Christians to various acts of sexual immorality. Paul recognizes the danger and provides a needed

---

[5] For example, Karl Payne utilizes "the world, the flesh and the devil" phrase, urging us to think in a balanced way about spiritual warfare (Karl I. Payne, *Spiritual Warfare: Christians, Demonization and Deliverance* [Sammamish: Cross Training, 2008], 47). Also, the introduction to the popular Four Views book on spiritual warfare also focuses some of the debate through the Flesh/World/Devil trifocal lens. See James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy, eds. *Understanding Spiritual Warfare: Four Views* (Grand Rapid: Baker Academic, 2012), 32–35.

[6] To my knowledge, this paradigm is my own, and it forms some of the structure for my Demonology and Spiritual Warfare class.

[7] Green comments, "That Jesus reuses the language of the seventy-two marks his speech as a mild corrective to theirs" (Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 418).

[8] Beale clarifies, "They are 'not to fear' the imminent trial because their lives and destiny are in the hands of the eternal Pantokrator of history, who has already experienced persecution, even to death, and yet overcome it through resurrection…. They are not to be afraid of the devil himself, who instigates oppressive measures through the Romans and Jews" (G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 241–42).

[9] Stott describes Acts 26:18 as instructions concerning what Paul was supposed to do (John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994], 373).

[10] Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 284.

command to prevent Satan's potential attack against the church. By this simple instruction, Paul leaves the Corinthians less vulnerable in spiritual warfare.

Vulnerability appears to be a central concern. Christians can behave sinfully or unwisely, thereby exposing themselves to a greater risk of spiritual attack from Satan (or the flesh and the world). Prevention steps into potential vulnerabilities and limits the enemy's reach into those areas. Now, by analyzing 2 Corinthians 2:5–11, let us consider how forgiveness qualifies as an essential form of preventative spiritual warfare.

2. The Occasion for Forgiveness in 2 Corinthians 2:5–11

Someone has again disturbed the Corinthian church. It does not appear to be a hypothetical situation. Victor Furnish says, "Paul has a specific individual in mind, although the person is never named."[11] The immediate context lacks specific details concerning the offender's name or his sin.

Perhaps the broader context of the Corinthian letters could identify the culprit. The traditional reading of this passage identifies this person with the rebuked man from 1 Corinthians 5, but more recent scholarship points us away from that conclusion.[12] After all, 1 Corinthians does not read like a "tearful letter" (2 Cor 2:4). Instead, it seems that there is another correspondence after 1 Corinthians, and this situation is distinct from the man who engaged in incest.[13] Of course, similarities exist between the two incidents, but having more than one case of congregational discipline seems not only possible but probable in this scandal-filled church that struggles with Christian love.

In other words, we do not know who this man is. "In 1 Corinthians, the evildoer is identified as a man who was involved in an incestuous relationship with his father's wife. In 2 Corinthians, the evildoer is simply identified as someone who has been a source of grief for Paul and the community."[14] He is a troublemaker, perhaps an "anti-Paul ringleader," but his identity is hidden from this letter, perhaps to further assist the healing and reconciliation that Paul prescribes.[15]

We experience similar difficulties in trying to identify the sin of this man, for "the details of the incident that lies behind these words are not clear."[16] Since he is likely not the incestuous man of 1 Corinthians 5, we are left to speculate using the broader context. Again, this lack of specificity is probably intentional. Chrysostom comments, "Notice that Paul nowhere mentions the crime, because

[11] Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians*, AB 32A (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 154.

[12] Furnish, *II Corinthians,* 159–60, 163–68. Due to the narrow scope of this article, the substantial debates surrounding this man's identity along with the nature and frequency of Paul's correspondences with Corinth are minimized.

[13] Much ink has been spilt concerning this tearful letter which may or may not be incorporated in 2 Corinthians. Ben Witherington III sums up the letter saying, "In his letter of tears, Paul must have advised the Corinthians to take action against this person, and now he says that he did this to test their character—to see if they would obey" (Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 365).

[14] Raymond F. Collins, *Second Corinthians*, Paideia (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 34.

[15] Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, WBC 40 (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), 35.

[16] Leon Morris, "Forgiveness," *DPL* 312.

the time had now come to forgive."[17] Yet a variety of possibilities are posited. Seeing the man as a part of the false apostle challenges in Corinth, Judith Diehl suggests, "It may have been that the rival missionaries and 'false apostles' ([1 Cor] 11:13) were envious of Paul and his position, and so labored to discredit, demean, and demolish Paul."[18] Furnish speculates, "All things considered, it would appear that the offense in question has been some slander of Paul and his apostleship, an affront compounded by the congregation's [initial] unwillingness to discipline the individual responsible."[19] Especially with the remainder of the letter in mind, this suggestion is not without merit. Ralph Martin guesses that this man "raised the charge of Paul's failure to keep promises made (according to 1 Cor 16:1–8) of a lengthy visit to Corinth," bringing Paul's reputation into doubt.[20] And of course, while deemed unlikely by most commentators, one could join Garland (along with most ancient interpreters except for Tertullian) and venture that this man is in fact the sexually immoral man from 1 Corinthians 5, meaning that Paul's instructions here ensure the completion of a prolonged discipline process.[21] Yet the text appears to be written in such a way that the crime is kept in the past so we can comfortably accept this uncertainty concerning the sin in the present. The only conclusion that we can safely and confidently reach is that the unnamed man is a source of grief to Paul and the church.[22]

In contrast, the previous response of the Corinthian church to this man is plain. They had disciplined him severely. The church had learned that "moral sins are not confined to persons immediately involved but usually affect the entire congregation."[23] They had given no blind eye to this man. Instead, "in response to Paul's tearful letter," the community had imposed discipline.[24] And it does not appear to be minor or informal.[25]

> It could not have been a simple reprimand, because the wording here shows that it has some enduring aspect or consequences which can—and, Paul believes, ought to—be now discontinued. It is likely to have been some temporary exclusion from the Christian community, or at least from such central congregational activities as the eucharistic meal.[26]

[17] Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians* 4.4; cited in Gerald Bray, ed., *1–2 Corinthians*, ACCSNT (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 206.

[18] Judith A. Diehl, *2 Corinthians*, SGBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 98. This man perhaps misunderstands the nature of suffering as well. Garland says, "Paul's lengthy discussions of his afflictions throughout the letter and his statement that they only understand him in part (1:14) suggest that the individual and others in the community failed to appreciate the path of suffering Paul follows as the apostle who preaches Christ crucified" (David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, CSC [Nashville: Holman Reference, 2021], 118).

[19] Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 162.

[20] Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 33.

[21] Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 122–27.

[22] Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 158.

[23] Simon J. Kistemaker, *II Corinthians*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 77.

[24] Furnish says, "This disciplinary act … has been in response to Paul's tearful letter, and thus a demonstration of the Corinthians' obedience (v. 9)" (Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 159). One can also not separate this chapter from chapter seven, where we learn of the letter and the church's contrite response. Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 159.

[25] Furnish says, "Viewed as a whole … these verses (5–11) convey the impression of some formal disciplinary action decided on and carried out by the congregation" (Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 155).

[26] Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 161.

Discipline has rightfully occurred, but it seems indefinite. A path to reconciliation is absent. Meanwhile, grief continues to strangle the love and life of the Corinthian church, demanding Paul's intervention once again.

3. The Satanic Scheme in 2 Corinthians 2:5–11

While Paul is probably not envisioning Satan as literally cackling outside the Corinthian church doors, he recognizes the grief and discord in the foreground even as he warns about Satan "lurking in the background."[27] Excessive sorrow might overwhelm the man (2 Cor 2:7) if the punishment has no conclusion despite his apparent contrition. Furnish paints a picture saying, "The image is of a person being drowned by (presumably his own) tearful grieving."[28] In this situation, Satan strikes. The fourth-century commentator Ambrosiaster says, "The devil, who is always subtle in his tricks, would then see that this man's mind was an easy prey, approach him and suggest that at least he should enjoy the things of the present, given that he has been denied any hope of future reward."[29] This man is vulnerable.

Satanic schemes ever swirl about the Corinthian church. There are so-called apostles whom Paul brands as Satanic in 11:12–15, and they might be the agents of Satan who will rob the church of this penitent yet unreconciled man.[30] He desperately needs forgiveness and the safe shelter of the united Christian community.[31]

As a good shepherd of the church, Paul instructs the church once again. At least here in chapter 2, he largely overlooks any wrong that he himself has suffered to protect the church, including the offender.[32] The letter opens Paul's heart, and "the apostle's deep interest in this man's welfare is only too obvious."[33] But the Corinthian church must share his heart. They previously obeyed in discipline; now they must obey in forgiveness.

---

[27] Rudolph K. Bultmann, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 50. Bultmann connects this text with 1 Corinthians 7:5, where Satan is similarly portrayed by Paul as a lurker, waiting to pounce.

[28] Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 156.

[29] Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Paul's Epistles*; cited in Gerald Bray, ed., *1–2 Corinthians*, ACCSNT (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 208.

[30] Furnish elaborates, "Elsewhere in his correspondence with the Corinthians Paul refers to certain 'false apostles' as being Satan's servants in disguise (11:12–15). In the same context he expresses his fear that the Corinthians may be seduced by such persons and espouse another kind of gospel, just as the serpent (viz., Satan) deceived Eve (11:2–5). It is reasonable to suppose that Paul has the same sort of opportunists in mind when, in the present passage, he remarks on the danger that Satan may take advantage of strife within the Christian community" (Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 163).

[31] In the context of the monastery, Basil the Great says, "Community life offers more blessings than can be fully and easily enumerated. It is more advantageous than the solitary life both for preserving the goods bestowed upon us by God and for warding off the external attacks of the Enemy" (Basil, *The Long Rules* 7; cited in Bray, *1–2 Corinthians*, 206).

[32] Martin says, "Paul saw this affront as not so much as a personal insult to be borne, but as a denigration of his apostolic work and an obstacle to be removed" (Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 39). Bultmann's intentional overstatement is helpful, "It is doubtful whether for [Paul's] part there can be any talk of 'forgiving,' since he was in no way personally offended!" (Bultmann, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, 49–50).

[33] Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 38.

Paul calls the Corinthian church to respond to the man with a few words: forgive (2:7), comfort (2:7), and reaffirm your love (2:8), but forgiveness (in its various forms) is repeated three times in verse 10. The heart of the matter is settling the past offense and reconciling. This act should be done publicly and formally, just as the original offense was not dealt with surreptitiously. Colin Kruse says, "The reaffirmation of love for which Paul calls, then, appears to be a formal act by the congregations, in the same way that the imposition of punishment in the first place appears to have been formal and judicial."[34] They need to forgive completely and unreservedly, and Paul cannot forgive in their stead. The Corinthian church must lead. Even though Paul has already forgiven the offender, Paul structures the text, "Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive," so that "the reference to the community's forgiveness precedes Paul's."[35] The Eastern church father Theodoret of Cyrus summarizes, "Paul's command now is that they should unite the member to the body, return the sheep to the flock, and show him their most sincere love and affection."[36] After all, it seems that the offender is experiencing godly sorrow for his previous act, and "when a sinner repents, both reconciliation and reinstatement should follow as a matter of course."[37]

Upon reading this new apostolic missive, the church may be surprised, thinking they had been faithfully following Paul's instructions. Martin says, "The readers may have been expecting Paul to endorse their action and 'confirm' (κυρῶσαι) whatever discipline they had imposed. Instead, he uses the verb to issue the call: now 'affirm' your love for him. The mixing of a legal term (κυρόω, 'confirm'; BAGD) and a non-legal one (ἀγάπη, 'love') is striking."[38] Furthermore, Paul uses a positive word for forgiveness. While χαρίζομαι normally means "to give," "several times in Pauline literature it means 'to forgive.'"[39] This usage probably reflects the idea of a pardon or conveying graciousness. The Corinthian church is not merely "wiping out an offense from memory," they are giving grace and even themselves back to the disciplined.[40] Of course, as they return to fellowship, this action of forgiveness does not negate all consequences: "Forgiveness does not require the church to reinstate the offender into a position of authority again, but does require his reinstatement into their fellowship."[41] Thus, Paul calls the Corinthian church to a surprising act of forgiveness, overflowing with grace.

In a sense, Paul calls the church to be truly Christian. Shogren says, "The NT consistently teaches that the imperative to forgive one's fellows is based squarely on God's gracious forgiveness," and he appeals to Jesus's parable of the unmerciful servants and Pauline passages like Colossians 3:13 and the

[34] Colin G. Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, EGGNT (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), 45.

[35] Frank J. Matera, *II Corinthians*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 62. Yet, lest Paul's desire to forgive be downplayed, consider Collins's statement, "Not only does Paul urge the Corinthians to forgive the evildoer; he also joins with them in forgiving the one who has caused so much grief. Whomever you forgive, I too forgive (2:10). Paul has virtually discounted (2:5) the grief that he suffered: he wants the Corinthians to know that he is one with them in forgiving the evildoer" (Collins, *Second Corinthians*, 56).

[36] Theodoret, *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* 298; cited in Bray, *1–2 Corinthians*, 207.

[37] Kistemaker, *II Corinthians*, 79.

[38] Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 38.

[39] Gary S. Shogren, "Forgiveness (NT)," *ABD* 2:835.

[40] John S. Kselman, "Forgiveness (OT)," *ABD* 2:831. Collins says, "Paul's own use of *charizomai* suggests that forgiveness is an act of graciousness, an act motivated by *charis*, graciousness" (Collins, *Second Corinthians*, 58).

[41] Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 129–30.

book of Philemon.[42] In essence, the church forgives as she has been forgiven and taught forgiveness in Christ. This connection arguably arises in 2 Corinthians:

> Reading 2 Corinthians 2 in a much wider context, one senses an implied relationship between Paul's counsel on forgiveness and repentance and his teaching that the Corinthians are called to engage in the "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:16–21). Thus, just as "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them," so presumably should the Corinthians themselves engage in such a ministry, seeking reconciliation with Paul and among themselves.[43]

With Satan at the metaphorical door, Paul knows that only gospel-rooted, Jesus-modeled forgiveness can heal the community, restore the penitent, and slam the door in Satan's face: "'[Paul's] call for forgiveness' changes an 'I win, you lose' situation to one where brothers in Christ win and Satan loses."[44]

4. Forgiveness as Preventative Spiritual Warfare in 2 Corinthians 2:5–11

The Corinthian church is in peril. If they "harbor ill will toward a repentant sinner, instead of showing love, mercy, and grace," Satan would win.[45] Paul implores them to act, for the status quo is a Satanic victory. Martin says,

> Two measures would bring about this result of the enemy's success in the matter. If, on the one hand, the offender were to be lost to the church by lapsing into "excessive despair" and remorse, then Satan's work would be achieved; if, on the other side, Paul and the church were to withhold their love and acceptance, the church's enemy would be just as pleased."[46]

Judging by Paul's instructions, this catastrophic outcome is inevitable, not a mere possibility, if they fail to heed the epistle. They cannot continue to discipline this man, or the entire ordeal becomes "destructive rather than constructive."[47] The church must forgive.

Forgiveness prevents Satan from accomplishing his aims. Collins says, "If the community heeds Paul's advice, Satan's attempted robbery will be foiled. This would be one small victory for the community and one small defeat for Satan, whose ultimate defeat is on the eschatological horizon."[48] Paul knows that the Corinthians know what Satan is scheming. The text says οὐ γὰρ αὐτοῦ τὰ νοήματα ἀγνοοῦμεν, and

[42] Shogren, "Forgiveness (NT)," 837.

[43] Stacy R. Obenhaus, "Sanctified Entirely: The Theological Focus of Paul's Instructions for Church Discipline," *ResQ* 43.1 (2001): 7.

[44] Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 129.

[45] Kistemaker says, "To harbor ill will toward a repentant sinner instead of showing love, mercy, and grace plays into the hands of Satan. The devil hates forgiveness and Christian love; he wants to see despondency, despair, and darkness. In that atmosphere Satan is able to reclaim a pardoned sinner" (Kistemaker, *II Corinthians*, 80).

[46] Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 39.

[47] Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 131.

[48] Collins, *Second Corinthians*, 60.

Furnish retranslates the faint wordplay, "for we are not unmindful of his mind."[49] Witherington frames it similarly, for Paul "is *mindful* of what is in the Devil's *mind*."[50] Satan is not a distant concern; he is a real and pressing problem that can hurt the church if they fail to forgive.[51] And if the Corinthian church forgives, they are finally living up to the instructions of 1 Corinthians 13, learning to love one another! Paul has guided them along another step toward "Christian maturity."[52]

Forgiveness is not an optional Christian practice. Not only have we received forgiveness, but this text portrays a Christian community that requires Christian forgiveness for health and vitality. Morris says, "It is the way of the world to nurture grudges against those they think have wronged them. It is the way of those forgiven by Christ to forgive freely the wrongs people do to them."[53] We ought to be Christian and Christ-like, reflecting his forgiveness to those around us. But forgiveness also strips Satan of his ability to exploit the sins of the saints. As Garland says, "Showing forgiveness is thus one way for the church to close the door on Satan's evil schemes (Eph 6:11)."[54] We cannot help but forgive because of Christ, the church, and the enemy.

5. Conclusion

Forgiveness, though essential, remains painful. Most Christian leaders know the travail of forgiving. Diehl mentions this dynamic concerning 2 Corinthians 2:5–11, "Necessary and often difficult, ministers must forgive terrible words, intentions, attitudes, and behaviors of the very people whom they try to serve. Paul stood up for this person, which may have been what the congregation did *not* do for Paul during the 'painful visit.'"[55] But forgiveness is a sign of Christian strength, not weakness. "So often we think forgiveness is for weaklings. Somehow we think we are vulnerable when we forgive. In a certain sense, we are making ourselves vulnerable to other people, but we are actually vulnerable to Satan if we fail to forgive."[56] Painful and essential, forgiveness is the action of the strong. Satan preys upon the weak, those who do not forgive along with those who are unforgiven.

In a time when many Christians do not experience forgiveness and unity in their local church, we may attempt to merely portray that we believe in forgiveness. But do we engage in self-denying, grace-giving, sin-forgiving work? Speaking from the context of Christian ministry in Canada, John Friesen bemoans this façade of forgiveness:

> Pretty well everyone likes to talk about forgiveness, but not too many people can tell many happy stories about it.... As a youth growing up in a rural Saskatchewan

[49] Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 158. He notes that the phrase also displays "understatement for the sake of emphasis," a "litotes."

[50] Witherington, *Conflict & Community in Corinth*, 365. The emphasis is original.

[51] Matera adds, "These references to Satan indicate how real the power of evil was for Paul" (Matera, *II Corinthians*, 63).

[52] Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 133.

[53] Morris, "Forgiveness," 312.

[54] Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 134.

[55] Diehl, *2 Corinthians*, 99. The emphasis is original.

[56] Maarten Kuivenhoven, "Forgiveness in the Church: A Sermon on 2 Corinthians 2:5–11," *Puritan Reformed Journal* 4.2 (2012): 27.

> congregation and later on as a young clergyman just entering the profession, I experienced great difficulty trying to understand how Christians who allegedly believed in God's forgiveness for themselves could be so unrelenting toward others.[57]

Actual forgiveness seems to be in short supply. After surveying the stories of wicked people who found the forgiveness of Christ, Brent MacDonald challenges us toward a more radical course of forgiveness and acceptance, "If you believe that God sent Jesus to save the worst of sinners, you must believe that God can and does change hearts and minds. He's in the business of transformed lives. It's easy to pay lip service to this idea, but you'll prove your true understanding by your actions."[58] And like the church in Corinth, we are beckoned to forgive, and even though we know we should, we might find ourselves reluctant to forgive.

Meanwhile, while we struggle to forgive, the church is vulnerable. The enemy lurks, preying upon our lack of unity. "Satan fans the flames of hurt into an inferno of hostility. Satan is powerless, however, before a united community filled with love and humble forgiveness."[59] Yes, we forgive because we are forgiven, but we also forgive because we are in a spiritual conflict. Maarten Kuivenhoven says with urgency, "When exercised, forgiveness is God's gift of defense for the church against Satan…. We can't afford not to forgive someone who has confessed sin."[60] But if we wish to put up a defense, forgiveness must be exercised, not merely suggested or discussed! Thus, with Kistemaker we assert, "If God forgives a sinner, the church must do no less."[61] And in so doing, we force the lion to lie down hungry.

[57] John W. Friesen, *Do Christians Forgive? Well, Some Do …* (Ottawa, ON: Borealis, 2000), ix.

[58] Brent J. MacDonald, *Forever Unforgivable: Learning to Forgive the Inexcusable for Christ's Sake* (Bentonville, AR: Kharis, 2019), 109.

[59] Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 135. He even describes Christian love as an "invisible, protective shield."

[60] Kuivenhoven, "Forgiveness in the Church," 22.

[61] Kistemaker, *II Corinthians*, 78.

Themelios 49.3 (2024): 677–94

The Devil Is Not a Christian: Critiquing Christian Universalism as Presented by David Bentley Hart

– Robert Golding –

Robert Golding is the lead pastor of the First Christian Reformed Church of Artesia, California.

****

Abstract: David Bentley Hart's book entitled *That All Shall Be Saved* is a powerful argument at first glance for the doctrine of Christian universalism, which is the view that those in hell all eventually enter heaven. However, upon a closer examination, it will be seen to be untenable. This paper will seek to refute Hart's thesis by appealing to Scripture, critiquing the inner logic of his argument, and proffering an understanding of sin that willfully rejects God. The latter opposes Hart's hamartiology, which has no category for the willful refusal of God, since, according to him, humans must always desire God.[1]

****

David Bentley Hart's argument in *That All Shall Be Saved* is built upon two foundational questions. First, he asks if it is logically possible for God to create an eternal hell for rational beings while being purely Good.[2] Second, moving from a consideration of God to one of humans, he asks if it is possible for rational beings to reject God for eternity.[3] In answering these questions in the negative, Hart offers four primary arguments. These four arguments comprise the four chapters of his book. Running throughout, Hart argues that God's design for hell is essentially purgatory—it is a place that some go but all leave. All are eventually saved though many experience salvation after a period of time in hell. This paper is divided into four sections responding to each of his arguments in turn. I will spend the bulk of this contribution engaging with the first argument, drawing aspects of the latter three arguments into its discussion. This approach is warranted because Hart's arguments bleed into one another, and a linear

[1] An earlier version of this article was published as Robert D. Golding, "A Critique of David Bentley Hart's 'That All Shall Be Saved,'" *The Southern Reformed Theological Journal* 5.1 (2021): 97–131. This updated version is published with permission.

[2] Capitalization is used throughout to refer to a transcendental notion of "the Good" which is the unity, or God, that allows one to recognize goodness in plurality.

[3] David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 13, 17, 208.

refutation is best presented under one head. The remaining three arguments will be discussed in a more succinct manner. I will also consider Hart's theological background (Eastern Orthodox) in order to locate his arguments within that tradition and thereby demonstrate the underlying assumptions that, if they should be disproved, render his arguments weaker than they appear *prima facie.* To do this, I will examine his thesis from a Reformed orthodox perspective.

The core of this article is a hearty disagreement with Hart's definition of sin. For Hart, sin is essentially a misunderstanding, a disease, or an inability to perceive reality correctly. Therefore, unsurprisingly, Hart thinks eternal punishment for such a misapprehension is unjust. My argument will center on the notion that sin is an *ethical and willful* decision made by moral agents (humans) that must be dealt with in hell. I will also seek to demonstrate that the Bible and logic verify this claim. In what follows, I will explain each argument and follow with a refutation, one by one.

1. Responses to the First Argument: Creatio Ex Nihilo

Hart's first argument is based on the moral significance of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing) as it is examined from its telic end. Essentially, Hart argues that creation is an extension of God's inner perfection.[4] Since God is a perfect creator, he does not create arbitrarily but with a purpose, a telic end. Since he is omnipotent and unconstrained, "all contingent ends are intentionally enfolded within his decision" to create.[5] So, the creation of an eternal hell would have to be an extension of who God is *ad intra* (within himself). Since there is no pain, punishment, or ethical rejection within God, hell must only be a means to a good end. Hart says, "This is not a complicated issue, it seems to me: The eternal perdition—the eternal suffering—of any soul would be an abominable tragedy, and therefore a profound natural evil; this much is stated quite clearly by Scripture, in asserting that God 'intends all human beings to be saved and to come to a full knowledge of truth' (1 Timothy 2:4)."[6] He goes on to say that this natural evil becomes moral when we consider that it is "the positive intention, even if only conditionally, of a rational will," that is, God's will.[7] So, God positively wills hell. Therefore, it must be a good end.

Hart's conception of *eternal* hell as gratuitous—a *temporary*, purgative hell, he argues, is desirable—is based on two primary assumptions. The first is that eternal hell cannot be completely deserved because, as the traditional argument goes, a finite sin cannot warrant an infinite punishment. The second is that, even if this were possible, using hell as a means for God's glory would relativize God, since he is only glorious when compared to evil, and it would make those in hell, in some sense, the saviors of those in heaven, which also diminishes Christ's sufficiency since the reprobate are *required* for the glorified believers' beatific vision. In a word, Hart argues that not only does Christian universalism provide us

[4] I reduced his argument to the following syllogism: (1) God created everything *ex nihilo.* (2) Everything that is done is ultimately done for its end (telos). (3) God is pure goodness (the Good). (4) God's will is identical with his nature (as per his simplicity). (5) God's will is therefore pure goodness. (6) Eternal hell is an evil (or bad) end. (7) God could not create something *ex nihilo* that has a bad or evil end (since that would mean something bad came from something perfectly good). Therefore, (8) eternal hell is a logical impossibility.

[5] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 70.

[6] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 81–82.

[7] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 82.

with the most glorious picture of God, indeed, the one who is Lord over all to the extent *every* soul loves Him eternally, but it is also the only logically possible situation if God is truly Lord.

Following the general Eastern Orthodox tradition, Hart has an ontological and privative conception of sin. This understanding is crucial for his discourse here, as well as his third and fourth arguments. The reason Hart requires this view of sin is because without it he cannot claim that hell is an evil end. Since he sees sin as a malady, or a parasite, it is fair for him to say that creatures continuing in that sinful state are suffering from something evil. Now, this does not mean that Hart does not perceive sin to be ethical to some degree. However, the ethical nature of sin is secondary to its pathological essence. Since humans are born with ontological maladies, they are inclined to willfully and culpably sin in light of their infirm situations. This is because their ability to reason and properly apprehend what is good (or, the Good) has been damaged. Humans therefore are culpable, but only in a limited sense. Hart uses the extreme example of Hitler to show that culpability is always limited since there are only two options available in understanding sin. He says,

> Hitler could, if he had been raised differently and exposed to different influences in his youth, have turned out differently; or he was congenitally wicked, and so from the moment of his conception was irresistibly compelled along the path to his full development as the *Führer*, so long as no countervailing circumstances prevented him from reaching his goal. But then, in either case, his guilt was a qualified one: In the former, he was at least partly the victim of circumstance; in the latter, he was at least as much the victim of fate. In neither case was he ever wholly free. These considerations do not excuse him, of course, or make punishment for his evils unjust; he was himself in any event, and the self that he was certainly merited damnation. They do, however, oblige us to acknowledge that he was finite, and so could never have been capable of more than what finitude allows … while his final judge will presumably be the God of infinite goodness and infinite might; the disproportion between them is that of creature and creator, and so the difference in their relative powers, being infinite, dictates that a properly proportional justice for the former cannot exceed the scope of the moral capacities with which he has been endowed by the latter.[8]

Hart argues therefore that humanity's inevitable ontological fall, the subsequent congenital sin-defect that attends all humans, and God's creation of that humanity *ex nihilo* entail that no person could deserve eternal hell. It would not be "fair" for people born into sin to pay the price for that sin if they did not choose it, especially if God created them out of nothing. However, hell is a Scriptural reality. Therefore, it must serve the good purpose of purging ontological maladies from sinful people. Towards the end of the book, he confesses that it is this intuitive anthropological consideration (that man is essentially sick rather than ethically sinful) that primarily drives his thinking. This sin-sickness, as it were, that infects us all renders us like players in a game who do not know the rules—we are destined to fail.

> I have to admit that, despite all I have just said, it is not primarily on any of these metaphysical or logical grounds that I find the free will defense of eternal torment an especially absurd one (though I do take them to be decisive), but rather as a matter of simple empirical observation. Nothing in our existence is so clear and obvious and

[8] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 38–39.

> undeniable that any of us can ever possess the lucidity of mind it would require to make the kind of choice that, supposedly, one can be damned eternally for making or for failing to make. Anyone who plays the game of life in life's house knows that the invisible figure hidden in impenetrable shadows on the far side of the baize table not only never shows his hand, but never lets us see the stakes of the wager, and in fact never tells us the rules.[9]

1.1. Sin as Vacuous

Hart argues at multiple points that traditional conceptions of hell and multiple *loci* of Reformed theology are vacuous and ultimately illogical. Our understandings of God's justice and human freedom, Hart says, ultimately die a death of a thousand distinctions to the point that God's hate is redefined as His love and our slavery to sin is refashioned into culpability.[10] Though defense needs to be made against these claims, I want to first make my own assertion, namely, that Hart's conception of sin has been so thinly pared down that it ultimately borders on unintelligibility. Since his other arguments come into play here, I will be drawing upon the entire book, indeed, more than one of his works, to make this point.

While affirming the usefulness of the conception of evil as *privatio boni* (the privation or absence of good), I want to question its ability to be comprehensive. When Hart conceives of evil as *solely* a lack of good, difficulties arise. For example, Hart says, "Evil is, in every case, merely the defect whereby a substantial good is lost, belied, or resisted."[11] This leads him later to affirm Gregory of Nyssa in his conception of evil as that which is ultimately powerless, "As Gregory understood, evil has no power to hold us, and we have no power to cling to evil; shadows cannot bind us, and we in turn cannot lay hold on them."[12]

However, when he discusses sin, he seems to counter this nonentity language; he refers to sin as "the parasitic unfolding of evil"[13] using the same term to describe the relationship between the holy or upright personality "upon which that ego is parasitic."[14] Sinful flesh is that "miserable empirical ego that so often struts and frets its hour upon the stage of this world…"[15] Without pressing his language beyond what it is meant to convey, it is instructive to note that he is forced to use quite substantive and active locution to describe sin. It is not just a shadow but a parasite (or, at least, "parasitic"). It is not inactive and powerless but impels the sinner to "strut and fret." Perhaps his most pointed definition of evil is seen in his theodicy entitled *The Doors of the Sea, "…* Evil, rather than being a discrete substance, is instead a kind of ontological wasting disease."[16] His purely privative conception of evil, while helpful in

[9] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 180.

[10] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 45, 74, 178.

[11] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 70.

[12] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 193.

[13] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 141.

[14] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 155.

[15] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 155.

[16] David Bentley Hart, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 73.

a restricted sense, cuts across the traditional understanding of sin and Satan as presented in the Bible, and it is forced to use language that is not purely privative—a disease is a thing.[17]

This is not to say that I disagree with the conception of evil as the *privatio boni*—the absence of good.[18] God cannot sin nor "create evil." To create evil would be to violate his nature. Therefore, evil can only properly be understood as the lack of something good—the absence of what God has created. However, Hart presses this conception to its breaking point by evacuating evil of its sinister nature in order to render eternal hell gratuitous. If evil is *merely* the lack of a good, he argues, how could God punish *that*? The biblical reality is that evil is *both* the absence of the good and the presence of an ethical rejection of God. Biblically speaking, evil is a very *active force.*

Ephesians 6:11–12 uses strong language to describe the power of evil, "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the *schemes of the devil*. For we do not *wrestle* against flesh and blood, but against the *rulers*, against the *authorities*, against the *cosmic powers over this present darkness*, against the *spiritual forces of evil* in the heavenly places."[19] In Hart's own translation of Matthew 11:12, we see, "Yet from the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of the heavens has been violently assailed, and the violent seize it."[20] Verses like these lead one to question whether it makes sense to think of evil as powerless, yet evil people and spirits as incredibly powerful, to the extent that they can inflict evil ends upon people. Does Hart's shadow language of sin do justice to the Bible's?

Hart wants us to see evil as essentially human misunderstanding, serious to be sure, but a misappropriation of facts at its core. Therefore, if this is all evil is, hell would indeed seem gratuitous. Surely, God would not punish someone for *misunderstanding* something. Punishment is reserved for those who make God their enemies.[21] However, the Bible's language concerning evil conveys a much more active, substantial, and ethically damning situation as discussed above.

Further, a purely privative conception of evil renders exegesis of Genesis 3 quite difficult. If we are to see evil as *merely* a lack of the Good, why did Eve see the forbidden fruit as "good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise" (Gen. 3:6b)? To reach out and take what God had forbidden was evil. Yet Eve saw it as good. Why did evil—the lack of the Good, as Hart describes it—appear good to her? Upon a *purely* privative conception of evil, Eve—before the fall—would be seeing evil as good. Could God's crown of creation, as it were, so easily mistake sin

[17] As Klaus Koch says, "The term ʿāwōn means more than an abstract value judgment, referring rather to an almost thing like substance." Klaus Koch, "עָוֹן," *TDOT* 10:550–51.

[18] This concept was developed most profoundly by Augustine. See, for example, Augustine, *Enchiridion* 3.11–4.12. Augustine helps us understand evil as a force because it is located in the will of man or spiritual beings. Therefore, evil is the failure to desire something good but it is *also* an active desire for something disordered (e.g. desiring to be like God in a usurping manner). This active nature of evil is that which Hart fails to emphasize. See, G. R. Evans, *Augustine on Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 115–17. I am very grateful to Hernan Wu for this reference to Augustine and his help regarding this doctrine.

[19] ESV here and following unless otherwise stated. Italics mine.

[20] David Bentley Hart, ed., *The New Testament: A Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 44. There is difficulty with the translation of "the violent" (βιαστής), but most take this to refer negatively to violence against the Kingdom rather than a violence of action, as it were, in humbly entering it.

[21] For a masterful exposition of the biblical grounds for the hatred of God among unbelievers, even despite appearances to the contrary, see Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman (Edinburg: Banner of Truth, 1990), 2:130–41. See also, Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864–1866), 5:461–26.

for goodness? Surely such a notion would impugn the creative act. A better option is to lay the blame at Adam and Eve's feet for willfully rejecting that which is good, not mistakenly reaching for it. This is not to say, of course, that Adam and Eve thought they were reaching for something evil for evil's sake. To commit the act, they must have thought it was good in some sense. The point is that, for God to punish them, they had to also understand that what they were doing was evil. Hart paints a picture of intellectually deformed creatures only doing their best. The Bible's description is one in which creatures seek to usurp the authority of their God and Father.

Even if we grant that this is Eve's gullible perception, in what sense is the sinful act of eating the fruit privation, when all it seems to do is increase her knowledge? On Hart's view, it seems that the opening of the eyes that ensued should have done nothing less than make Adam and Eve *increase* in their love of God. In an online article responding to questions about his book, Hart says, "The more irrational a choice, the less free it must be; but, the more one knows, the more rational one's choices become."[22] If Adam and Eve's knowledge increased, they would understand the Good better, and desire it more fully. But the opposite is the case—after they ate of the fruit, they knew about evil and then desired it instead. Hart's conception of sin utilized throughout his argument renders these passages all but unintelligible.

If Hart would respond by saying that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil did not provide objective clarity regarding good and evil but some sort of misunderstood inclination toward evil (that is, some sort of "ontological wasting disease"), we would rightly ask how God could plant such a tree without being deceptive. Even if we granted that premise (God forbid) there would be no clear motive for God to do it. It should be clear that Hart's position renders exposition of such passages strained, if not impossible. While, on the other hand, a primarily ethical conception of sin enables one to read these passages without circuitous exegesis.

Due to this purely privative conception of evil, he is eventually forced to make this glaring concession, "Even an act of apostasy, then, traced back to its most primordial impulse, is motivated by the desire for God."[23] While we note Hart's laudable desire to maintain consistency here, it is hard to leave unnoticed that his defining apostasy as ultimately motivated by the desire for God seems perilously close to the ostensibly Reformed tendency to define God's hate as his love. Hart says that using the word "love" to refer to a God who punishes people in eternal hell (a common orthodox defense of hell) is to reduce the word "to utter equivocity, and that by association reduce the entire grammar of Christian belief to meaninglessness."[24] Though he lambasts those theologians who describe God's dispensation of wrath in hell as a form of love for his saints in heaven, he does the same thing in a different way. In critiquing this apparent tendency in the Reformed, Hart makes an actual misstep in the same direction by defining the *rejection* of God as the *reaching* for God. Hart's conception of sin as merely the lack of good fails to stand up to biblical scrutiny and it renders apostasy unintelligible.

1.2. Impugning God's Creation

The foregoing leads us to question Hart's ontological conception of sin as it has the potential to impugn God's creative act. Hart describes human beings as created in an ignorant state. It is because of this unbiblical assumption that he claims hell is unjust.

[22] David Bentley Hart, "What Is a Truly Free Will?," *Public Orthodoxy*, 24 April 2020, https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/04/24/what-is-a-truly-free-will/.

[23] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 185.

[24] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 74.

Hart rightly wants to refute the charge that God created evil. In so doing, however, it seems inevitable that he has opened himself to the charge that God willfully created intellectually defective creatures. If it is only through a defect in the intellect that humans fail to choose God, one must ask whence that defect arose. Hart, along with the Eastern Orthodox tradition, attributes "the cause of the fall to the childlike ignorance of unformed souls, not yet mature enough to resist false notions."[25] Adam and Eve were "two persons so guileless and ignorant that they did not even know they were naked until a talking snake had shown them the way to the fruit of knowledge."[26]

However, according to his own definition of freedom, if Adam and Eve were truly free, they could never reject God. In describing the rational soul in his theodicy, he says, "Liberated from *all* ignorance, emancipated from *all* the adverse conditions of this life, the rational soul could freely will *only* its own union with God, and thereby its own supreme beatitude."[27] Thus, one is forced to admit that either Adam and Eve were defectively created or Adam and Eve were created in intellectual bondage. Much of this difficulty arises from Hart's fourth argument based on human freedom and the impossibility of a rational intellect willfully choosing an evil end (i.e., hell) for itself. While there is much force to this argument, it mitigates his understanding of the creation of man. Simply put, if Adam and Eve *must* have chosen God (the Good) to be free, they were obviously not free. Did God create Adam and Eve in a state of bondage?

In his exposition of Romans 9:19–33, Hart says that God does indeed bind sinners in sin, but it is so that he can later save all, "*all* are vessels of wrath precisely so that *all* may be made vessels of mercy."[28] However, this does not adequately answer the question either. One cannot answer the dilemma of God's enslaving people by saying he does so in order to free them. If freedom is the goal of enslavement, leaving the subjects free in the first place would produce the same result.

To help elucidate his position, Hart employs the *Christus victor* (Christ the Victor) motif which can be seen in his historical assessment of the church's understanding of Christ's work, "For the earliest Christians, the story of salvation was entirely one of rescue, all the way through: the epic of God descending into the depths of human estrangement to release his creatures from bondage to death, penetrating even into the heart of hades to set the captives free and recall his prodigal children and restore a broken creation."[29] Seeing Christ's work as primarily (if not solely) emancipation rather than propitiation coheres with the aforementioned slavery of Adam and Eve. However, it does nothing to assuage the notion that God creates slaves only to free them. Rather than creating humans upright (Eccl 7:29), God seems to be, for Hart, creating man in bondage.

Hart's use of the *Christus victor* concept not only does nothing to defend against the implication that God is creating defective creatures, it causes problems of its own. One wonders exactly how it is that Christ's death on the cross is remuneration for the manumission fee of humanity. Though Hart is admittedly sympathetic to Gnostic dualism at some level,[30] he rightly wants to avoid Manichean

[25] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 43.

[26] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 43.

[27] Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 41. Italics on the word "only" are mine.

[28] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 137.

[29] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 25.

[30] He says, for example, "I admit that it is my conviction that there are certain notable respects in which ancient Gnosticism was far nearer to the religious vision of the New Testament than are many now well-established

dualism. I am unsure how he is able to maintain that elusion while still positing that Christ's work is "the 'manumission fee (λύτρον, *lytron*) given to purchase the release of slaves held in bondage in death's household."[31] He is clear that Christ's work "was in no sense a ransom paid to the Father to avert his wrath against us."[32] To whom is the manumission fee paid then, if not Satan? If the fee is paid to Satan, to whom is the fee paid when Satan himself is eventually purged and saved, which is part of Hart's conclusion? The closest we get is to some ethereal notion of the kingdom of darkness. But, of course, the darkness in that kingdom has no real power since it is just a shadow (see 1.1. above). Hart is forced to denigrate God's creative act by describing humans as created in bondage and he proffers unintelligible definitions of evil that are potentially beholden to Manichean notions of Good versus Evil rather than those found in Scripture.

1.3. Hart's Utility of Hell

At this point we would do well to question Hart's claims that any divine utility of hell would denigrate God's perfection, since he would only be compared to evil rather than being infinitely Good, and render Him immoral, since he is subjecting finite creatures to infinite punishment. In response, we note that Hart's position, rather than answering these problems, only partially circumvents them. Hart must allow that it is impossible for God to save certain souls without the purgative effects of hell. Even though "God can (if nothing else) so arrange the shape of reality that all beings, one way or another, come at the last upon the right path by way of their own freedom," he can only do this "in this life *or the next*."[33] Hart is forced to admit that God does not have the power to guide all human decisions in life toward himself. Rather, he must—in the majority of cases, since most people do not have the gospel—resort to extreme spiritual and physical punishment in the afterlife in order to elicit this effect. His contention is that a reformative hell is better than a retributive one, but it leaves one wondering why there is a hell at all.

If the condition that put a human in hell is ontological sickness, why put that sick person through the anguish of hell to remedy that sickness when it is well within God's power to do so through the pleasant confines of his church? This is not to say that Hart abandons all culpability and therefore all condign punishment of sin, but he freely confesses that the situations that provoke much of that culpability are unfair. One person is born in the church and, though sinful, avoids the purgative punishment of their sins. Another, on the other hand, is born outside the church—without even the opportunity to hear the gospel—and must endure anguish to be eventually saved. Perhaps this notion would cohere if all people equally heard the gospel and had equal chances in life to sin or not to sin, but, as cited above, he says, "Anyone who plays the game of life in life's house knows that the invisible figure hidden in impenetrable shadows on the far side of the baize table not only never shows his hand, but never lets us see the stakes of the wager, and in fact never tells us the rules."[34]

In order to maintain his Christianity, Hart seems to be willing to say that none will avoid hell without Christ (though I could be wrong, and if I am, he would be more of a general universalist than a so-called Christian universalist). Of course, not all people have the opportunity to hear about Christ

forms of Christian belief…" (Hart, *The Doors of the Sea*, 94–95).

[31] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 25–26.

[32] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 25.

[33] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 184. Italics mine.

[34] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 180.

in this life. If life is so uncertain and unfair, how is it equitable that some of us ascend to heaven on the effulgent pillars of Christ's church, while others must crawl, not just from the unfortunate milieu of, say, a mud clad Jhuggi in Delhi but out of eons—Hart is open to the idea that the temporary purgation of hell can last a very long time—of purgation in hell's blazing flames because they never heard the gospel? Hart's project takes some sting out of the intuitive reaction to eternal hell, but only to replace it with the bite of unequal and arbitrary purgation. To be sure, in Hart's analysis all will be well in the end but the means to that end seem inevitably unjust since some are afforded a strikingly better opportunity of avoiding hell than others. This question must be answered: How is it just for God to effectively force certain persons to go through hellish purgation while others are given the opportunity to avoid it? Far from offering an answer to this question, Hart propounds the difficulty by highlighting how unfair life is.

Of course, this question can be posed to the traditional proponent of eternal hell as well, but there is an answer from the Reformed perspective. As difficult as it may be to accept, the radical equalizer of total depravity, not just in every faculty but in every person, that brings divine treason and therefore entails absolute culpability is the only way to make sense of human beings' unequal status. Since we all deserve death as a result of our ethical rejection of God, none could deserve saving (Rom 3:23). On Hart's scheme, eternal hell is never deserved. On a Reformed understanding, hell is nothing but absolute justice for every human that has ever lived, aside from Christ. Therefore, the recognized inequality experienced by human beings throughout the world is not due to certain groups having less than they deserve, but it is solely attributable to other groups having more than they are entitled to. Christ's parable of the workers in the vineyard is instructive here (Matt 20:1–16)—one person's reception of grace does not occasion the merit of all. For Hart, however, even temporary hell is the result of innocent ignorance. So why do any have to go?

Hart avoids eternal hell by saying all humans are ignorant and no one could possibly deserve it. But, if that is true, it follows that no one would deserve a temporary hell either. What is good for the goose is good for the gander.

1.4. Hart's Definition of Election

Another issue to discuss at this point (though it principally arises in his third argument) is Hart's definition of election. Since a predestinarian doctrine would amount to inequality in Hart's system, he must equate the elect with the first fruits of God's redeeming work which are instrumental to save the "derelict."[35] Ultimately then, "there is, it turns out, no final division between the elect and the derelict here at all, but rather the precise opposite: the final embrace of all parties in the single and inventively universal grace of election."[36] Though this is philosophically coherent, it is still open to the question posed above. That is, why would God elect only some and allow others to suffer in hell? If all are eventually elect, why only elect some at first? Hart's conception, in seeking to depict God as restoring the brokenness in all humanity, inevitably portrays him as achieving that end in a dubious manner. To be sure, this is more palatable than the vengeful God he caricatures of Reformed Christianity, but nevertheless, Hart's presentation is not without its faults particularly in its arbitrary definition of election. The doctrines of sin, humanity, hell, and election must all be played in minor keys in Hart's system, if they are played at all, when, on the other hand, these doctrines are strikingly set forth, often with vivid imagery, in the Scriptures.

[35] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 137.

[36] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 136.

2. Responses to the Second Argument: The Lexical/Exegetical Argument

This argument and the ones following it will be dealt with in a succinct manner since space precludes a thorough analysis and much of what was covered in section I above applies to II–IV. In this section, Hart provides multiple linguistic arguments and refers to lexical use in various ancient authors. To do full justice to his presentation, an exegetical analysis would need to be done in each of his references which would meet or exceed the length of Hart's argument. However, I seek to make some expeditious remarks below that will show Hart's argument belies the ability of appropriating biblical language for universalist teachings. Below, I make at least seven claims against Hart's thesis, but even so I am not comprehensive; there are more arguments in his work that I cannot respond to in this space.[37] But engaging with the selection of arguments below should show that his system is not as watertight as he believes it to be.

The second argument in Hart's work relies upon Scripture more than the other three. He provides copious universalist sounding passages as proposed evidence for the Bible's teaching of a purgative hell.[38] Fortunately, most are written by Paul, and they employ similar Greek. Eighteen of the twenty-five passages Hart provides use the word πάντα ("all") in one way or another. Many exegetes have seen this word in the context of salvation as referring to all classes of people rather than all individuals as Hart would have it. This interpretation admirably embraces the passages that indicate that *not* all individuals are saved and it makes sense of Paul's recurrent emphasis on the inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles in the fold of God, that is, both classes of people.

N. T. Wright strongly indicates the need to read these passages in the traditional sense, "Perhaps only those who have lived in societies split down the middle can appreciate how that 'all' sounded in Paul's world—the early Christian world—where 'Jew and gentile' were the key categories. To allow his 'all' to resonate instead in the echo-chambers of the modern western world, with its quite different theological and soteriological questions, is mere anachronism."[39] In isolation, Hart's interpretation is valid. However, when reading these passages within their grammatico-historical framework as well as the other pages in Scripture, his interpretation is strained. Clearly the biblical authors meant "all" in the sense of "all types of people" and not "all individual people." It may be hard for modern Westerners born and raised with equality indoctrination to see this, but for biblical authors steeped in radical hierarchies of class and nationality, "all people" could only mean one thing.

In another six of the passages Hart supplies, the word κόσμος ("world") is used in reference to those that God will save. A similar argument to that made above can be applied here. Most of these passages are Johannine and a similar stress on inclusion of classes of people can be seen here as in the Pauline literature. For example, 1 John 2:2, which states, in Hart's translation, "And he is atonement for our

[37] Most interesting of those not grappled with here is Hart's claim that both Shammai and Hillel, famous NT era Rabbis, taught a purgative conception of hell which would inform our reading of Jesus's teachings (Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 114ff).

[38] In the order presented, these are Rom 5:18–19; 1 Cor 15:22; 2 Cor 5:14; Rom11:32; 1 Tim 2:3–6; Titus 2:11; 2 Cor 5:19; Eph1:9–10; Col 1:27–28; John 12:32; Heb 2:9; John 17:2; 4:42; 12:47; 1 John 4:14; 2 Pet3:9; Matt 18:14; Phil 2:9; Col1:19–20; 1 John 2:2; John 3:17; Luke 16:16; 1 Tim 4:10; 1 Cor 15:23–24, 28; 1 Cor 3:11–15.

[39] N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 2:1253.

sins, and not only for ours, but for the whole cosmos"[40] is referring to the atoning work of Christ which applies to more than just the original audience of John. When John says the Christ is the atonement "for the whole cosmos," his point is, obviously, that the Christ is the atonement "not only for ours." John does not mean to tell his readers that Christ saves even the unrepentant in this life. Rather, John wants his audience to understand that Christ is the savior of far more than their little group. Again, John is referring to all types of people corporately, not all people individually—Christ saves the whole world, not just Israel, which is a small part of the world. This makes contextual sense, and it accords with the passages that teach eternal hell (see below).

Though amassing passages is next to pointless in this discussion, we should note in passing that Hart's claim that the preponderance of passages on hell are universalist needs to be checked. He claims, "If one can be swayed simply by the brute force of arithmetic, it seems worth noting that, among the apparently most explicit statements on the last things, the universalist statements are *by far* the more numerous."[41] However, even including some dubious insertions in Hart's list, I was able to amass at least as many references to eternal hell from both testaments, not including parallel passages.[42] By far, Hart is incorrect.

Hart moves on to spend some time defining the various terms used for hell in the Bible (שְׁאוֹל, "Sheol"; γέεννα, "Gehenna"; ταρταρόω, "Tartarus"; ᾅδης, "Hades") to show that the lexical range in the Bible is indicative of a non-eternal nuance[43] as well as arguing that the temporal adjectives often modifying these words (עוֹלָם, αἰώνιος, which are usually translated something like "eternal") are similarly not meant to indicate eternal duration, but unspecified periods of time.[44] However, it is essential to notice that he does admit that ἀΐδιος (a derivative of αἰώνιος) does "have the intrinsic meaning of 'eternal,'"[45] but conspicuously missing in his argument is any mention of Jude 6 which employs this word to describe the chains with which the fallen angels are held in "gloomy darkness." Granted, the chains are used "until the judgment," and Hart would likely say this is an indication of the fallen angels' eventual redemption. But this passage much more easily accords with Revelation in which the fallen angels are presented at the judgment of Christ and are subsequently sent into the eternal lake of fire thereafter (Rev 20:11–15), which would render their chains truly ἀΐδιος.[46] Even upon his very limited concession of Greek terms

[40] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 101.

[41] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 95. Italics mine.

[42] Ps 49:14, 88:5, 52:5; Isa 66:24; Jer15:14; 17:14; Dan 12:1–2; Obad 10; Zeph 1:18; Mal 1:4 Matt3:12, 10:28, 18: 6–9, 25:41–46; Mark 9:42–48; Luke 13:23–25, 16:23–24; John 3:36; Rom 2:6–11, 9:22; Phil 3:19; Heb 6:4–6, 10:26–29; 2 Pet3:7; 2 Thess1:5–10; Jude 6, 13; Rev 14:11, 20:10, 14–15, 16:11, 21:8.

[43] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 111–18.

[44] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 120–27.

[45] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 123.

[46] Hart says Revelation does not provide us with "so much as a single clear and unarguable doctrine regarding anything at all" (Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 106), which is convenient to his project. Though Hart claims to be a man of the Bible, many of his descriptions of the Bible belie a high view of Scripture. Compare, for example, Hart's estimation of Revelation with Warfield's: "Within this elaborate plan is a poem unsurpassed in sacred or profane literature in either the grandeur of its poetic imagery, or the superb sweep of its prophetic vision." Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1970), 2:86.

that mean "eternal," there is at least one passage in the New Testament (Jude 6) that explicitly refers to judgment as just that—eternal—and Hart does not mention it.

Further, though he claims αἰώνιος is primarily used as a finite time marker by writers before, during, and immediately after the NT era (like Plato, Philo, Josephus, and many patristics),[47] BDAG notes that Diodorus Siculus (1st century BC), Josephus, Flavius Arrianus (2nd Century AD) as well as various inscriptions use the term to convey "a period of unending duration, *without end.*" [48] For example, Josephus uses αἰώνιοςto refer to a period of time without end when he says that Elijah, "both made them amends as well as the country, by a lasting favor [αἰωνίῳχάριτι]."[49] There is a semantic range for αἰώνιος, but Hart fails to show that a limited temporal reference is mandated in NT use. Further, he does not grapple with the aforementioned classical and patristic era's use of the term as "eternal."

In addition, even if we were to admit that every single use of αἰώνιος must mean something like "the age" (though there is no good reason to do so), there is no reason to conclude that the αἰώνιος to which Paul is referring is not the *last* αἰώνιος. That is, the age to come in which all will be in heaven or hell could just as well be the last age in which people's destinies have been fixed. Indeed, many NT scholars interpret αἰώνιοςalong with Hart, but nevertheless maintain the traditional doctrine of eternal hell.[50]

Another weakness of Hart's exegetical work is seen in his use of Pauline literature. Early in the book, Hart paints Christians as hypocritical if they believe in eternal hell and are not vehemently preoccupied with evangelism.[51] The true Christian who holds to the traditional view of eternal hell, according to Hart, would never "be able to rest even for a moment, because he would be driven ceaselessly around the world in a desperate frenzy of evangelism, seeking to save as many souls from the eternal fire as possible."[52] However, this critique seems to be nullified by the writer upon whose corpus Hart most intently relies. This definition of a true Christian who believes in eternal hell waxes biographically Pauline as we remember Paul's incessant missionary zeal that literally drove him around the known world. In just one of his voluminous statements evincing his zenith desperation to evangelize, Paul says, "For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.… To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save *some*" (1 Cor 9:19, 22, emphasis mine; cf. Rom 9:3; 2 Cor 11:16ff). The biblical author that Hart relies upon most seems to act as if he—according to Hart's own standard—believes in eternal hell.

Finally, we are faced with Hart's question:

> We can see that the ovens are metaphors, and the wheat and the chaff, and the angelic harvest, and the barred doors, and the debtors' prisons; so why do we not also recognize that the deathless worm and the inextinguishable fire and all other such images (none of which, again, means quite what the infernalist imagines) are themselves mere figural

[47] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 120–25.

[48] BDAG, s.v. "αἰώνιος."

[49] Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston, reprint ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 686.

[50] See, Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2:1029.

[51] This does not mean that the Church is sufficiently evangelistic. This is probably the single greatest weakness in terms of active obedience among the church today.

[52] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 30.

> devices within the embrace of an extravagant apocalyptic imagery that, in itself, has no strictly literal elements?[53]

In response, we simply note that this *is* the approach of Reformed exegetes by and large. Almost none affirm strictly literal interpretations of Jesus's sayings or those in Revelation that depict eternal flames and undying worms. However, a metaphor is employed not just as a disorienting phantasmagory (though veiling is surely part of the impetus for the imagery in many cases), but it is used in order to convey something to the hearer. If we cannot affirm that, there is no point in reading and studying them; on Hart's analysis, these passages are next to, if not completely, useless. We can and do recognize the metaphorical nature of biblical imagery of hell without resorting to, it seems to me, diminutive terms to describe them (i.e. "phantasmagory," "extravagant," and "hallucinatory imagery") or claiming that "we delude ourselves if we imagine that … we could hope to grasp even a shadow of a fragment of [the book of Revelation's] intended message."[54] A better approach is to read these texts as shading in our understanding of hell, providing crucial context and color. They are not "hallucinatory." With this in mind, we turn to Hart's quotation, "Theologians are often the most cavalier in their treatment of the texts, chiefly because their first loyalty is usually to the grand systems of belief they have devised or adopted …"[55] Indeed, theologians *are* often cavalier with their texts.

2.1. A Slight Concession

With this said, I argue not only that the aforementioned passages do not teach universalism but that another passage Hart cites, along with others like it, could be interpreted to indicate a preponderance of salvation for humanity. While rejecting most of Jesus's teaching on hell as "intentionally heterogenous phantasmagory, meant as much to disorient as to instruct,"[56] Hart says that Matthew 18:14 "maybe even"[57] supports universalism (it is instructive to note that some of Jesus's teachings should be essentially ignored, for Hart, but others should be considered as potential proof for his argument). Here Jesus says (again, in Hart's translation), "So it is not a desire that occurs to your Father in the heavens that one of these little ones should perish."[58] Interestingly, Charles Hodge takes this passage, as well as the references to the οἱ πολλοί ("the many") in passages like Romans 5:18–19, to indicate that "all who die in infancy are saved."[59] Employing different means to the same effect, Warfield argued that "those theologians have the right of it who not merely refuse to repeat the dogma that only a few are saved, but are ready to declare … that 'not only will order be restored throughout the universe, but the good will far outnumber the bad; the saved will be many times more than the lost.'"[60] Warfield here cites Alvah Hovey approvingly and notes that, in addition to Hodge, both Robert L. Dabney and William G. T. Shedd are aligned in the gist of the foregoing statement. Thus, there is not only a readily available and, I argue, more appropriate interpretation of passages like these over against the universalist reading Hart propounds, there is

[53] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 94–95.

[54] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 119, 107.

[55] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 162.

[56] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 119.

[57] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 100.

[58] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 100.

[59] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, reprint ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:26.

[60] B. B. Warfield, "Are They Few That Be Saved?" (1918), https://tinyurl.com/v7xvjj43, pp. 11–12.

also much Reformed precedent to see these passages as indeed indicating a prevalence of salvation in redemptive history through the salvation of those who die in infancy. That is, the means by which more would be saved than lost is universal infant salvation (which Hodge and others taught), coupled with historically high infant mortality rates. This mitigates some of Hart's harangue against the traditional view of God's mercy because God is seen as saving the lion's share of humanity. But, again, *one person* saved would be more grace than humanity could ever deserve. Such is the grace upon grace of the God of mercy.

3. Response to the Third Argument: What Is a Person?

Hart's third argument seems to be the most speculative. His exegesis of Romans 9–11, as noted above, proffers a notion of God's election in which some are rejected so that all can be later included. He follows Gregory in asserting that God's creation is essentially twofold in that the prior eternal "creative act that abides in God" is followed by "a posterior creative act, which is the temporal exposition … of this divine model."[61] We note a Barthian theme in that the creation of Adam and Eve was really the creation of humankind as a whole and, "moreover, this human totality belongs to Christ from eternity, and can never be alienated from him."[62] This unity of humankind, as mentioned above, is extrapolated by Hart's assertion that human beings are (merely?) relational experiences, or "subsistences of relationality."[63] As such, eternal hell is seen as an impossibility for two reasons. First, the people in hell are really Christ in some sense, and he cannot be in hell eternally. Second, the saints cannot enjoy their glorification because they will be preoccupied with the attendant grief arising from their loved ones' suffering in hell.

Hart's construal here seems beholden to a neo-platonic monism in which all people are really One person as per their *exitus et reditus* (exit and return) from the One. In response, we first question here whether his attempts at maintaining individuality for those in heaven are successful. He argues that as subsistences of relationality, we are unable to exist in heaven apart from those in hell. But I would turn the argument around and say that as instantiations of the single mass of humanity, which is joined with God's simple divinity in heaven, individuality begins to dissolve into the meaningless. God would continue to exist, but would we? Hart would likely employ the Eastern Orthodox distinction between God's essence and energies to allow for a non-monistic theosis of the saints. This of course brings with it the attendant complications of potentially dividing God and rendering him ultimately unknowable; further, it does not seem to address the issue of monistic unity of humanity. This is not to say that Hart's presentation is incoherent but perhaps fraught with unneeded difficulties when compared to the Reformed scheme. Furthermore, as many have pointed out before, these ideas are more Platonic than Christian.[64]

Secondly, and more simply, we note that the connectedness that the saints once had with their reprobate loved ones was really a connectedness to God's goodness, which, upon the Reformed scheme,

[61] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 139.

[62] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 141.

[63] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 154.

[64] Vern S. Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), 437–562.

will be fully in heaven with them.[65] So, there is no "part" of the saint (or Christ) in hell, since all the goodness with which they were connected is not in hell. Rather, that goodness is now fully in heaven. This is not because the things the saints loved in the reprobate moved back to God, as it were, but because the things they loved in them were God. The emanations of the sun do not cease to exist when the moon is gone. In the same way, the goodness the saints loved in the reprobate still exists, though the reflections of that goodness are gone (relationally speaking). Thus, the saints could never miss anything in their unbelieving loved ones because everything about them that they ever loved will be in heaven with them, yet to a greater degree. This is because the goodness we love in one another is ultimately God's goodness. Hart should readily affirm this since all earthly good, in his view, is a participation of the Good (God). When people are in hell, their goodness is gone (unless Hart wants to say that God punishes his own goodness). Therefore, the saints in heaven would not mourn those who are in hell. This is because all that is left in hell is bad.

Another consideration is that those in heaven will no longer be concerned with the things of the past, whether family or otherwise. As Isaiah says, "For behold, I am creating a new heavens and a new earth; and the former things will not be remembered or come upon the heart" (Isa 65:17, LSB).

4. Response to the Fourth Argument: What Is a Freedom?

The final argument in *That All Shall Be Saved* is related to the first and, as such, it is potentially the most powerful. While the first argument looked at the possibility of hell from God's perspective, the last considers the logic of hell from the standpoint of a rational creature. Hart bases this argument on the notion that a desire to repent in the reprobate would render hell unjust because God would be withholding reconciliation out of vindictive spite. Immediately then, we notice that Hart's argument is predicated upon the notion that eternal hell is not entirely deserved. If it were, even the desire for reform would not warrant the claim that it must be given to the culpable. A murderer may desire to do good things for society and reform his ways, but that does not mean he does not deserve to spend the rest of his days in jail. Even so, one could still argue that an omniscient jailor would not be operating with perfect ambition if he were to withhold reform from the person who he knew could experience it if he were given the opportunity. Therefore, we will assume, for the sake of argument, that the reprobate must not desire reconciliation from hell to God's embrace in heaven if hell is to be just. The untenability of an ontological conception of sin was addressed in 1.1. above. Here, I seek to move the response a bit further by assuming an ethical conception of sin and a condign eternal hell and therefore looking at the cognition of the reprobate as that which understands God yet does not desire Him—that is, rational creatures *do* desire eternal hell.

Hart utilizes a transcendental metaphysic to argue that rational creatures are unable to both know the Good and not desire it. That is, since God is the ultimate Good, rational creatures cannot not desire him any more than they cannot not desire to be happy. They are programmed to desire God. All desire for sin, or those things that are not good, is seen by Hart as a misperception of the things in and of themselves. As noted above, this approach leads Hart to say, "Even an act of apostasy, then, traced back to its most primordial impulse, is motivated by the desire for God."[66] But, I argue that this falsely equates good things and God *à la* pantheism. My argument is based on Jonathan Edwards' notion that a desire

[65] Parts of this paragraph were taken from my "Making Sense of Hell," *Themelios* 46.1 (2021): 145–62.

[66] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 185.

towards a being that participates in Being is not necessarily (perhaps is even necessarily not) a desire for Being in general (i.e. God).[67] Or, put another way, one's desire for a good can be contrary to God, despite Hart's argument.

Edwards defines people who desire good (being) yet do not desire God (Being in general) as those who "have a determination of mind to union and benevolence to a *particular person* or *private system*, which is but a small part of the universal system of Being: and that this disposition or determination of mind is independent on, or not subordinate to, benevolence to *Being in general*."[68] This is for three reasons. First, in the words of Edwards, this benevolence toward particular persons (or, for our purposes, good things) when not subordinate to Being in general (or the Good) is actually against the Good because it does not desire its propagation exhaustively, but only in so far as it benefits the one with the desire. Simply put, one can desire goods and not the Good due to culpable selfishness (not innocent ignorance, as Hart would have it). This is therefore a desire for a particular object in *opposition* to its general existence. Like, for example, desiring a cog in a watch, removing it, and damaging the watch whence it came. Secondly, the desire for good things is not only in opposition to the Good, but it can lead to enmity towards it. Edwards says, "for he that is influenced by private affection, not subordinate to regard to Being in general, sets up its particular or limited object *above* Being in general; and this most naturally tends to enmity against the latter, which is by right the great supreme, ruling, and absolutely sovereign object of our regard."[69] Thirdly, this inordinate desire for good things ultimately leads Edwards to consider the desire "*itself* [as] an opposition to that object [that is, God]."[70]

An analogy of this idea can be seen in interpersonal actions—though a person can cognitively understand that God creates all people, he can desire to subjugate and oppress certain people under himself as means to his own ends. In so doing, he is desiring a good (people) while hating God whence people come. He does not need to misperceive God in order to hate God. He knows that God claims authority over all people, and as such, there are no other true sovereigns. Thus, he can desire his own sinful interaction with good things through his own sinful sovereignty, while fully understanding who God is and what he commands. Hart would have no recourse to say that this man is simply misunderstanding God because God really wants to give him his basic desires. The man's basic desires are for complete control over other humans, and in no way does the beatific vision comport with that desire. Here Hart would likely reply that it is the man's desire for happiness that is ultimately driving him (and oppressing people is just a means to that end), and if he understood that he could only be perfectly happy with God, he would not desire to oppress people but would rather desire God. But I argue that this man is so

[67] It is instructive to note that Edwards is, according to McClymond, beholden to neo-platonic notions of participation and the *analogia entis* (analogy of being) which aligns with Hart's theological background. However, Edwards uses these conceptions to make drastically different conclusions. See Michael McClymond, "Analogy: A Neglected Theme in Jonathan Edwards and Its Pertinence to Contemporary Theological Debates," *Jonathan Edwards Studies*, *Special Issue* 6.2 (2016): 153–75.

[68] Jonathan Edwards, *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, WJE 8 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 554 (emphasis original).

[69] Edwards, *Ethical Writings*, 555.

[70] Edwards, *Ethical Writings*, 556.

different from the saints that he cannot be happy without meeting his desire for oppression.[71] The man needs domination to be happy, and God does not offer his saints domination.

We might be able to explain this notion by considering willful ignorance. Like the man who desires to oppress people, Satan and demons can only desire sin. They have a proper understanding and apprehension of God in terms of understanding who he is and what he desires to do with humanity. But they reject his good plan since they perceive autonomy and self-rule to be better than submission to him. Are we really to believe, on Hart's scheme, that a creature that is thousands of years old, who knows the Scriptures better than all theologians, is really just unaware of who God really is? Or do we agree with the plain biblical teaching that Satan both knows God and hates him?

This does not mean that those in hell desire the effects of hell or punishment, of course. Rather, it is to say that they desire something to the exclusion of God to the extent that they have enmity for him. I have suggested that this desire may be for dominance and freedom from God's sovereignty. However, one does not need to say what the desire is for in order to maintain that they desire something other than God. Indeed, there may be desires for multiple things apart from God. Thomas Aquinas puts it this way: "First, there is the turning away from the immutable good [i.e., the Good], which is infinite, wherefore, in this respect, sin is infinite. Second, there is the inordinate turning to mutable good [i.e., God's creation]."[72]

Alvin Plantinga, relying on Edwards, makes a similar argument. Utilizing a distinction between the intellect and the will, Plantinga shows that a person can properly perceive God via the intellect and simultaneously reject him via the will in the same way that a bird might properly perceive a snake, or a mariner might rightly see a storm. In both cases, the snake and the storm might be objectively beautiful, and the bird and the mariner are properly apprehending them. However, the beautiful snake and storm are hated due to the relation they possess with the one who is beholding it.[73] In the same way, an unbeliever can properly perceive God but have no desire for God because God's justice demands the eradication of cherished sin. The unbeliever would then see God's beauty as wrath since it poses a direct threat to what the unbeliever most loves, which is, inevitably, himself.

Thus, we have a complete paradigm shift between Hart and Edwards. Hart says the desire for good things is the desire for God on all accounts. Edwards says that the desire for good things in a sinful manner is intentionally against God. The reprobate want goodness for themselves, which indicates that they do not desire those good things generally. Indeed, the desire for good things selfishly (i.e., the desire for other beings) is enmity for those same things generally (i.e., Being in general). In this way, rational creatures in hell still desire good things, but they hate the Good in the same way that a person can love a being while hating Being. Thus, we have both logical and Scriptural grounds to reject Hart's thesis.

---

[71] This argument is based on a radical distinction between saint and reprobate to the point that, I argue, the term "human" is not broad enough to properly refer to them both. I use the term "less-than-human" while still maintaining the full corporeal humanity of those in hell. Due to this radical distinction, those in hell are seen to be ontologically distinct from those in heaven. Thus, their desires are so warped, they can perceive God yet hate him. This is the thesis of Golding, "Making Sense of Hell." N. T. Wright makes a similar argument when he says that those in hell "exist in an ex-human state." See N. T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 182–83.

[72] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón, trans. Laurence Shapcote (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), I–II q.87 a.3 resp.

[73] Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 303.

5. Conclusion

Hart's thesis is compelling when viewed in the abstract. But when we examine it in light of the whole corpus of Scripture and consider the implications of some of his conclusions, we see that the argument has many inherent difficulties and it does not accord with all of Scripture. We have examined all four of his primary arguments, highlighting their shortcomings with varying degrees of significance. At each step in his overall argument, weaknesses are present. Even his more minor claims are subject to serious critique. At the very least, with this many difficulties, we are prudent to take a long pause when considering his thesis rather than perceiving it to be above reproach, as Hart does.

In closing, I would remark that Hart's thesis requires that the Holy Spirit has allowed the vast majority of the Church to completely misunderstand its doctrine of hell for two millennia. If the foregoing did nothing other than balance the scales (though I think it shows we should abandon Hart's thesis), it seems we should opt for the traditional account on the grounds that it would not require us to maintain this vast theological tragedy in church history.

Though Hart would have us believe Satan is destined to repent of his evil ways one day in hell and be among the glorified redeemed in heaven, the truth of the matter is that he will be "be tormented day and night forever" (and in case that was not clear) "and ever" (Rev 20:10b, LSB). Satan will never be a Christian, but those we know this side of eternity might be, by the grace of God. May the Lord give us the strength to tell them the good news of salvation today. How many thousands will not live to see tomorrow? How impossible is the chance of redemption then!

Book Reviews

– OLD TESTAMENT –

– NEW TESTAMENT –

– HISTORY AND HISTORICAL THEOLOGY –

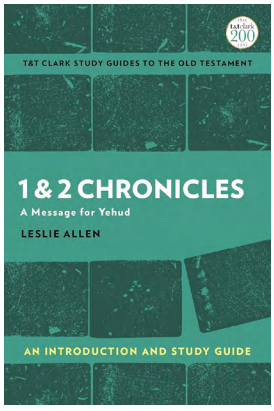
– SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY –

– ETHICS AND PASTORALIA –

– MISSION AND CULTURE –

– OLD TESTAMENT –

Leslie C. Allen. *1 and 2 Chronicles: A Message for Yehud*. T&T Clark Study Guides to the Old Testament. London: Bloomsbury, 2021. xii + 120 pp. £17.99/$26.95.



Leslie C. Allen, an Old Testament professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, brings his expertise in Chronicles to this insightful study guide. This volume offers a clear and accessible introduction for newcomers while providing advanced insights for seasoned scholars. As a successor to Gwilym H. Jones's 1993 entry in the Old Testament Guides series (*Sheffield Academic Press*), Allen's work incorporates recent scholarship and delivers his unique perspective on Chronicles.

This guide consists of four core chapters exploring Chronicles' content, particularly its adaptation and expansion of earlier literary sources (chs. 3–6), framed by two introductory chapters and a conclusion.

The first chapter explores the standard topics of authorship, dating, and sources. Allen posits that "the Chronicler" wrote during the last years of the Persian period, from the mid-fourth century BC onward (p. 6). The chapter also delves into the subject of spiritual exhortation, with Allen suggesting that the Chronicler has repurposed material from Samuel-Kings to construct a comprehensive program aimed at encouraging his audience to "seek the Lord" (p. 2).

The second introductory chapter outlines how the Chronicler conveys his message. Allen adopts a macrostructural rhetorical-critical approach influenced by the works of James Muilenburg ("Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88 [1969]: 1–18) and Rodney K. Duke (*The Persuasive Appeal of the Chronicler: A Rhetorical Analysis*, JSOTSup 88 [Sheffield: Almond, 1990]). He views Chronicles as consisting of two major sections, both ending with postexilic references: 1 Chronicles 1:1–9:34 and 1 Chronicles 9:35–2 Chronicles 36:23. Along with the macrostructure, Allen identifies rhetorical markers indicating smaller "kerygmatic units" within the text (p. 19).

Chapter 3 examines the genealogies in 1 Chronicles 1:1–9:34. Entitled "Israel: Elect, Inclusive, and Resilient," it provides a concise overview of the genealogies' shape and content. It also explores potential sources for these genealogical accounts, including Genesis, Joshua, 1 Kings, and Ruth, among others.

Chapter 4 highlights how David and Solomon function as "models for seeking God" in their respective roles of preparing for and building the temple (1 Chr 9:35–2 Chr 9:31; p. 39). A feature of this guide is Allen's identification of keywords and their relation to the key themes of Chronicles, such as דרש, "to seek" (pp. 42–44, 49, 52–53, 56).

Chapter 5 shows how subsequent kings are evaluated against the models established by the reigns of David and Solomon, beginning with Judah's kings in the Divided Kingdom (2 Chr 10:1–28:27). Following Sara Japhet (*The Ideology of the Book of Chronicles and Its Place in Biblical Thought*, trans. A. Barber, 2nd ed. [Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1997], 161–64), Allen applies the generational options in Ezekiel 18 to the kings in Chronicles. The evaluations are sometimes applied to phases within reigns, such as Rehoboam's, which shifts from bad to good and from bad to relatively good, and finally bad because "he did not set his heart to seek the Lord" (2 Chr 12:14; pp. 64–66).

Chapter 6 continues with Judah's kings in the Single Kingdom (2 Chr 29:1–36:23). The evaluations allow Allen to view reigns as larger rhetorical units. For instance, Amon's negative reign and Josiah's

positive reign parallel the two phases in Manasseh's reign to form a cohesive rhetorical unit (2 Chr 33:1–36:1; pp. 85–89).

The final chapter discusses the spirituality and theology of Chronicles. Spirituality is defined as "believers' commitment to an established religion" (p. 91), which is expressed through the act of seeking the Lord in worship (p. 92). This worship is to align with the practices of the Jerusalem temple and adhere to the Torah, along with its "Davidic and Solomonic supplementation" (p. 96). In Chronicles, seeking God results in blessings, while forsaking him brings negative consequences, both attributed to God's direct response (pp. 93–94). The repeated failures of Judah's kings functioned to warn the Chronicler's generation in Yehud to take the opportunity to turn back to God after sinning (p. 103).

Readers of *Themelios* will appreciate Allen's rhetorical approach, particularly those interested in how Chronicles impacts its audience. Though some may question his division of exegetical and rhetorical units, these divisions provide a helpful starting point for teaching larger groups of chapters and sections. His focus on keywords adds further cohesion to his analysis.

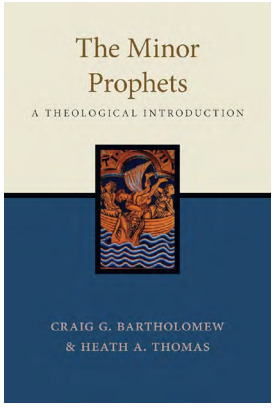
However, *Themelios* readers may find areas of disagreement. Allen's significant discussion of how the Chronicler modified or expanded sources, especially Samuel-Kings, might try the patience of those who prefer final form readings. Nevertheless, Allen defends his focus as integral to biblical scholarship, which requires "assessment of later contributions to the final, canonical form of a book" (p. 55). Some readers may also question Allen's views on historicity, such as interpreting large numbers as "dramatic hyperbole" (p. 67) or seeing Elijah's letter as "ghostwritten in the Chronicler's style" (2 Chr 21:12–15; p. 73). Yet, these points underscore challenging aspects of the text that demand further investigation.

Finally, although Allen draws some connections with the New Testament, *Themelios* readers may desire more robust biblical-theological links. For a deeper dive into Allen's hermeneutic method, readers can explore his other works on Chronicles (*1, 2 Chronicles*, The Preacher's Commentary [Nashville: Nelson, 1987]; and "The First and Second Books of Chronicles," in *1 Kings–Tobit*, ed. Leander E. Keck, NIB 3 [Nashville: Abingdon, 1999], 297–659). For pan-canonical biblical-theological themes, resources like Graeme Goldsworthy's *1 and 2 Chronicles: The Lion of the Tribe of Judah*, Reading the Bible Today (Sydney South: Aquila, 2021) and John W. Olley's "1–2 Chronicles," in *1 Samuel–2 Chronicles*, ed. Iain Duguid, James M Hamilton Jr, and Jay Sklar, ESV Expository Commentary 3 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 899–1294 offer additional insights.

This book will be especially valuable to seminary students and biblical scholars beginning their study of Chronicles. Those interested in the intersection of rhetorical and redaction criticism, literary analysis, and theological themes will find Allen's approach thought-provoking and enriching.

Peter H. W. Lau
Equip Gospel Ministries
Selangor, Malaysia

Craig G. Bartholomew and Heath A. Thomas. *The Minor Prophets: A Theological Introduction*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023. 400 pp. £35.99/$45.99.



The back cover of *The Minor Prophets* carries a substantial claim, describing the volume as a "unique introduction to the Minor Prophets." This claim likely evidences overreach by the marketing department and in my assessment is not strictly accurate. Nevertheless, Bartholomew and Thomas provide an eminently useful textbook on an oft neglected section of Scripture. They contend:

> If for no other reason, we ought to retrieve and renew our reading of and listening to the Minor Prophets today because of their importance for understanding *Jesus*. They are indispensable in grasping the magnitude of the Christ event. Precisely as disciples of Jesus, we are pushed to return to the Minor Prophets and listen to all that they have to say as part of Scripture for today. They bring God's word to bear on all of life in their particular contexts, and Jesus is Lord of all of life. Although we are in a different act in the drama of Scripture from them, their discrete witness remains, now enriching and enriched by the fuller and more comprehensive story of which they—and we—are part. (p. 355, emphasis original)

The Minor Prophets serves readers well in this task.

Craig G. Bartholomew is Director of the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology in Cambridge, UK, and Heath A. Thomas is the President and Professor of Old Testament at Oklahoma Baptist University. Both are widely published in the areas of Old Testament and biblical interpretation. In *The Minor Prophets* they combine these areas of expertise and interest. Across twenty-two chapters they offer three different types of engagement with the Book of the Twelve. Chapters 1–2 and 20–22 tackle general issues such as history, context, theology, and application. In between these bookends each prophetical book has its own chapter—except Nahum and Zephaniah, and Haggai and Malachi, with each pair sharing a chapter. These chapters generally cover context, interpretation, theology, and New Testament use. These are supplemented by a handful of chapters that focus on one passage or theme in a Minor Prophet, with Hosea, Joel, Amos, Jonah, Micah, Habakkuk, and Zechariah receiving additional chapters.

Several features of this volume commend it to the reader. First, the chapters on each book in the Minor Prophets offer in-depth but succinct introductions. Indeed, these chapters are perhaps the crowning achievement of the book as they introduce readers to historical context, offer a reading of the book in its entirety, and conclude with theological and canonical reflections. While giving each book its own voice, Bartholomew and Thomas's canonical awareness (both for the Book of the Twelve and the entire canon) is instructive and exemplary. Other introductory textbooks on the Minor Prophets are likely to multiply page count but unlikely to give you significantly more information.

Second, the selection of chapters that focus on a particular theme or passage offer good examples of a slower, closer reading of a text or texts. These chapters also tend to lean more towards application. Thus, chapter 11 on Spiritual Formation, with Jonah's prayer in view, encourages a reading of Scripture that affects change in the reader. Chapter 18 on Zechariah 9:9–10 is wonderfully Christocentric while remaining attentive to the original context, providing a roadmap for preaching Jesus from the Old Testament. Chapter 6 on the Day of the Lord is arguably the standout, despite its brevity. In only nine

pages it adequately orientates the reader to the Day of the Lord in the Old Testament, the ancient Near Eastern context, Second Temple Literature, and the New Testament.

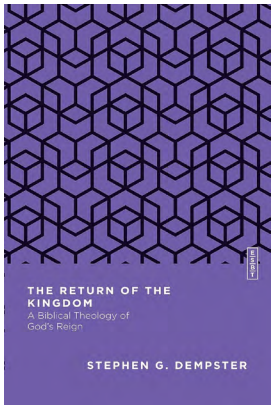
Third, the introductory and concluding chapters offer a superb background and theological framework for understanding the Minor Prophets. Indeed, these chapters alone would prove worthy as an introductory textbook for any course on the Book of the Twelve. Additionally, the footnotes throughout the book evidence the research undertaken and, while not excessive, provide plenty for the interested reader to pursue. *The Minor Prophets* orientates the reader well and provides a solid basis and foundation for conducting serious study of the Minor Prophets.

One issue with this volume is the authors' perceived agenda. Two themes appear repeatedly, one lauded and the other condemned: creation care and consumerism. It is undeniable that YHWH is presented as Creator in the Minor Prophets (e.g., Amos 4:13; 5:8; 9:5–6), and that one implication is that his people must care for creation (pp. 124–29), but the theme is not as pervasive or prominent as Bartholomew and Thomas suggest. On the other hand, consumerism is frequently the target of prophetic condemnation. While aspects of consumerism obviously foster sinfulness and are certainly confronted by the content of the Minor Prophets, it is somewhat curious that other aspects of so-called Christian culture do not face the same sharp criticism. What of gossip, or pornography, or bullying, or celebrity culture? Surely these features of so-called western Christianity likewise fall short of Micah's call to do justice (Mic 6:6–8; pp. 189–201). Each of these features fail to do justice by denigrating, abusing, or worshiping people—none of which is just for those involved. The persistent presence of these two issues, without any explanation as to why they are the repeatedly chosen examples, unfortunately proved a distraction from the otherwise excellent content.

Despite this relatively minor issue, I commend this volume. Personally, I will review my lectures on the Book of the Twelve with this volume in hand and add it to the recommended reading list. Teachers and students will find it valuable. In my estimation, however, it will be most beneficial to the preacher. It will be the first book I pick up whenever I preach the Minor Prophets. Indeed, I think the preacher is the book's key audience. Every pastor should have Bartholomew and Thomas's *The Minor Prophets* on their shelf and, after the biblical text itself, it should be the first book read in preparing to preach any one of the Book of the Twelve—for nowhere else will one find such a well-researched but concise survey of the biblical material.

S. D. Ellison
Irish Baptist College
Moira, Northern Ireland, UK

Stephen G. Dempster. *The Return of the Kingdom: A Biblical Theology of God's Reign*. Essential Studies in Biblical Theology. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2024. xii + 220 pp. £20.99/$24.00.



Stephen Dempster has long been known as a leading voice in biblical theology. In this compact book, he masterfully traces the theme of the kingdom throughout the Scriptures. In so doing he provides another worthy addition to the Essential Studies in Biblical Theology series. Here is another book in the series that can be handed to a layman to help them grasp the Bible's storyline. In fact, since the kingdom is one of the *most* essential of the Bible's storylines, this may provide the best overview of the Bible as a whole.

Beginning in Genesis, Dempster explores the theme of God's kingdom through the entire canon of Scripture (ch. 1). He claims that the entire biblical message can be summarized by "the return of the king" (p. 2). The sovereign King created the world with mankind to rule the world under him. Mankind, through sin, loses the kingdom, but God's mission is to restore the world to an even better state than its original, where humanity reigns with God forever (p. 9).

As Dempster explores kingship in Genesis, he presents an interesting concept based on Ancient Near Eastern data (ch. 2). "Image" and "likeness" (Gen 1:26) are not synonyms, he argues. The "image" of a king proclaims his rule, while "likeness" denotes homage or worship of his god (p. 14). Thus, humanity as likeness was to face YHWH in communion, then face outward as his image, proclaiming his rule.

Dempster then continues to explain the theme of kingship in the creation narrative and the loss of the kingdom through Adam and Eve (chs. 3–4). Due to this loss, God begins to restore the kingdom through a godly seed, the line of Seth, Noah, and Shem (ch. 5). Chapters 6–7 conclude the examination of Genesis, showing how God begins to restore his kingship through the family of Abraham.

Chapters 8–9 explore the rest of the Pentateuch. By creating Israel into a nation and giving them a covenant and law, God establishes his kingdom program. For the first time, YHWH is explicitly referenced as king (Exod 15:18; p. 80). In these chapters Dempster emphasizes that YHWH is king. I wish, however, that he had explored the question of the prominence of Moses. While Moses is a key figure, he is not spoken of in kingship language, unlike predecessors such as Adam and Abraham. Why does the canon begin to move towards God's theocratic kingship and not human viceregents (1 Sam 8:7)?

The story takes a turn in the Former Prophets, where God establishes a human dynasty through the line of David (ch. 10). Interestingly, Dempster points out that the end of the Former Prophets is also the halfway point of the Hebrew Bible. By the end of 2 Kings, the kingdom of God is at a "dead end" (p. 125), with the kingdom in ruins and the nation in exile. Dempster posits that the exile raises the same question the barren Sarah faced, "Is anything too hard for YHWH?" (Gen 18:14).

After a brief exploration of the Latter Prophets (ch. 11), the author then takes up the Writings in two chapters (chs. 12–13). He shows that David is the key to God's salvation by looking at the Psalms via their canonical seams. Only a few pages are given to the "wisdom literature."

The final four chapters investigate the New Testament. Dempster argues that its structure points to the centrality of Jesus as King (p. 155). Matthew, the first book, focuses on Jesus's kingship, answering the unresolved question left by the Hebrew canon. Like Genesis and Chronicles, Matthew begins with a

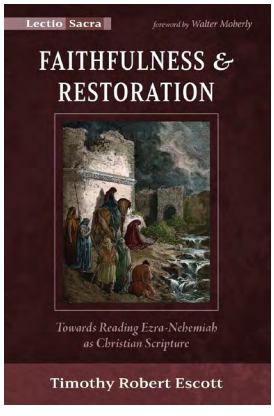
genealogy, focusing on the royal line (p. 157). The book of Revelation then ends with Christ reigning as King in the perfect, restored world.

This summary of the book's contents reveals a point of critique: the book is "frontloaded" towards Genesis. Dempster uses chapters 2 through 7 to traverse through the first book of the Bible, sixty-four pages out of the roughly two-hundred-page book. This seems out of balance with, for example, one chapter on the Former Prophets, the corpus in which Israel's kingdom and the Davidic covenant are established. Consider, especially, that the entirety of the Latter Prophets is explored in a single eight-page chapter! Surely a prophet like Isaiah not only has many riches to mine but also presents major developments in the messianic ideal of God's kingdom. Understandably, the Genesis account sets the trajectory for God's kingdom, but a more balanced treatment of the corpus of Scripture would have been beneficial.

Despite this critique, Dempster's book is highly valuable and remains a top recommendation for giving someone a taste of good biblical theology. Dempster combines exegetical work with historical context to offer unique insights into the text. He helpfully demonstrates the preeminence of the kingdom theme throughout Scripture.

Drew Grumbles
Albany Baptist Church
Albany, New York, USA

Timothy R. Escott. *Faithfulness and Restoration: Towards Reading Ezra-Nehemiah as Christian Scripture*. Lectio Sacra. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2023. 246 pp. £27.00/$33.00.



Timothy Escott provides a well-grounded applied reading of Ezra-Nehemiah from a Christian perspective. It is rooted in the text's language, structure, narrative, and themes. Multi-faceted, it presents four reading strategies for deriving insights from this biblical text: (1) as the end of the Old Testament story, (2) eschatologically, (3) figurally, and (4) ethically. Escott's goal is to generate fruitful Christian readings without distorting the distinctive voice of Ezra-Nehemiah (pp. 4–5). He strives to bring the concerns of the text into dialogue with the church, a conversation which has been historically sparse. The author does not tackle the intricacies of authorship and source debates but focuses on the canonical shape of the text.

In chapter 1, Escott focuses on how Ezra-Nehemiah completes the story of the Old Testament with the partial restoration of Israel. Although there is a disparity between the glory days of the first temple and kingdom, the return and rebuilding are evidence that "the Lord's purposes for Israel remain intact," anticipating the full restorative work of Christ (p. 43). Christian significance in Ezra-Nehemiah is not limited to highlighting the need for the Savior, as sometimes taught in Christian circles, but it includes recognizing the ongoing message to the people of God to persevere in difficulty, partner with God to bring about his purposes, and retain humility and repentance in the face of failures.

Chapter 2 promotes an eschatological reading of Ezra-Nehemiah. Following the lead of the text itself (see Ezra 1:1–4), Escott brings prophetic promises into dialogue with Ezra-Nehemiah. He points out the author's explicit reference to Jeremiah's prophecy of the return (especially Jer 30–33), implicit

reference to God's promises to "arouse" Cyrus (Isa 45:13; cf. Ezra 1), and verbal connections with Ezekiel's promises of restoration (especially Ezek 36; pp. 55–57). Hope, says Escott, sets the tone for the book. Escott refreshingly claims that while many prophecies remain unfulfilled, this is not due to Israel's moral lapses but is simply because the biblical story continues (p. 71). Full expectations will be met later through the restorative work of Christ.

In chapter 3, Escott discusses the dominant figurative reading of Ezra and Nehemiah in Christian circles through the centuries. These figurative readings often bear little or no connection to the text, which simply serves as a launching point for describing the superior person and ministry of Christ. Following John Dawson, Escott prefers the term "figural," which, unlike figurativeness, extends rather than obliterates the literal sense of the text (p. 87). Escott demonstrates that already in the text itself figures of this type appear, including the Israelite exodus, Sinaitic revelation, the debacle of the golden calf, and the conquest, highlighting a parallel experience among the returnees. Escott extends this usage into a Christian context. For example, the "second Exodus" motif in the book is fruitful for understanding not only the return to the land under Zerubbabel but also the exodus from the world of sin by believers in Christ. Similarly, the rebuilding of the temple harks not only backward to Solomon's temple in the text's nuances but flashes forward to the edification of the living temple of believers today. Ezra-Nehemiah's themes of confession, repentance, and commitment to the Torah are grounded in Israel's wilderness experience in a positive light, instead of as a reminder of failures. Escott recommends a similar attitude for the church (p. 106).

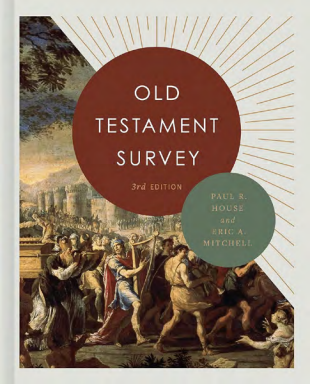
In chapters 4–5, Escott encourages an ethical reading of Ezra-Nehemiah. He points out that Ezra's community, as well as the contemporary church, require both a renewed commitment to the Torah as well as fresh biblical interpretation to address its ethical issues. He wisely explains that following the Torah is not obeying unambiguous laws but requires interpretation in each generation in, to use Michael Fishbane's terms, a "circle of exegetes" (p. 156). Escott is certainly correct that ethical values promoted in Ezra-Nehemiah (e.g., generosity, worship, and holiness) are still relevant (p. 169).

Escott addresses the questionable ethics of expelling wives and children from their families (ch. 6; see Ezra 10:11–44). He views the mixed marriages as a matter of covenant violation rather than sancta violation but then claims that the problem is a violation of the community's holiness instead (p. 181). In my opinion, both the community and the Torah are sancta (sacred), thus violation of either is a breach of holiness. Escott claims that Ezra's community acted out of self-preservation *in extremis* (p. 204).

Escott has achieved his goal of a "hermeneutically alert investigation into reading Ezra-Nehemiah as Christian Scripture" (p. 205). His sensitive handling of the text allows its own voice to speak rather than being smothered by a burden of extraneous matters. While he concludes that Christ's life, death, and resurrection was the ultimate fulfillment of the biblical story of restoration, Escott applauds the faithfulness of the generations of the return. Rather than downplaying the returnees' story, Escott recognizes that they were the link to God's continuing work, including the advent of Christ (p. 29). He challenges the church to partner with Christ and model the faithfulness of earlier Jews of faith. Escott's positive treatment of this Jewish work is much needed in Christian circles. Here, the returnees take their place as fellow-heirs of the kingdom who overcame challenges resonant within the church today. I commend Escott for unfolding the value of Ezra-Nehemiah for Christian thought and practice.

Hannah Harrington
Patten University
Oakland, California, USA

Paul R. House and Eric Mitchell. *Old Testament Survey*. 3rd edition. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2023. xxvi + 532 pp. £49.99/$49.99.



I picked up this book to evaluate if it could replace two textbooks in an Old Testament survey/foundation course that I teach to first-year seminary students: Hill and Walton's *Survey of Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2010) and Arnold and Beyer's *Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic). To be sure, I could have undertaken a more updated comparison with the recent fourth versions of these two books, but at the time of my review, Arnold and Beyer's 4th edition was still forthcoming. Nonetheless, all three books have achieved "standard" status since their debut more than twenty-five years ago and any of these volumes would make a good textbook, especially in more confessional institutions.

House and Mitchell write with an evangelical audience in mind. They hold on to traditional positions, such as early dating of events, inerrancy, and the unity of the Bible. This latest edition has expanded on topics related to the historical and geographical background of the biblical text in a picturesque manner—there are about sixty diagrams/maps, forty-six illustrations/tables and charts, and close to three hundred high-quality, full-color images and pictures. The reader will be treated to some form of visual aid on almost every page of the volume!

The book is divided into twenty-two chapters, grouped into four major parts (Law, Former Prophets, Latter Prophets, and Writings) following the sequence of the Hebrew Bible canon. Each chapter begins with a summary of five items: plot, major characters, key minor characters, major events, and major themes. The back matter of the book includes name, subject, and scripture indices.

Perhaps benefitting from Mitchell's archaeological expertise, an outstanding feature of this book is the sixty or so sidebars titled, "For Greater Historical Understanding." These sidebars are interspersed across the book and develop specific historical and archaeological background information, such as the dating of Israel's conquest of Canaan (pp. 123–24). I have not encountered another introductory text on the Old Testament with such extensive background content.

Designed as a textbook, there are several other notable features. First, it is easy to read. The authors have written in clear, short, and direct sentences. There is little use of jargon, and when it does appear, it is well explained. As such, this book is helpful to readers who do not have English as their first language. Second, while well-researched, the book is free from laborious footnotes or lengthy bibliographies. Every page is well-spaced and well-paced, without coming across as having too much information. Third, this book's primary focus is descriptive, retelling the content of each book, although short evaluations are given sporadically and a brief conclusion is provided at the end of a chapter. This makes the volume beneficial for those less familiar with Old Testament narratives.

This book suffers from several weaknesses. First, it lacks a way to help readers engage deeper with the presented content. Apart from a brief conclusion at the end of a chapter, the book does not offer deeper theological reflections or applications. Unlike Hill and Walton and Arnold and Beyer, there are no "further readings" or "discussion questions" at the end of chapters to deepen the engagement with the content. Such questions can be helpful for peer-to-peer discussions or engagement with the tutor in the classroom. In other words, this book lacks important handles and activities to deepen learning.

Second, I find the lack of discussion on literary unity surprising because the authors clearly stated their intent to "emphasize the Old Testament's unity" (p. 1). To those who are aware of House's work on the unity of the Twelve (Minor Prophets), this is all the more striking! There is very little to no discussion on the structure or outline of each biblical book. The divisions of each biblical book are simply given on the contents page and discussed as they stand. In other words, the book does not offer sufficient windows to show readers how the biblical texts can be structured, read coherently, or interpreted.

As a whole, the book's strength lies in its extensive provision of historical, archaeological, and background content. It also excels with a well-presented, picture-rich, and clutter-free format, giving it an edge over other Old Testament surveys. The breadth of historical details provided is more than sufficient for first-year seminary students, eliminating the need for additional references on background information. However, it is weaker compared to Hill and Walton and Arnold and Beyer in terms of hermeneutical and interpretive discussions.

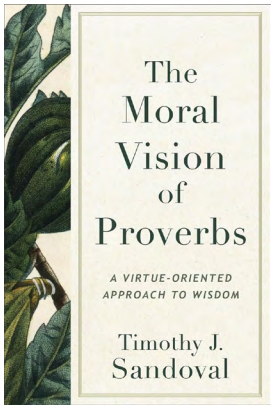
Although all three textbooks are written from an evangelical perspective, House and Mitchell typically adopt a more traditional position, though not unfairly. At the same time, House and Mitchell stand out in their decision to discuss books in the sequence of the Hebrew Bible rather than the Christian canon.

Compared to *Survey of Old Testament* and *Encountering the Old Testament*, House and Mitchell's book is more readable and slightly shorter in length, making it suitable for the reading load of a three-credit hour introductory Old Testament course. However, as an ecosystem of resources, Arnold and Beyer and Hill and Walton offer a wider spread of teaching/study resources, such as instructor manuals, presentation slides, sample syllabi, quizzes, and flashcards. House and Mitchell, nonetheless, is accompanied by an *Old Testament Survey Workbook* (by Archie England and Eric Mitchell [Nashville: B&H Academic: 2023]) that provides instructors with "a simple resource for structuring lessons, increasing student engagement, and assessing understanding," as described by the publisher.

In conclusion, I cannot outrightly replace Hill and Walton or Arnold and Beyer with House and Mitchell. Neither do I want to relegate *Old Testament Survey* simply to one among my bibliographic references. In my view, House and Mitchell can be part of the expanded textbook list and offered as an alternative option for students who require more readability. At the same time, instructors using other textbooks can supplement their content on history and archaeology with the material featured in House and Mitchell.

Peter C. W. Ho
Singapore Bible College
Republic of Singapore

Timothy J. Sandoval. *The Moral Vision of Proverbs. A Virtue-Oriented Approach to Wisdom*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024. xiv + 418 pp. £38.99/$49.99



This book is a welcome addition to the increasing literature on the moral dimensions of wisdom books. Sandoval has previously focused more narrowly on economic issues (*The Discourse on Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*, BIS 77 [Leiden: Brill, 2005]) but seeks in this volume to provide a fuller description of the moral thinking of Proverbs. It consists of two substantial parts: the case for seeing virtue ethics in Proverbs (chs. 1–9), and the implications of this for broader discussions (chs. 10–14).

The introduction carefully outlines the book's approach: to analyze Proverbs "in the light of and in terms of virtue-oriented moral discourse" (p. 16).

He offers some helpful insights into why the ethical teaching of the book of Proverbs has been marginalized (pp. 24–28) but argues that Proverbs, with its robust creation theology, should not be regarded as "the theological outlier in the biblical canon that some have thought it to be" (p. 29). He provides succinct outlines of utilitarian, deontological, and virtue ethical theories (pp. 32–38) yet finds that many of the analyses of the ethical teaching of Proverbs are quite ambiguously expressed (pp. 38–46). While Sandoval is trying to explain the current neglect, I suspect that many readers will want to lightly flip through this material.

Sandoval rightly suggests that the prologue is the hermeneutical key for reading the book as a whole (e.g., p. 53). He undertakes a careful study of Proverbs 1:2–7 and finds here an outline of intellectual (wisdom, insight), practical (shrewdness, prudence), and especially social virtues (righteousness, justice, and equity). However, he also proposes that we need to develop some figurative modes of interpretation (as suggested by v. 6) and shows how the prologue informs the cause-and-effect rhetoric in the book (pp. 59–67). His treatment of the book's anthropology explores what will lead to human flourishing, a very contemporary concern.

I found the most powerful chapter (ch. 4) argued for a focus on moral agents rather than actions. Here there is a very robust presentation of Proverbs' emphasis on character types rather than isolated actions. The motif of the two ways is also significant here, as it concentrates on our fundamental life directions rather than our individual decisions. The negative characters in the book also alert the reader to the priority of virtue ethics (pp. 89–98). The overall goal is to create "virtuous agents, traveling desirable paths" (p. 98).

In chapter 5, Sandoval insists that there is room for discipline in our desires for wealth, sexuality, honor, and health, for the virtuous life is contented rather than insatiable (Prov 30:15–16). The concern of Proverbs is "that the desires of people who follow the paths of the wise and just be rightly tutored and trained into a life of virtue" (p. 143). Chapter 6 explores the connection between ethical and intellectual virtues, engaging here more overtly with Aristotelian virtues. While I found this less interesting, it did offer some useful insights on various proverbial figures.

At a popular level, many in today's culture focus on the individual in the book of Proverbs. However, Proverbs makes it very clear that an individual cannot thrive apart from the community in which they are embedded. This is explored in detail in chapter 7, which highlights the importance of social virtues. Sandoval draws out the implications for social justice, with a focus on kindness to the poor, limiting strife, generosity, and friendship. Chapter 8 outlines the case for finding "practical wisdom" in Proverbs,

often evident in our speech (but sometimes in our silence), while chapter 9 describes the limitations of the idea (it does not always work and provides no clear moral exemplar), especially in relation to justice.

Part 2 has a more diverse range of topics, exploring "several key texts and interpretive questions in the light of part 1's claims" (p. 15). It includes a study of wisdom influence in Amos (or at least its intertextual connections with Proverbs). Chapters 11–12 argue in detail how the competing ideas of character and creation can be mediated by a notion of natural law (in a virtue ethic sense) in the cosmogony of Proverbs, followed by a worked example (Prov 8:22–31). I did not find the mythological reading of Proverbs 8, significantly dependent on the Amun tradition in Egypt, to be persuasive.

Chapters 13–14 rightly outline wisdom as a multi-faceted idea—whether as practical skill and know-how, as everyday shrewdness, as knowledge (or even esoteric understanding), or as morality. However, I am less convinced that the insights on practices from Alasdair MacIntyre help us in a major way. Sandoval argues that Proverbs was addressing young males in a position of privilege, and so some of its teachings should be reconsidered in our different context today (though he understands this in terms of trimming a few branches rather than chopping down the tree, p. 347).

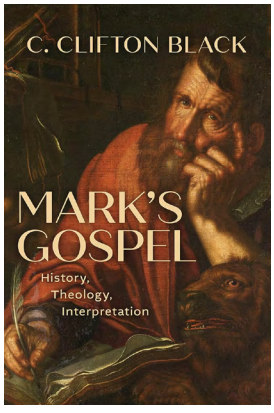
In the conclusion, Sandoval argues for a refining of Proverbs so that women, slaves, and the poor are able to fully thrive. He finds the picture of the woman of Proverbs 31 to be partially fruitful but needing revision for our current context. Many evangelical readers of this journal may have reservations about some of the positions Sandoval outlines in his conclusion, but that should not prevent us from learning much from this valuable book.

I appreciated the occasional use of non-Western scholars (e.g., pp. 11–13) and the less-Eurocentric term, "ancient West Asia" (e.g., pp. 239–40). I especially appreciated part 1 and found that the more he focused on the text, the more compelling was his argument. However, I would like to have seen the motif of the heart explored in more detail in the description of the moral agent. I confess that my interest waned when he concentrated on MacIntyre and Aristotelian scholarship. Indeed, I wondered if it might have been an even more useful book if it only consisted of part 1. Part 2 dealt with more esoteric or boutique matters, of less interest to most readers, and could have been published in journals. Yet, that is a minor matter. The focus on virtue ethics in the books constitutes a clear and necessary challenge to OT ethicists who view their discipline as primarily concerned with teaching about actions and goals. Room must be made for Proverbs' strong focus on the importance of character for OT ethics.

Lindsay Wilson
Ridley College
Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

– NEW TESTAMENT –

C. Clifton Black. *Mark's Gospel: History, Theology, Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023. xxiii + 534 pp. £45.00/$59.99.



A prolific scholar on Mark's Gospel, C. Clifton Black has assembled seventeen chapters of essays, articles, and blog posts previously published between 1988 and 2021, as well as a freshly written, thorough survey of the *status quaestionis*, "Markan Studies: Whence and Whither?" (pp. 134–73). After a brief, 34-page commentary on Mark's Gospel, Black divides this book into three parts: historical studies, theological studies, and homiletical studies. Since it would be impractical to summarize each essay of this wide-ranging anthology, this review focuses on the new essay, the capstone at the end of part 1, before critically appraising its contents and summarizing the book's overall value for different groups of potential readers.

In "Markan Studies: Whence and Whither?" Black reviews three decades of scholarly trends in studying Mark and offers suggestions as to where the study of Mark may go from here. Black identifies three areas of study that have proven especially fruitful: the investigation of Mark's genre, the application of memory studies to Mark's portrayal of Jesus, and the examination of Mark's relationship to the Roman empire. Black acknowledges that since the publication of Richard Burridge's *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), a scholarly consensus has emerged that Mark and the other canonical Gospels are examples of ancient biographies, but he avers that Mark also has affinities with other types of Hellenistic Jewish and Greco-Roman literature, and he warns his fellow scholars against having "a taxonomical fixation that diverts as much as it directs" (p. 141). Black similarly registers qualified agreement with those scholars who situate Mark within its Roman imperial context. By contrast, he is more skeptical of recent scholarship that affirms the historical reliability of Mark based on memory studies. To Black, the tendency of scholars who apply memory studies to Mark and the other Gospels to conflate the historical Jesus with the Christ of faith is "misguided" (p. 150).

Regarding the future of Markan studies, Black offers six suggested avenues of study. First, scholars may study the Greek style of Mark in light of recent developments in rhetorical criticism. Second, while some scholars have studied how the OT functions in Mark, no one has yet answered the question "whether Mark comprises a jumble of OT sources and themes or possesses a scriptural cohesion" (p. 166). Third, Mark's accounts of Jesus's miracles deserve closer scrutiny. Fourth, scholars may attempt to elucidate the relationship between Mark and other NT texts—though Black personally doubts how persuasive these arguments may prove. Fifth, the reception history of Mark from the second century through the Protestant Reformation needs to be unearthed. Finally, Black foresees various cultural lenses, such as "race, ethnicity, gender, sex, class, and the power dynamics that emerge—sometimes, erupt—at their intersection," to be prevalent features of Markan interpretation within the foreseeable future (p. 170).

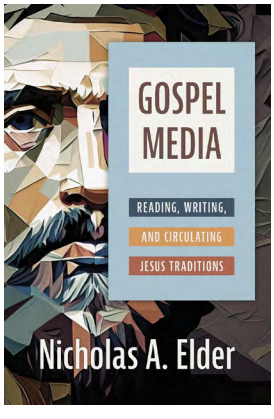
Black's stance in relation to this last trend raises what for many conservative evangelical readers will be an unwelcome aspect of tis book: its occasional denials of biblical inerrancy and more frequent use of critical methodologies that focus on exposing oppressive power dynamics at work within the

text and its contexts of interpretation. As a senior professor at Princeton Theological Seminary and an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church, he (unsurprisingly) directs his homiletical remarks in chapters 16–17 not only to qualified men but also to women. Perhaps more surprisingly, he briefly uses profanity in the transcript of his own homily (p. 425).

These reservations aside, this collection of essays is a welcome addition to Black's lengthy list of publications on the Gospel of Mark. The *status quaestionis* essay alone justifies the price of this book for Markan scholars. In addition, the inclusion of numerous chapters from otherwise hard-to-access, expensive edited volumes and the revision of at least three of the included essays make this a volume worthwhile of the consideration of NT scholars more broadly (see the acknowledgements on pp. 427–29). Pastors, too, will find numerous chapters helpful to them as they prepare to preach or teach Mark. The introduction consists of Black's 34-page, accessibly written commentary on Mark. Chapters 7, 8, and 10 contain theological reflections on Mark that are particularly relevant for pastoral ministry (pp. 177–210, 229–45). Finally, chapter 16 contains numerous blog posts on various passages in Mark that Black originally wrote for workingpreacher.org and which provide homiletical examples to other preachers (pp. 371–420). *Mark's Gospel: History, Theology, Interpretation* offers something for everyone working either in the academy or in the church.

Jordan Atkinson
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Kansas City, Missouri, USA

Nicholas A. Elder. *Gospel Media: Reading, Writing, and Circulating Jesus Traditions.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024. xvii + 326 pp. £38.99/$49.99.



Elder is Assistant Professor of New Testament at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary in Iowa. With this book, Elder provides a fascinating and penetrating account of the employment of media, as the title suggests, prior to and into the writing of the New Testament. The aim of the book, he writes, is to engage "the mechanics and sociality of reading, writing, and circulation in the canonical gospels' context" with the intention to argue that "the complexity of ancient media practices is reflected … [in] these written Jesus traditions" (p. 1). This emphasis on complexity stands in contrast to the tendency in NT scholarship to oversimplify these diverse phenomena; thus, part of his goal is to dispel myths that have accumulated around scholarship's understanding of media in the ancient world. A discussion of these myths frame each of the chapters.

Elder divides the book into three main parts, dealing with reading, writing, and circulation, respectively. Part 1, consisting of three chapters, walks the reader through silent and vocalized reading (ch. 1), solitary and communal reading (ch. 2), and how these reading practices inform our understanding of the Gospels (ch. 3). Part 2 (chs. 4–6) explores direct writing as distinguished from dictated writing, and, as in the first part, applies the author's findings to the Gospels. With part 3, Elder discusses the complexities of publication and circulation (ch. 7) before situating the gospels within this context (ch. 8). He then concludes the book with a summary of his findings.

In chapter 1, after marshaling evidence from a number of sources, such as a riddle in *The Learned Banqueters* (4th century BC) and Aristophanes's comedy, *Knights* (5th century BC), Elder corrects the myth that "reading was always or usually done aloud" (p. 7), arguing instead that silent reading was "not rare or extraordinary" (p. 25). Drawing from Pliny, among others, Elder argues in chapter 2, in contrast to the myth that reading events were primarily communal, that the evidence provides multiple examples of solitary reading and diverse functions for communal reading events, such as to field test an oration with a small, private group in order to make corrections. Applying ancient reading practices to the Gospels, he frames his discussion by refuting the myth that "each gospel was written to be experienced in the same way" (p. 79). Here, he makes the case that "each gospel is self-conscious about its textuality and its textual medium" (p. 79).

Turning to his discussion of writing, he argues that, while writing by hand was not the norm, "it was common and used to varying degrees and for varying purposes by varying authors" (p. 143). Moreover, he demonstrates that, while "personal missives" were handwritten (p. 147), there were four primary reasons why letters were dictated and thus written by a scribe: "busyness, convenience, health, and secrecy" (p. 148). With the discussion of circulation and publication, Elder makes the case that such activities were "social acts" which have parallels with modern practices (e.g., revising a blog post after publication). The diversity attending these activities is reflective, he contends, of diverse purposes.

This is a fascinating and insightful work. Elder draws on a vast array of literature contemporary to the NT to demonstrate that reading, writing, and circulation/publication practices were highly nuanced and diversified. As such, the study of such media is worthwhile as it illuminates the Gospel writings themselves. To begin with, he makes a compelling case that the Gospel of Mark was written to be received as proclamation since, he argues, it exhibits an "interplay between orality and textuality" (p. 173). Its purpose was not to be read, primarily, but to be orally delivered. Both the length of this Gospel and its dissemination in codex form point to this function of the Gospel.

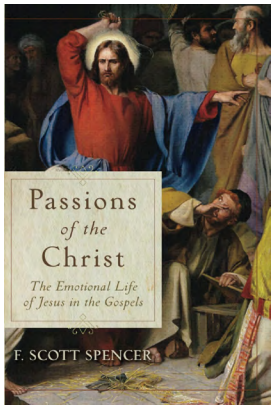
Whereas Mark served as a bridge between the oral tradition it textualized and later "textual instantiations" (e.g., Matthew), Matthew is distinct in that it presents itself as a book (p. 92), intended to be read in religious contexts. Luke, like Matthew, also displays a higher degree of literary sophistication, though written, Elder states, for its first reader, Theophilus. Thus, while Mark was not written for publication (but rather oral presentation), Matthew and Luke clearly were, and as such, they were circulating via a different media: a roll or "a bookroll" (p. 251). Intriguingly, while it is well-known that the Gospel of John stands out from the other gospels, its written features, the author demonstrates, further highlight this distinction as it both displays greater oral features than even Mark at points and "manifest[s] norms of written narrative" to larger degrees that Matthew and Luke at other times. As such, he writes, John "is a literary and media metamorphosis of antecedent [Gospels]" (p. 275).

In conclusion, this thoroughgoing analysis of the gospel media makes clear the value of such an investigation. While it pushes against the thesis that all four Gospels are, in the same way as each other, written for a universal rather than a particular audience, it does substantiate the effort and thought that was put into each of the gospel creations. By dispelling the myths regarding media, Elder gives the scholarly community and the serious reader a greater appreciation for additional layers of complexity

that attend the Gospels. This is essential reading for any serious student or scholar working with the Gospels.

Thomas Haviland-Pabst
Montreat College
Asheville, North Carolina, USA

F. Scott Spencer. *Passions of the Christ: The Emotional Life of Jesus in the Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021. xi + 304 pp. £24.99/$32.99.



Major works in modern philosophy and psychology, like Martha Nussbaum's *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and Richard Lazarus's *Emotion and Adaptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), have been instrumental in reviving the ancient view that emotions are rational, value-laden, and shaped by cultural context. When applied to narrative, this cognitive theory of emotion may bear fresh insights into the motivations, values, judgments, and goals of characters communicated through their emotions. Yet, while some recent dissertations and scholarly works have applied cognitive theory to biblical texts, little has been written that is more broadly accessible to students and laypersons. F. Scott Spencer's recent monograph, *Passions of the Christ: The Emotional Life of Jesus in the Gospels*, offers just such a helpful entry.

Spencer sets out to "examine [Jesus's] reported passions in light of 'normal' human experience as understood by ancient and modern emotion theorists and scientists" (p. 9). In part 1, Spencer provides a brief overview of the cognitive theory of emotion and considers the place of emotion within theology (i.e., the discussion regarding divine passibility or impassibility) and the problems it poses. Part 2 analyzes the negative emotions of Jesus, namely anger, anguish, and disgust, while part 3 focuses on Jesus's positive emotions, namely surprise, love, compassion, and joy.

In the book's theoretical section (chs. 1–2), Spencer first draws upon several contemporary psychologists and philosophers to provide a broad outline of the cognitive theory of emotion. Spencer then supports these claims with neurological studies that help to isolate the evaluative function of emotion in the human brain. In chapter 2, Spencer tackles the problem of divine passibility. He rejects the "limited passibility" (p. 24) of Aquinas and Rob Lister for fear that it risks "making God's absolute, autocratic will into an idol" (p. 25), arguing, rather, for a mutable and passible God. Many readers will likely find Spencer's treatment of the problems of divine passibility, change, and limited omniscience lacking. However, given its limited space, this section serves as an efficient overview of the relevant historical positions.

Each of the eight chapters of the book's exegesis portion is structured around a different emotion. Each chapter first dives deeper into modern emotion theory and relevant ancient texts to explain how a particular emotion functions and what it may signify. Next, Spencer analyzes select Gospel pericopes in which Jesus expresses or experiences that emotion, at times rounding out his exegesis with comparisons to Early Jewish and Greco-Roman literature. Finally, each chapter aims to determine what Jesus's emotional responses communicate in light of his values, context, and goals.

Spencer's treatment of Jesus's anger (ὀργισθεὶς) toward a leper in Mark 1:40–45 will serve to exemplify his approach (most manuscripts read σπλαγχνισθείςin v. 41). Spencer first draws upon Aristotle, Martha Nussbaum, and modern "appraisal theory" to establish that anger is a "confrontational emotion triggered by a demanding offense against the self or relevant others" (p. 47). Spencer concludes from this theoretical basis, and from indications of Jesus's aims elsewhere in Mark, that the leper's words entail "a slighting of Jesus's indomitable will to flourishing life" by questioning his "life-giving purpose" (p. 52). Spencer goes on to address other episodes of Jesus's anger in a similar fashion, at times drawing upon the OT prophets for parallels.

Part 2 continues with chapters 4–5, both of which deal with episodes of Jesus's grief. Chapter 6 analyzes episodes of disgust. Part 3 focuses on Jesus's positive emotions. Chapter 7 examines instances of surprise. Chapter 8 looks at Jesus's love and compassion in "pastoral ministry," while chapter 9 deals with the same emotion but in the context of discipleship. The final chapter examines passages that feature the joy of Jesus. Spencer concludes the study with a brief epilogue.

While the ambitious scope of the project too often necessitates brevity in discussions that need a fuller treatment, one must commend Spencer for the efficiency with which he handles his complex and demanding subject matter. The book covers a great deal of theoretical and textual ground but treats theories and texts with enough attention to make (mostly) compelling arguments. Spencer's writing is accessible and fluid. The reader is often rewarded with intellectually refreshing and pastorally fruitful readings of challenging Gospel stories.

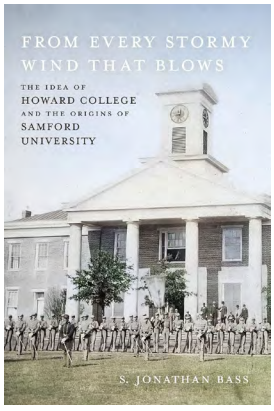
The book is not without problems. Spencer does little to bridge the gap between the emotion theories he draws upon and the Gospel authors and their audiences. One cannot assume that the evangelists and their readers were acquainted with Aristotle and the Stoics. Yet, Spencer does not provide a method for determining whether a biblical author is working with any particular understanding of emotion in a given pericope. Perhaps related to this methodological lacuna, Spencer at times drifts into anachronism. For example, Spencer offers (sometimes rather flippant) criticisms of Jesus for not satisfying modern, Western expectations for interpersonal engagement, as in his readings of Mark 9:14–29 (especially p. 201) and Mark 7:24–30 (especially pp. 137–139).

The Passions of the Christ is an excellent study for pastors, laypeople, and counselors looking for fresh insights into Jesus's emotions in the Gospels. The book is also ideal for graduate students looking for a novice-friendly introduction to emotion theory in NT studies.

Matthew K. Robinson
University of Oxford
Oxford, Oxfordshire, UK

– HISTORY AND HISTORICAL THEOLOGY –

S. Jonathan Bass. *From Every Stormy Wind That Blows: The Idea of Howard College and the Origins of Samford University*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2024. 398 pp. £42.94/$50.00.



S. Jonathan Bass is the university historian at Samford University in Birmingham. His *Blessed are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King, Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the "Letter from Birmingham Jail"* (also published with LSU Press) was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Therefore, on one hand, a book on the origins of Samford University seems fitting for a historian recognized for his work on Alabama history, Civil Rights, and the Jim Crow South. On the other hand, Bass's latest work, *From Every Stormy Wind That Blows*, encompasses far more than Southern history. Any Baptist historian will be surprised to find just how many names are familiar—and unfamiliar—in Bass's extensive cast of characters. For example, Basil Manly, one of the founders of the Southern Baptist Convention, plays an interesting role in the book, as he was considered a "mighty magnet" during his presidency at the University of Alabama, drawing Baptist boys *away* from Howard College, a Baptist school (p. 66). The story of Howard College was an arduous (and often unsuccessful) quest to galvanize the Baptist churches of Alabama to support an institution designed to educate and improve the lives of their own people. Taking the reader on a journey through nineteenth-century America, Bass tells this story well.

Bass grounds the religious beginnings of Howard College in the Second Great Awakening, identifying the school as a nexus of three strains of revivalism: Timothy Dwight at Yale, the western camp meetings of Cane Ridge, and the revivalism of Charles Finney in the "Burned Over District" (p. 2). This is the sort of religious history you would not necessarily expect from a Civil Rights historian. Bass locates these revivalist influences in the founders of the school, each bringing their own unique flavor to Howard College (named after the English reformer John Howard, who embodied an enlightened Christian model of education). Ultimately, for Bass, the "idea" of Howard College was its emphasis upon the virtue and character of its students, "to liberate young men from the corrupting influences of frontier rowdyism, plantation hedonism, and cultural secularism and transform them into useful and enlightened Christian citizens" (p. 5).

Taking the reader on a ride from the frontier South to the Old South to the New South, Bass begins by showing how agrarian Baptists of the Black Belt attempted to save and sanctify the unsavory cotton and slave speculators of the Alabama frontier. From temperance to Sabbath schools (ch. 1), to a classical school (ch. 2), to literary societies (ch. 3), Howard established itself upon "a Common Sense liberal arts curriculum rooted in the classics and the Bible" (p. 42). When revivals broke out, as one did in 1850, "most Howard students professed Christianity and participated in prayer meetings to fan the flames of revival fires" (p. 51). In the antebellum period, Howard was firmly rooted in its revivalist context.

The middle chapters of the book cover the financial strain caused by the Civil War and the revolving door of presidents who helped steer the school in its wake. Howard was indelibly shaped by the war of secession. Presidents went off to serve for the Confederacy. During Reconstruction, others sought to mold the school into a military academy where cadets wore "soldier like" uniforms modeled after the Confederate gray (p. 124). Students gave orations on the military genius of Stonewall Jackson. At one

point, the Howard banner was even a version of the Confederate flag. In the black, fertile soil of Marion, Alabama, the myth of the Lost Cause grew abundantly.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the book is Bass's ability to demonstrate the tensions that existed in Alabama through the middle and end of the nineteenth century and how this led to agonizing fundraising endeavors in a divided state. Just as the nation itself was divided, so was the South, and so were the Baptists themselves. "Many churchgoers, especially in North Alabama, viewed Howard as a school of the planter-dominated Black Belt or simply Marion's college and not a denominational school for all Alabama Baptists" (p. 121). In addition to regional prejudices, which had already been encountered by a host of Southern Baptist educators, especially those in South Carolina, Alabama also presented socioeconomic challenges and political rivalries. Bass brings these out well in the book. There were southern aristocrats and hill country commoners. There were Greenback Labor partisans and Bourbon Democrats. Alabama was, in effect, a microcosm of the Reconstruction South.

Most important to the fundraising efforts of the college, the state was also divided between the Old South culture of Black Belt towns like Marion and the New South ambitions of industrial cities like Birmingham. Beginning in chapter 11, Bass chronicles how the fundraising woes of the school eventually factored into its transition to Birmingham. As a "live, stirring city" filled with New South boosterism and industrial wealth, Birmingham presented an optimistic future for the school. "It was no coincidence that these forces supporting the relocation of Howard College jumped into the fray as soon as the Alabama Baptist State Convention received sole ownership of the institution" (p. 156). In this sense, the religious dynamics of the school were a critical piece in Howard's eventual growth (although, as Bass shows, Birmingham did not solve Howard's problems overnight).

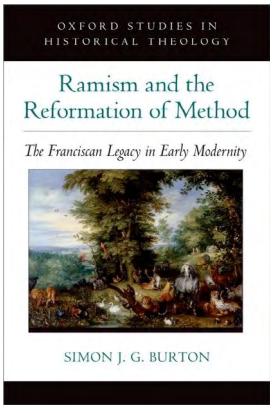
Bass's book is about more than the history of one school. It is also about the transformation of the American South and the nation at large. When Howard looked to new beginnings, it embodied a new worldview in the Southern mind. "Gone were the old rural values built upon cotton agriculture, plantation paternalism, and slave labor; these were replaced with industrialization, urbanization, and individualism" (p. 173). For many Americans today, the city of Birmingham embodies an older version of the South. However, as Bass shows, there was a time not so long ago when Birmingham represented the *newer* South.

Although his references to the North are relatively scarce, and the book could have benefited from a broader view of the American landscape, Bass does note President Benjamin L. Riley's attempt to forge an alliance with John D. Rockefeller's University of Chicago in 1893 (pp. 257–58). Indeed, it should not be overlooked that Baptists *everywhere* were pioneering new ways to educate their people and the world. And this is one of the most valuable insights in the book: in the nineteenth century, establishing and sustaining educational institutions was a messy, thankless, inglorious business and required an enormous amount of sacrifice and hard work from men and women who often did not see much reward for their efforts aside from the comfort of knowing that they were doing the Lord's will. Bass shows how the fluid, unpredictable nature of higher education is but a reflection of the nation itself. In so doing, the author tells the story of the American South at both the micro and macro levels. Every crop failure, every change in trustee leadership, and every racist act on the sidewalk of a small Alabama town could

spell imminent disaster for a fledgling Baptist school. However, through many trials and tribulations (and trustees), Howard College (now Samford) endured.

Obbie Tyler Todd
Third Baptist Church of Marion
Marion, Illinois, USA

Simon J. G. Burton. *Ramism and the Reformation of Method: The Franciscan Legacy in Early Modernity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. 412 pp. £76.61/$120.00.



The past several decades have enjoyed a resurgence of interest in early modern Reformed scholasticism and theological method, not least due to the work of Richard Muller. Historical scholars and lay readers alike have come to appreciate something of the breadth of the early modern Reformed tradition. Most educated readers now rightly reject the 'Calvin and the Calvinists' thesis, which erroneously contended that the post-Reformation use of scholastic method in theology represented a corrupting of the Reformation's legacy. In fact, Reformed scholasticism represented the maturation of the Reformation, enabling the sophisticated and precise expression of Protestant thought fit for academic instruction and polemical engagement with Protestantism's learned Roman Catholic opponents. Yet this important correction of older scholarly opinion has proven so persuasive that it has led to over-simplifications of its own. For example, it has become virtually axiomatic in discussions of early modern Reformed theology that one must sharply distinguish between form and content, (scholastic) method and (Reformed) theology. Of course, as has often been observed, form and content are not so neatly separable, the form of one's theological formulation having far-reaching effects on the scope, interests, and character of one's theology. Moreover, Simon Burton's superb new study demonstrates that the early modern period knew many intellectuals who sought not only to reform the material content of theology but also belonged to a long tradition of Augustinian and Franciscan Christian Philosophy, which sought to reform method itself.

Burton's study focuses on the philosophy of controversial French pedagogical reformer Peter Ramus (1515–1572), seeking to locate Ramus's thought in its intellectual context and to trace its early modern reception. The introduction alone repays close reading, presenting Ramism as the convergence of the four great intellectual streams of Augustinian and Franciscan Platonism, Lullism, Christian Humanism, and Reformed Scholasticism. Ramism embraced the Augustinian combination of *realism* (real universals), *exemplarism* ('reality mirrors and participates in the divine reality of God himself'), and *illuminationism* (the manifestation of divine light in creation which radiates truth to human minds) (pp. 3, 7). A fundamental aspect of Burton's framing is the contrast between the Augustinian Christian Philosophy of Franciscans like Bonaventure—which sought to harmonise theology, philosophy, and method—and the Christian Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas, which, for all its Augustinian and Platonist influence, 'sharply demarcated philosophy from theology' and 'showed little appetite for a scriptural encyclopaedism or logic' (p. 9). Thus, while scholastics distinguished method from theology, a competing Augustinian and Franciscan tradition of Christian Philosophy (notably exemplified by Ramism) viewed them as inextricably intertwined. Burton's work illuminates Ramus's ambitious attempt

to reform method in accord with the divine dialectical nature of reality, along with how his legacy was variously transformed by his intellectual heirs.

The first two chapters focus on Ramus himself. Chapter 1 addresses the nature of Ramus's dialectic (logic). Ramist method has long been best known for its famous branching diagrams, dividing subject matter into their constituent parts. Where many scholars have treated Ramus's method as superficially pragmatic, Burton persuasively argues that Ramus's dialectical method had Neoplatonic metaphysical underpinnings, an understanding which Ramus sustained throughout his career's work. Ramism was no mere technique for arranging content, as it is often regarded. For Ramus, it represented the one true method of all learned discourse, mirroring the realist structure of things in themselves and thus replacing Aristotelian metaphysics as the science of being *qua* being. Burton's argument for Ramism's realism is bolstered by his highlighting the interconnections between the dialectical, mathematic, and mystical currents in Ramus's outlook, its continuities with Fabrist and Cusan thought, and Ramus's participation in an Augustinian and Franciscan tradition of Platonic Christian Philosophy. Chapter 2 examines Ramus's ambitious pedagogical reform program, which sought to apply his dialectic to the reform of academic knowledge and, by this means, to the reform of society.

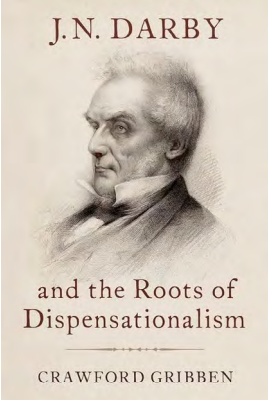
The remaining seven chapters trace the development, modification, and integration of Ramism into subsequent approaches to method, constituting a variegated but continuous tradition of Christian Philosophy. This tradition ran parallel to and often overlapped with the tradition of Reformed scholasticism mapped out by Muller. Successive chapters treat the Philippo-Ramist syntheses of the Herborn theologians Caspar Olevian (1536–1587) and Johannes Piscator (1546–1625), the Cambridge Ramism of Alexander Richardson (d.1621) and William Ames (1576–1633), and the synthetic trinitarian and Bonaventurian methods of Amandus Polanus (1561–1610) and Stephanus Szegedinus (1515–1572). The book concludes with dedicated chapters on the approaches of four intellectual giants, treating the 'methodical Peripateticism and encyclopaedism' of Bartholomäus Keckermann (c.1572–1609), the trinitarian and apocalyptic encyclopaedism of Johann Heinrich Alsted (1588–1638), the trinitarian universal reformist vision of Johann Heinrich Bisterfeld (1605–1655), and the pansophic philosophy of Jan Amos Comenius (1592–1670). These figures emerge as bound together by the broad Platonist dynamics of their thought, their pursuit of exemplarist, trinitarian, participationist, and scripturalist approaches to logic, method, and metaphysics, and an orientation toward the encyclopedic encapsulation of all knowledge conceived as the recovery of Edenic knowledge of God and creation.

Burton's dense and erudite work promises to have transformative significance for the study of early modern Reformed theological method. Where scholars have primarily focused on Reformed continuities with Aristotelian, scholastic, and Thomist traditions, Burton highlights the understudied but perversive influence of Platonic, Franciscan, Bonaventurian, and Scotist streams of thought, especially as embodied in Ramism. This should facilitate more nuanced discussions of notions like 'Reformed Thomism', 'Reformed scholasticism', and 'Christian Platonism', which are often discussed rather simplistically. For example, Burton's work complicates Craig Carter's influential advocacy of the 'Christian Platonism' central to Christianity's 'great tradition'. He demonstrates Platonism's variegated reception and highlights how prominent figures that Carter marginalizes from his account of this tradition (Bonaventure, Scotus) exhibited a more thoroughgoing Christian Platonism than those Carter places at its center (Aquinas). Burton's volume also assists scholars in distinguishing Ramist approaches to Reformed theology from broader patterns of Reformed scholasticism.

Burton's study achieves its goals admirably while opening up vast avenues for future research. Much work remains to be done, for example, on Ramus's thought and its reception among the puritans of England and New England. The influence of Bonaventure and Scotus on Reformed thought requires far greater scholarly attention. More broadly, the Augustinian notion of 'Christian Philosophy'—contrasted with more Thomistic and scholastic approaches—warrants further development and exploration. No student of early modern Reformed theology can afford to neglect this important work.

Matthew N. Payne
University of Sydney
Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

Crawford Gribben. *J. N. Darby and the Roots of Dispensationalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. 240 pp. £25.99/$39.95.



Crawford Gribben's volume both distills his past research into Christian apocalyptic movements and adds intense documentary research into the career of Darby (1800–1882). It is a superb volume. While entitled *J. N. Darby and the Roots of Dispensationalism,* it is best understood as an intellectual and theological biography of this oft-named but inadequately understood Christian leader of the nineteenth century. The great strength of the volume is its emphasis on context.

Since at least 1937, church historians have been drawing attention to the overlapping circles of Protestant radicals that emerged in late Georgian and early Victorian Britain. 1937 was the year of the publication of A. L. Drummond's *Edward Irving and His Circle.* Such overlapping relationships were highlighted again in Ernest Sandeen's *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millennialism, 1800–1830* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970). One observes the same pattern (now extending into Francophone Europe) in Timothy Stunt's *From Awakening to Secession: Religious Radicals in Switzerland and Britain, 1815–1835* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), as well as in Grayson Carter's *Anglican Evangelicals: Protestant Secessions from the Church of England c.1800–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Persons like Darby, who were caught up in such movements, were most often figures (ordained and lay) from within the national Protestant churches of England, Ireland, and Scotland. Consistent with their positions of privilege, they were people un-nerved by the upheavals set in motion by the French Revolution. Well beyond France, that revolution served to accelerate the expansion of popular democracy and the removal of former religious discrimination. Legislation granting religious Dissenters (Catholic and Protestant) full political rights served to weaken the favored status of the state churches; such legislation provided a voice in government for persons conscientiously opposed to those churches. While Catholics and Protestants *outside* the state churches were delighted to see such changes, such undermining of the long-established social and religious order helped to foster a whole range of movements that shared an aspiration to recover more stable and more authentic forms of Christianity. We now recognize these aspirations to have been influenced by the circulation of Romantic notions concerning the distant past.

Tendencies as diverse as the Catholic Apostolic Church, the Oxford (or Tractarian) Movement, the Plymouth Brethren, the "Western Schism" from the Church of England, and a strident futurist premillennialism all emerged in these early decades of the nineteenth century. Darby would have "rubbed shoulders" with a surprising number of principal characters in these movements, all who shared similar concerns but were on their way to distinct destinations: John Henry Newman, Francis Newman, Edward Irving, Henry Drummond, Henry Bulteel, Robert Hawker, and others.

Darby was born in Ireland to a landed family of considerable means. He lacked interest in Christ and the gospel until his adult life. Having gained a degree in Classics (with distinction), he left a career in law to seek ordination in the Church of Ireland (i.e., the Church of England in Ireland). Having secured ordination, he carried out pastoral ministry for several years while still without a living faith. It was only while convalescing from injury that he came to exchange this merely formal Christianity for a personal faith and intensity of conviction. All this was happening just as the character of the established Church of Ireland (Protestant) was being altered under the democratic reforms intended by the British Parliament to end the disabilities of Roman Catholics and non-Anglican Protestants. Irish Roman Catholics would now be seated in the London House of Commons. Not only Darby, but also many other social conservatives found these changes ominous; it was easy to view such events as a portent of social revolution and an intimation of the approaching end of the world.

Without ever formally terminating his relationship with the Church of Ireland, the whole balance of Darby's life and career was spent pursuing an alternative to the weakened national church, which now appeared to have only as many liberties as the British state should grant it. Other Christians sharing Darby's privileged social standing and anxieties found different alternatives to his. Both in Dublin and in southwest England, Darby was, from this point onward, always in the company of the Plymouth Brethren, a constituency top-heavy with university-educated, comfortably wealthy, and highly literate people. Darby did not originally tower over this movement. But after the movement divided into Open (pragmatic) and Exclusive (more tightly-knit) factions, he became the leading voice and author of the latter group. We read that, in all, he wrote at least nineteen million words. He became the self-appointed emissary of the Exclusive Brethren in Francophone Europe, Germany, the Netherlands, the Caribbean, and North America.

Self-consciously working from a broadly Reformed theological position and freed from any confessional boundaries, Darby displayed both maverick-like convictions (sometimes reversing himself) and a readiness to pick and choose from elements of historic orthodoxy. For example, he affirmed the passive but not the active obedience of Christ. The eventual editors of Darby's collected writings showed a penchant for smoothing out such vacillations and developments, revising early writings in the light of those that came later.

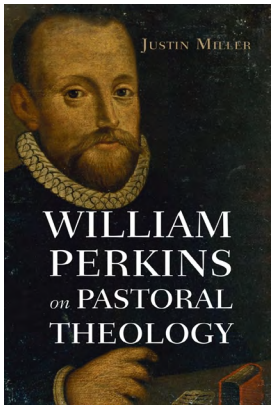
The Brethren movement, in all its manifestations, did not conceive of itself as a church or of its local assemblies as churches. Darby and his followers upheld the view that the church, historically considered, had "fallen" soon after Apostolic times. Its early nineteenth-century disarray was only confirmation of that fall. The Protestant denominations of Britain looked askance at the Brethren for this reason, supposing (with some justification) that this movement preached the ruin of long-established denominations with a view to proselytizing their members. The Evangelical Alliance, at its 1846 founding, named "Darbyism" as one of the current pronounced threats facing Protestant evangelicalism. Charles Spurgeon drew attention to the movement's weak conception of the ministry.

This strained relationship notwithstanding, Darby was noted by non-Brethren Protestants on both sides of the Atlantic. Presbyterian Robert Dabney of Virginia reviewed his writings with measured approval. Though he was no friend to Higher-Life teaching or the Keswick Movement, some of Darby's teachings influenced both. Gribben aptly describes Darby as promoting a "laundered charismaticism." Alarmed at America's frayed moral fabric, post-Civil War evangelical Protestants abandoned their earlier optimistic postmillennialism in favor of the more pessimistic premillennialism promoted by Darby both in his writings and North American visits. He certainly influenced D. L. Moody and the Niagara Bible Conferences. Gribben also finds evidence that some of Darby's emphases were taken up in the writings of theologian John Murray (d. 1975) and London preacher D. M. Lloyd Jones (d. 1981).

Though Darby freely utilized the terminology of "dispensations," he neither coined the terminology nor developed the framework for understanding the history of redemption, which has gone by the name Dispensationalism. That development may be attributed supremely to C. I. Scofield (d. 1921) and the study Bible he produced with an editorial team in 1909. The North American aspect of this story has recently been explored by Daniel Hummel in *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023). Gribben, justifiably concentrating on the intellectual and theological development of Darby himself, has shown us that this somewhat angular and domineering Christian leader of the nineteenth century has been under-recognized for his vast literary and theological influence. If not the father of dispensationalism, he may justly be considered its grandfather. He was assuredly among the architects of the future fundamentalist movement.

Kenneth J. Stewart
Covenant College
Lookout Mountain, Georgia, USA

Justin Miller. *William Perkins on Pastoral Theology*. Eugene, OR: Resource, 2023. 106 pp. £13.00/$16.00.



William Perkins (1558–1602) was arguably the most popular Protestant author and pastor in Elizabethan England. By the early 1600s, within England, his works outsold those of John Calvin, Theodore Beza, and Heinrich Bullinger combined. Perkins became the first Protestant divine from England to have a widespread continental reception. His works heavily influenced the New World. But by the mid-1800s, he fell into relative obscurity. Since the 1950s, however, the study of Perkins has experienced a renaissance. Scholarship on Perkins has tended to focus on a few topics like the conscience, covenant theology, predestination, preaching, and, to a lesser extent, demonology, the family, assurance, and Ramism. In part, because Perkins never wrote a tract specifically on ecclesiology, academics have devoted relatively little time to Perkins's views on either the church or the sacraments. To be sure, some academics like David Barbee, Bryan Spinks, and Donald John MacLean have discussed these topics. However, Justin Miller's *William Perkins on Pastoral Theology*—particularly chapters 2–5—provides a helpful elucidation of Perkins's understanding of the church and the sacraments.

Miller's book unfolds in eight chapters. The opening chapter proffers a brief discussion of Perkins's life (pp. 2–6) followed by a consideration of Perkins's use of the church fathers (pp. 6–10), which seeks to encourage today's Christians to rediscover the fathers. Chapter 2 explores "Perkins's view of the

local church." While the term "local church" is somewhat anachronistic for Perkins and blurs the way he often thought of the Church of England as a single church, Miller nonetheless highlights important parts of Perkins's thinking, such as the marks of a church (p. 19), the regulative principle (p. 23), the Christian Sabbath (p. 26), and church membership (p. 27). Chapters 3–5 discuss Perkins's views on the sacraments. Chapter 6 explores Perkins's thoughts on pastoral ministry. Chapter 7 traces Perkins's discussion of preaching. Chapter 8 concludes the book by comparing parts of Perkins's thought with that of Jonathan Edwards and John Owen.

Miller's work is a version of his DMin dissertation. Miller is not as concerned with engaging in academic debates as with edifying local churches through "historical theology for God's glory and the church's good" (p. 11). He puts Perkins into conversation with recent authors like Albert Martin (pp. 61, 86) and Martyn Lloyd-Jones (pp. 64, 79, 93). Miller's work is a type of retrieval that seeks to guide and exhort today's pastors. In other words, he is making a positive theological argument rather than offering abstract historical observations about Perkins and late Elizabethan England.

While Miller's book has many commendable points, I want to highlight three. First, the book explores a relatively understudied topic. Chapter 2, in particular, covers ground that is not widely discussed by others. Second, the work accurately captures the broad strokes of Perkins's thought. As Perkins's corpus runs more than two million words, the presence of a roughly 100-page book on a topic is valuable. I should note that the brevity of Miller's work means that he must, by necessity, oversimplify parts of Perkins's thought (e.g., the marks of a church on p. 19). Nonetheless, pastors who want to know what Perkins thought on pastoral theology without reading two million words will find a faithful guide in Miller. Third, the book is relevant and applicable to today's Protestant pastors. Miller does a good job connecting Perkins's thought to the underlying pastoral issues facing ministers today. To be sure, there is much more in Perkins's thought that Miller—if he had written a longer book—could have discussed. For instance, Perkins spoke at length about the dangers of false conversion and the importance of excommunication.

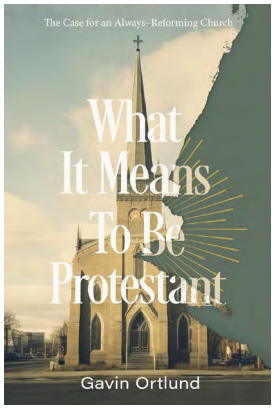
Given that this this is an academic review of a book that originated as a dissertation, I offer two observations before concluding. I should add that these two points do not detract from the usefulness of Miller's work for today's pastors. First, the book largely sidesteps important scholarship on Perkins and his period. For instance, before spending a few pages discussing "the church fathers and Perkins" (pp. 6–10), Miller observes, "I do not intend to exhaust this topic, as it would be a dissertation of its own *and a worthy one*" (p. 6, emphasis original). An important academic already wrote such a dissertation: David Barbee, "A Reformed Catholike: William Perkins' Use of the Church Fathers" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2013). Further, Ian Breward, Coleman Ford, and Ann-Stephane Schäfer have authored detailed discussions on this topic—none of which appear in Miller's book.

Second, the book generally avoids historically contextualizing Perkins. In particular, Miller's work omits a number of factors that influenced Perkins's thinking on the church. For instance, Elizabeth and members of her ecclesiastical hierarchy, like John Whitgift and Richard Bancroft, exerted substantial energy to quell the Puritan movement, which sought, in part, to make changes to English ecclesiastical life. Likewise, Perkins wrote within the context of threats from Separatists like Robert Browne, Henry Barrow, John Greenwood, and Francis Johnson. Further, ecclesiastical and political opposition from Roman Catholicism influenced Perkins's ecclesiastical thinking. When readers see Perkins's thought on the church through these three lenses, his thinking comes into clearer focus.

Nonetheless, for pastors and interested laymen who want to understand parts of the pastoral theology of Elizabethan England's foremost divine, I recommend this book. Pastors who want to retrieve parts of Perkins's pastoral theology for their ministry today will benefit from Miller's writing.

Eric Beach
University of Oxford
Oxford, England, United Kingdom

Gavin Ortlund. *What It Means to Be Protestant.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2024. 261 pp. £11.28/$22.99.



Gavin Ortlund's *What It Means to Be Protestant* promises, impressively, to be both timely and timeless. It is timely because Ortlund has put his finger on what seems to be a growing trend of ecclesial angst for many. One of the surprising blessings of our disenchanted and rootless age is that the instability of our culture is forcing not a few tired souls to ask big questions about meaning and ultimate reality. Burnt out on modernism, there seems to be a growing trend of what Justin Brierley has called a *Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God* (Carol Stream: Tyndale Elevate, 2023). Given that those reconsidering Christianity today are exhausted by our late-modern world, they are not likely to find solace in a brand of Christianity that looks as old as yesterday's secular trends. We ought not be surprised, therefore, by the phenomenon of evangelicals leaving seeker-sensitive low-church settings and converting to Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy (see W. Bradford Littlejohn and Chris Castaldo, *Why Do Protestants Convert?* [Landrum, SC: Davenant, 2023]). Far from being a deterrent from seekers and uneasy evangelicals today, the ancient flavor, mysterious and otherworldly liturgies and rituals, and apparent historical pedigree of these traditions are some of their strongest selling points.

Ortlund's work is timely because he has a pulse on the exact kinds of questions and concerns that animate so many today. Contrary to popular opinion, the book shows how Protestantism offers just as rich, ancient, and liturgically satisfying a home as these other traditions. But *What It Means to Be Protestant* is also poised to remain timeless because it represents a necessary and surprisingly underrepresented book category. This book is not *strictly* a polemic against Christianity's other major ecclesial traditions, nor is it *strictly* an apologetic for the Protestant Reformation and ongoing "protest" (though Ortlund includes these elements). It also offers a clear and straightforward definition of what mere Protestantism is in itself. On this point, Ortlund is transparent from the very beginning: "In sum, I commend Protestantism as first, a renewal of the gospel in the church; second, a return to the authority of Scripture; and third, a removal of historical aberrations" (p. xx). In this way, *What It Means to Be Protestant* is not only a critique of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy but also a positive and catholic vision of Christianity, with Protestantism held up and defended as a faithful expression thereof.

Structurally, Ortlund's book is divided into three distinct sections. Part 1, "Protestantism and Catholicism," is dedicated to a definition of Protestantism *in se.* Ortlund contends in these chapters that Protestantism is a renewal movement *within* the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, and therefore lays claim to the entire Christian tradition as its heritage. Against the charges of sectarianism brought against it, Ortlund argues here that Protestantism is poised to be *more* catholic than its rival

traditions since Protestantism defines the Church along confessional and spiritual lines rather than institutional lines. The conscience-binding tendency of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, who definitionally anathematize those outside of their narrow *institutional* borders, is not, according to Ortlund, in the spirit of catholicity. Ortlund also shows in this section that Protestant distinctives like *sola fide* do not originate *ex nihilo* in the 16th century but rather lay claim to ancient precedent.

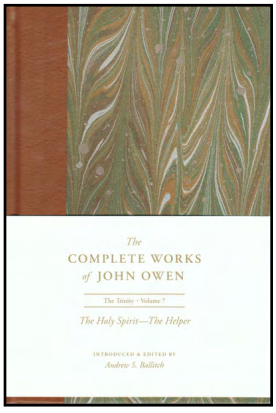
Part 2, "Protestantism and Authority," develops a case for and defense of what is arguably the most distinctive mark of Protestantism: *sola scriptura*. In these chapters (5–8), Ortlund pulls together a wide range of scholarship to cogently and accessibly defend *sola scripture,* as well as answer its common objections. Since this doctrine is one of Protestantism's most misunderstood and misrepresented beliefs (by both Protestants and non-Protestants), this section alone is worth the price of the book. *Sola scriptura*, Ortlund shows, is not a rejection of all other authorities but rather a refusal to attribute *infallibility* to any authority but Holy Scripture. This framework is set in stark relief against competing authority frameworks, represented by the Papacy and Apostolic Succession (as defined and defended by Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy).

Part 3, "Protestantism and History," takes up John Henry Newman's famous quip: "To be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant." Ortlund begs to differ with Cardinal Newman on this point. He defends Protestantism as a product of *historical retrieval at its core.* In the spirit of John Calvin in his famous letter to Cardinal Jacopo Sadoleto, Ortlund shows how the Protestant Reformers were *deeper in history* than their Roman and Constantinopolitan counterparts. In defense of this position, Ortlund concludes his study with two case studies—Mary's Assumption and Icon Veneration—to demonstrate how some of the distinctive dogma of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy prove their failure to be sufficiently deep in history. Though these beliefs have a relatively long historical pedigree, Ortlund shows how they originated on spurious historical grounds.

Ortlund is to be commended for writing such an irenic yet clear-throated definition and defense of Protestantism. He has done us all a great service by helping to dispel the false dilemma of either embracing Protestant doctrine or being historically rooted and catholically minded. Throughout the book, Ortlund's warm pastoral heart is never difficult to discern, rendering the vision he paints of Protestantism not only intellectually satisfying but also *desirable*. I cannot commend this book highly enough.

Samuel Parkison
Gulf Theological Seminary
Abu Dhabi, UAE

John Owen. *The Holy Spirit: The Helper*. Edited by Andrew S. Ballitch. The Complete Works of John Owen 7. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023. x + 369 pp. £36.99/$39.99.



At present, John Owen (1616–1683) is undergoing a resurgence of popularity in the academy and the Church. At one time, historians and theologians lamented that his life and theology were disregarded or completely ignored. However, this has all changed. In our day, Owen is commonly referred to as the "Prince of the English Divines," "the Calvin of England," or the "Prince of the Puritans." His exegetical, theological, polemical, spiritual, and practical proficiency remains worthy of a close and careful reading.

This edition has been produced in response to a growing number of scholars interested in Owen, beginning with Peter Toon, Sarah Cook, Sinclair Ferguson, Christopher Hill, Richard Muller, Carl Trueman, Alan Spence, Christopher Cleveland, Ryan McGraw, Edwin E. M. Tay, Andrew Leslie, Tim Cooper, Crawford Gribben, Marty Cowan, and John Tweeddale. Further, the four-volume work of Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics,* and William van Asselt's *Protestant Scholasticism* has led to a resurgence of interest in Reformed scholasticism of which Owen was a part. Moreover, the volumes of scholarly contributions from editors Kelly Kapic and Mark Jones, *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Kelly Kapic and Willem van Vlastuin, eds., *John Owen between Orthodoxy and Modernism*, Studies in Reformed Theology 39 (Leiden: Brill, 2021); and Crawford Gribben and John Tweedale, eds., *T&T Handbook of John Owen*, T&T Clark Handbooks (New York: T&T Clark, 2022) warranted this publication.

This renaissance of Owen Studies has been captured by the Crossway edition of the *Complete Works of John Owen*. This forty-volume project is edited by two reputable scholars, Lee Gatiss and Shawn Wright, who have recruited world-class academics to participate in the production of this edition. This handsomely bound installment of his works is a welcome addition to Owen scholarship. Volume 7 contains two treatises, *The Reason of Faith* (1677) and *The Cause, Way, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God* (1678). They are an elaboration of Owen's doctrine of Scripture. The two discourses are complementary and can be summarized in the following: the Holy Spirit alone enables a person to believe that the Scripture is truly God's Word, and the Spirit alone illuminates the mind of the regenerate so this person can understand the mind and will of God.

As to the arrangement of volume 7, Gatiss and Wright give a "Works Preface" to the entire set discussing the publication history of Owen's writings (pp. vii–x). In 1721, one "uniform edition" of Owen was published, but this proved "abortive." In 1826, the Thomas Russell edition included twenty-one volumes. Finally, in 1850, William H. Goold produced twenty-four volumes, which is the most well-known edition. This edition was reprinted by Banner of Truth beginning in 1965, with Owen's Hebrews commentaries appearing in 1991. The new Crossway version appears warranted because the "appetite for Owen" has grown (p. vii). Gatiss and Wright have concluded the older editions (Russell and Goold) "fail to meet the needs of modern readers who are often familiar with neither the theological context nor the syntax and rhetorical style of seventeenth-century English divinity" (p. viii).

The editor's introduction by Andrew Ballitch (pp. 1–70) contains a biography of Owen. Ballitch begins with his education at Oxford (1632–1635) and moves to his writing *The Display of Arminianism* in 1642, to his rise in prominence, to his pastoral ministry (1642–1646; 1646–1649), to his call to the

chaplaincy of Oliver Cromwell (1649–1651), to his academic positions at Oxford (1651–1657), to the ascendency of Charles II, and to his reclusion from public life after *Act of Uniformity* in 1662 until his death in 1683. This last stage was one of the busiest times for Owen as he published the Hebrews commentary, *Pneumatologia, Justification by Faith, Meditation and the Discourses on Christ,* and these two treatises, the *Reason of Faith* and *The Cause, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God.*

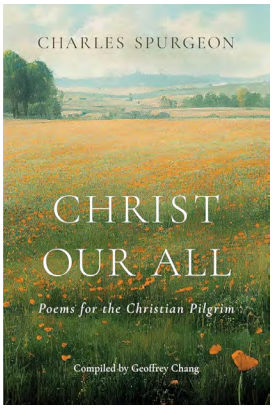
Moreover, Ballitch incorporates a description of Owen's polemical adversaries from the Roman Catholics, revolutionary sectarians, Quaker, and Socinians. He also includes outlines for not only the present discourses but also future works about the Holy Spirit, which have been included in volume 8, *The Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer, The Holy Spirit as a Comforter,* and *A Discourse on Spiritual Gifts.*

This new edition is not just for academics; it is also for the Church. For the pastors and laypeople's ease, Gatiss and Wright have returned to the original sources and conformed the spelling to American standards; modernized it; added Scripture references, new paragraph breaks, chapter titles and headings; and renumbered "imprecise and inconsistent" ordering; etc. Translations of the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew have been included, making these volumes more manageable for the common reader, but they have retained the original languages for scholars (pp. viii–ix). They included "certain shorter works that have never before been collected in one place," including Owen's correspondence, his sermons, and an "extensive index to the whole set" (p. ix).

This is a noteworthy publication, and I look forward to the other thirty-nine volumes. The editors should be congratulated.

Allen M. Stanton
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary
Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Christ Our All: Poems for the Christian Pilgrim.* Compiled by Geoffrey Chang. Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2024. 298pp. £24.99/$24.99.



In *Christ Our All*, Geoffrey Chang has assembled a helpful compendium of C. H. Spurgeon's poems in one place. Chang is an assistant professor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and the curator of the Spurgeon Library. Divided into the two categories of unpublished and published works, Spurgeon's poems are supplemented by suggested Scripture readings for further contemplation, as well as citations of their original appearances where applicable. Assessing this collection requires evaluation on three levels. First, Chang's editorial comments and decisions require attention. Second, the weighty task of appraising the poems themselves proves necessary. Finally, there is the need to appraise the unique contribution of the book as a whole.

Chang introduces the often-forgotten fact of Spurgeon's affection for poems and hymns. Seen against the backdrop of the Rivulet controversy, wherein a contemporary pastor caused no little stir when he produced a Christian hymnbook of only ambiguous reference to the God of the Bible, Chang's portrayal of Spurgeon captured his penchant for combining doctrinal truth with right affections (p. 11). Chang further sets out to "identify a unifying theme for the private poems, and perhaps even for all of Spurgeon's poetry" (p. 18). The book's subtitle provides the answer: Spurgeon's

pilgrim outlook. In this venture, Chang succeeds; the sheer volume of Spurgeon's references to heaven, struggle, victory, sanctification, and experiential Christianity evades easy tabulation. All these themes and more can be captured by Spurgeon's emphasis on the Christian pilgrim's journey: perhaps a nod to Spurgeon's well-known love for and allusions to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress.*

Chang is easily forgiven for not organizing the poems by topical category, a move that might satisfy the preferences of researchers and devotional readers alike. Even a cursory reading of a handful of the poems reveals that such an effort is prevented by its virtual impossibility. For Spurgeon, each devotional thought contained an interconnected web of doctrines. His doctrine of depravity, for instance, yielded self-effacing declarations of the sinner's utter dependence, even as those very thoughts on dependence gave way to exultations of God's glory (pp. 70, 99). All this creates an environment in which each poem eludes simple categorization. The inclusion of a topical index at the work's end, however, is a welcome supplement.

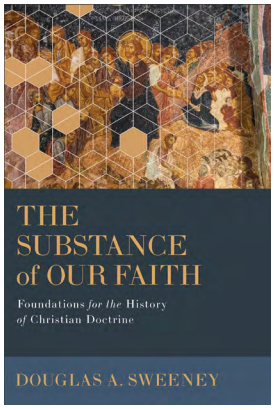
The task of weighing so broad and varied an array of poems—written by the "Prince of Preachers" no less—seems daunting. And yet certain notable patterns rise to the fore when the works are taken in summary. First, the poems frequently reference human frailty (p. 282). This surfaces in Spurgeon's nearly constant allusions to the believer's dependence upon God for all good. It likewise appears in Spurgeon's frequent expectation of death and affectionate heavenward gaze (p. 64). Second, the theme of sanctification proves salient throughout. Spurgeon's emphasis on the conscience and holiness satisfies those who continue to see in him a Puritan influence, while his plaintive posture toward God often turns to requests for help in growth in grace (pp. 33, 62). More incisive summaries of Spurgeon's poems may exist, but attempts to identify too many common threads uniting them all are limited by the occasional, topical, and devotional nature of their composition. It is enough to observe, as others have before, that Spurgeon primarily wrote and spoke words because he believed God himself had spoken. It would seem unnatural to conclude that Spurgeon's reflex to put truth into print would not somehow intersect with his affection for verse.

A few options exist for identifying the unique contributions of this work. One could point to the obvious research gift *Christ Our All* represents. Here, Spurgeon's poems—especially the previously unpublished ones—have been liberated from the archives and made available to the popular reader. Moreover, the poems give a unique window into a side of Spurgeon seldom seen elsewhere. Since a healthy majority of those compiled were—after all—unpublished, one wonders what purpose they served. Through his poetry, Spurgeon was able to express his experiential theology and process his relationship with God through verse. For a man so often analyzed only through the lens of his outward-facing writing, Spurgeon's poems give light to his private approach to devotion. Indeed, only 35 of the 186 unpublished poems do not adopt a first-person perspective. In other words, the overwhelming majority of Spurgeon's poems arose from how he viewed himself, his church, or his membership as one of the elect in direct relationship to a personal God.

In this work, Chang has provided orienting handles for getting the most out of the primary source content that lies within. *Christ Our All* provides insights into both Spurgeon's theology and devotional life. Given how Spurgeon held the two together, such insights are often present in the same poem.

Gregory W. Mathis
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Kansas City, Missouri, USA

Douglas A. Sweeney. *The Substance of Our Faith: Foundations for the History of Christian Doctrine*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023. xvi + 189 pp. £19.99/$24.99.



Evangelicals have a reputation for being ahistorical biblicists when it comes to our theology and ethics. While this has always been too simplistic a criticism, there is more than a kernel of truth to the accusation. Fortunately, a growing number of both scholars and pastors of evangelical conviction are drawn to historical theology, dogmatic theology, theologies of retrieval, confessional theology, and other related trends that draw upon the theological wisdom of the Christian tradition. But if we are to engage with doctrine faithfully, we need wise guides. Enter Doug Sweeney, a church historian who understands the role of doctrine in Christian discipleship.

Sweeney's latest book, *The Substance of Our Faith: Foundations for the History of Christian Doctrine*, is a prolegomenon for how Christians should understand the history of doctrine. According to Sweeney, doctrine is "a form of church teaching intended for the shaping of daily faith and practice" (p. xiii). Doctrine is teaching from God, about God and all things in relation to God, for the benefit of God's people. Thus, while doctrine may at times overlap with the academic discipline of theology, local churches are the most appropriate venues for doctrinal formation. Sweeney divides his book into four main chapters.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the historical development of doctrine. The apostolic kerygma was inscripturated and canonized. The key teachings of Scripture and its proper interpretation were summarized in the *regula fidei* and ecumenical creeds, often refined in response to heresies. Over time, Christian communities debated the proper relationship between Scripture and tradition. Since the Enlightenment, scholars have offered academic theories of doctrinal development, the best of which recognize that doctrine has developed by way of both a deposit of inspired teaching (Scripture) and an ongoing dialog about that teaching (tradition). Sweeney argues the Holy Spirit has been active throughout, and that the Spirit continues to unite believers in a common faith that is in continuity with Scripture and the best of the Christian tradition.

Chapter 2 addresses the role of geography and ethnicity in the history of doctrine. The church has always been an international, multi-ethnic movement. Many ancient Christian theologians hailed from parts of Africa and Asia that most modern Westerners think of as mission fields. With the (re-) emergence of vibrant Christian communities in the so-called Global South, doctrinal development has been increasingly influenced by non-Western voices doing indigenous theologizing in post-colonial contexts. The net effect is a growing awareness that not only is doctrine rooted deeply in the Christian past, but it is also far more diverse than many Western believers realize.

Sweeney's third chapter focuses on the nature of doctrine and its role in the life of the church. There is no single definition of doctrine agreed upon by all Christians. In Sweeney's understanding, doctrine "represents the faith and practice of the church and is taught in congregations in a manner that is guided by their creeds, confessions, and contemporary authorities" (p. 109). He engages with a diverse community of historians and theologians who have reflected on doctrine, its history, and its implications. He also summarizes how major Christian traditions have developed their own understandings of what doctrine is, how it has developed, and its ongoing relevance for the Christian

life. Sweeney closes the chapter by making a case for the pastoral function of doctrine as an important means of spiritual maturity.

The final chapter argues that the history of doctrine matters for Christian discipleship. Sweeney summarizes and critiques several recent scholarly movements that seek to draw upon the Christian past for contemporary application. He emphasizes his own approach is both evangelical and catholic. It is evangelical because it is rooted in the gospel and its implications. It is catholic, not only because it is in continuity with the Great Tradition but because it is in dialog with the global body of Christ. The consensus teachings of the church matter more than the insights of individual thinkers, even as the latter helps to continually refine the former. Evangelicals always begin from their particular confessional streams, but they look to enter the river of the wider body of Christ by engaging with the global history of Christian doctrine. In the power of the Holy Spirit, learning from that history helps contribute to present Christian flourishing.

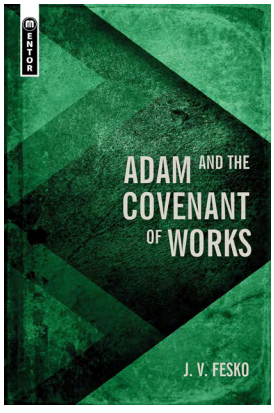
I am not aware of another book that is exactly like *The Substance of Our Faith*. Sweeney wears his own faith on his sleeve and makes no apologies for wanting to see the gospel advanced, individual believers grow, and the church thrive. Yet Sweeney is also a serious scholar who engages critically with the leading scholars and movements related to the history of Christian doctrine. Sweeney's sensitivity to the international nature of the church is also refreshing, especially in a work that argues that doctrine matters for the life of the church. Most global studies of Christian faith and practice overemphasize diversity, sometimes dismissing outright the concepts of unity and continuity as the fruit of Western, imperialistic thinking.

In sum, Sweeney's commitments and emphases are refreshing, resulting in a book that will be appreciated by both thoughtful pastors and faithful scholars. *The Substance of Our Faith* is intended to be the first in a two-volume project. In his projected second volume, which he promises will be much longer, Sweeney hopes to offer a survey of the history of Christian doctrine from a global perspective for the sake of the church. The value of this initial volume should lead many church historians, theologians, and pastors to eagerly anticipate the arrival of volume two.

Nathan A. Finn
North Greenville University
Tigerville, South Carolina, USA

– SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY –

J. V. Fesko. *Adam and the Covenant of Works*. Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2021. xxxiii + 496 pp. £24.99/$34.99.



Interest in covenant theology continues to surge, and with this book John Fesko adds another significant contribution to the conversation. His recent studies include two volumes on the intra-Trinitarian covenant of redemption, one oriented to the historical development of the doctrine and one to more constructive concerns. Similarly, *Adam and the Covenant of Works* is a more constructive treatment that nicely complements Fesko's *The Covenant of Works: The Origins, Development, and Reception of the Doctrine*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). The first part of the book summarizes many of the findings from that historical study, and the exegetical and doctrinal treatments in parts two and three engage with contemporary questions.

In the opening historical section, Fesko demonstrates that different early modern terms for the original covenant (covenant of works, covenant of nature, covenant of life) were not competing descriptions but referred respectively to the terms, the sequence, or the purpose of the arrangements described. He also observes that a minority of early modern Reformed interpreters read Leviticus 18:5 merely as an expression of evangelical obedience (presenting the moral law of God as a life-giving guide). However, the more common interpretation, which also affirmed the third use of the law but supported it with other passages, was to read Leviticus 18:5 in parallel with Ezekiel 20:11–16 and through the lens of New Testament passages like Romans 10:5 and Galatians 3:12. This majority view not only interpreted "do this and live" as an ongoing obligation but also affirmed that no fallen sinner could claim such faithfulness.

Subsequent chapters explore the implications of these matters for early modern interpreters. Adam's legal faith before the fall was different in kind and object from the evangelical faith of God's people in the Messiah after the fall. Twentieth century interpreters misunderstood post-Reformation texts by reading them through the lens of a modern distinction between covenant and contract alien to the earlier sources. The Reformers and their heirs generally distinguished between post-fall redemptive grace and God's creational gifts in the Garden of Eden. Though many of these findings are now relatively well settled in the historical literature, Fesko's study also helps to clarify less settled questions, such as the relationship between the covenant with Moses and the covenants of works and grace.

Turning to exegesis, Fesko defends Hosea 6:7 as a supporting text for the covenant of works, but one of the major themes of the book is that the doctrine draws from a host of other passages as well. Fesko then argues on the one hand that the Mosaic covenant was "undoubtably part of the covenant of grace." On the other hand, he concludes that it also functioned within the covenant of grace to "drive sinners to Christ" as a "ministry of death," and that it may be described as an "old covenant" that "becomes obsolete in light of the new covenant." In this way, "The Mosaic covenant is part of the covenant of grace but serves to highlight the substance of the covenant of grace, namely Christ" (pp. 308–9).

The doctrinal section brings the book to a conclusion by weaving these findings together. Fesko defends the idea that Adam possessed a natural desire to see God; he possessed the knowledge,

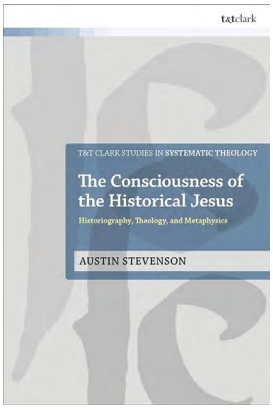
righteousness, and holiness necessary to please God (p. 324), and he also had a "protological dispensation of the Holy Spirit" (p. 406). As such, the covenant of works coincided with the created order itself, and by it Adam could have merited everlasting reward. This reward would not have been meritorious because of the "intrinsic value of Adam's obedience" but because of "God's promise and magnanimity expressed by covenant" (pp. 407–8). Fesko prefers the distinction between prelapsarian goodness/benevolence and postlapsarian grace/mercy to notions of superadded gifts or grace before the fall, or to notions of condign and congruent merit functioning after the fall. Though the Mosaic covenant does "readminister" the covenant of works, it functions within the covenant of grace. Thus, the fall remains the fundamental hinge of redemptive history prior to the incarnation of Jesus. Prior to the fall, sanctification could precede justification, but after the fall, justification is only by faith and precedes sanctification (p. 364).

Fesko unites historical, exegetical, and systematic theology to make a strong case for the covenant of works from the teaching of Scripture. Some readers will not agree that exegesis merely "gathers the materials for constructive doctrinal formulation" (p. 324), because selecting and organizing scriptural passages is already an act of theological system building. Others may point out that the distinction between "gift" and "grace" needs to engage more deeply with recent exegetical theology. Still others will want to delve deeper into the evangelical nature of the Mosaic administration expressed in its sacrifices, ceremonies, and other provisions.

Nevertheless, Fesko offers a strong case that Scripture teaches a covenant of nature/works/life by which Adam could have merited eternal reward before the fall. The promise of Christ is the substance of the covenant of grace after the fall, and this promise finds its fulfillment in the new covenant. The covenant with Moses was an administration of the covenant of grace, but the covenant of works "reappeared" in this old covenant to bring God's people to Christ. There may be more to say, but John Fesko demonstrates why many theologians past and present have not wanted to say less.

Andrew J. Martin
Covenant Theological Seminary
Saint Louis, Missouri, USA

Austin Stevenson. *The Consciousness of the Historical Jesus: Historiography, Theology, and Metaphysics.* T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology 41. London: T&T Clark, 2024. xii + 247 pp. £95.00/$130.00.



In his book, *The Consciousness of the Historical Jesus*, Austin Stevenson explores the intriguing question of whether Jesus was aware of his divinity. By engaging with two competing traditions, Stevenson offers a balanced and resolute answer: Jesus had an awareness of his divine nature. The two schools of thought on which the author centers his attention are the Historical Jesus research tradition and the Thomistic tradition. Stevenson contends that numerous scholars belonging to the former camp maintain unquestioned metaphysical biases that hinder their ability to fully comprehend the theological aspects of Jesus's life and identity. In contrast, the author notes, classical Chalcedonian Christology offers a more robust foundation for understanding the true nature of the Son. Stevenson supports his argument by examining the theological *theologoumena* within the tradition. More significantly, he delves deeper into the "Concepts

of Knowledge" through chapters 4–7. Furthermore, Stevenson's involvement with modern cognitive theory showcases his adeptness and capacity to produce interdisciplinary work that exceeds superficial examination.

In chapter 2, Stevenson navigates what has been labeled "The Metaphysics of Participation" (pp. 41–57). The author's work resembles the writings of theologian Matthew Levering. In this framework, the divine does not overpower or negate the natural but rather elevates and perfects it. Similarly, Stevenson argues for what he calls "noncompetitive" relationships between divine and human realities (p. 41). Like in Thomas Aquinas's christological metaphysics, the noncompetitive, mixed relation between creator and creature is expounded to protect the divine life from being subsumed into the human and vice versa. Therefore, "we can only speak with any coherence about the hypostatic union of divinity and humanity in the person of Christ if we avoid collapsing these two natures into one another in a competitive fashion" (p. 57). Chapter 3 presents a reinterpretation of classical Christology, highlighting Aquinas's distinction between person and nature, in order to counter arguments made by N. T. Wright regarding the "de-Judaizing of the Gospels" in the doctrine of incarnation (p. 87). The work here is meticulous and nuanced. Although Aquinas's thought may come across as purely abstract, Stevenson demonstrates that the medieval theologian is entirely focused on upholding the distinction between the creator and the creature, all while remaining devoted to the story of Scripture (p. 95).

The second part of the book is an overture in cognitive theory and modern psychological anthropology. In this portion, Stevenson evidences the insufficiency of the Historical Jesus research school. The absence of metaphysical grounding leads to knowing being solely dependent on associative relationships. In contrast, Stevenson seeks an anthropology that can comprehend the true nature of things. In chapter 5, the author delves into an engrossing section that explores the patristic context of interpreting Mark 13:32. This verse elicits inquiries arising from the apparent disparity in the extent of knowledge possessed by Jesus and the Father. In an effort to address the charge against the church fathers and their classical Christology of "de-Judaizing the Gospels" (pp. 87, 95), Stevenson offers extensive evidence to show that "there is nothing inherently ahistorical, let alone Docetic, about this approach [Patristic exegesis]. By comparison, the arguments of Ehrman and Allison belie Monophysite or Ebionite dogmatic assumptions" (p. 141).

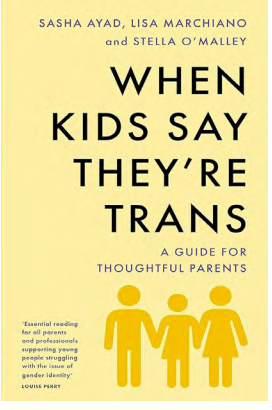
Stevenson's book is technical and learned, demanding careful engagement with Thomistic metaphysics. Nevertheless, the clarity of the presentation and its enjoyable nature make the material worth reading. For those with an interest in classical Christology, this book proves to be a great resource. *The Consciousness of the Historical Jesus* goes beyond the platitudes seen in other attempts of theological retrieval. Stevenson's engagement with the tradition centers on a specific Christology indebted to a lineage of Thomistic metaphysics. The book's main strength is Stevenson's ability to illustrate that such metaphysics is not only a preferred option but also a source of epistemological stability. How can we ascertain Jesus's awareness of his divinity? The naivety of the Historical Jesus school in their naturalistic metaphysics is found to be lacking both in its cognitive theory and in its philosophical underpinnings. By not isolating Christology from the notion of God, Aquinas offers a more reliable answer. As Stevenson concludes in chapter 3, "the doctrine of the hypostatic union is a sophisticated way of holding together these claims while insisting on the reality and integrity of Jesus' humanity.… The Chalcedonian picture of Christ is fully compatible with historical study of Jesus" (p. 95). For those interested in exploring

Thomistic scholarship from multiple perspectives, ranging from virtue theory to Thomas's classical metaphysics, Stevenson's book is an exceptional guide.

Rafael Bello
Oklahoma Baptist University
Shawnee, Oklahoma, USA

– ETHICS AND PASTORALIA –

Sasha Ayad, Lisa Marchiano, and Stella O'Malley. *When Kids Say They're Trans: A Guide for Thoughtful Parents*. London: Swift Press, 2023. xv + 304 pp. £20.00/$19.95.



Written by three therapists with extensive experience in counselling individuals and families wrestling with gender identity concerns, *When Kids Say They're Trans* is, in many ways, the book thousands of Christian parents have been waiting for. Comprised of fifteen chapters, six appendices, a glossary, resource pages, references, and an index, it covers almost everything that "thoughtful parents" could hope for and, remarkably, does so in just over 300 pages. The irony is that this is not a Christian book, nor are any of its authors Christians. Nevertheless, until there is a Christian alternative that is as clear, informed, and insightful as this one, it is *the* book not only to read but also to recommend—especially to parents who have been caught off-guard by their child's sudden declaration of a trans identity.

Let me begin with a brief word about the book's three highly accomplished authors. Sasha Ayad is a US-based counselor who works with adolescents struggling with gender identity issues. She also runs a coaching group to help parents respond wisely to their child's identity exploration. Lisa Marchiano, also based in the US, is a psychotherapist and Jungian analyst. She, too, consults with parents of both trans-identifying teens and detransitioners. Stella O'Malley is an Irish psychotherapist and author who had her own experience of gender-related distress as a child. Her work focuses on teenagers, parenting, and family dynamics. In addition to facilitating a coaching site which offers practical help to parents navigating their child's gender confusion, she is the cohost (with Sasha) of the *Gender: A Wider Lens* podcast and the executive director of Genspect, an international organization that advocates for a non-medicalized approach to gender dysphoria.

From the book's preface on, it is clear the authors have major misgivings about medical transition for anyone of any age. This is largely due to the damage that cross-sex hormones and "transgender surgeries" inflict upon the body. As they state, "we see medical transition as a life strategy that comes with certain costs" (p. 2). Indeed, it does, and the authors devote a whole chapter to detailing these costs (pp. 85–107). However, their particular concern is for children and adolescents and, in terms of the book's primary audience, for those parents who have come to the conclusion that "social and/or medical transition is not the best option for their child." They are aware, of course, that some parents will (or have) come to a different conclusion. If so, they politely suggest that "this book won't be likely to help you much," particularly as the evidence it presents will "steer you away from transitioning your child" (p. xi).

In fact, the authors are unequivocal in their rejection of the basic premise of the (so called) affirmation model of care, which is that "some kids are 'truly trans'" (p. 16). To the contrary, they write,

> we don't believe there is such a thing as a "trans child". There is no evidence that children can be born in the wrong body, or that some children are born with an innate gender which is misaligned with their sex. We do know there are some children who suffer from gender dysphoria, and we recognise that medical interventions are offered in the belief that these will alleviate their distress. Nevertheless, it is not possible to change sex. (p. xiv)

This conviction has practical implications, not only therapeutically (as we will see below) but also linguistically. As they explain: "Because we do not believe there is a separate category of people who are innately transgender, we use sex-based pronouns. We refer to children's sex and not their gender identity, and we do not use terms such as 'trans boy', preferring the accurate term 'trans-identified female'" (p. xiv).

Consistent with this understanding, the authors have little time for gender identity theory, which they define as "the belief that some people have an unknowable, unfalsifiable, inner essence that makes them 'trans' and which may require the person to transition before they can be happy" (p. 2). Nor do they find any scientific evidence to support claims that "there is a biological reason for gender-related distress"—e.g., "a female foetus being exposed to too much testosterone" (p. 238). This does not rule out the possibility that certain somatic conditions (e.g., polycystic ovary syndrome or rare disorders of sex development) "may play a role in some young people developing gender dysphoria" (p. 11). But the primary contributors would seem to lie in the social and psychological realms. (To this end, "Appendix 2: Social and Cultural Movements That Can Shape Gender-Related Distress" and "Appendix 6: Common Coexisting Conditions" are valuable additions to the book.)

Accordingly, the authors hold to (what they call) "a developmental model of understanding gender dysphoria." Behind this is a view of gender as "the social norms associated with being male or female," norms that "often rely upon regressive stereotyping" but can also be helpful "to categorise group behaviour" (p. 238). While relatively unproblematic for most people, these norms can be confusing for some, especially teenagers who have been "swayed by a combination of queer theory and gender identity theory." Nevertheless, taking "a holistic view of the individual," the developmental model is curious about any and all influencing factors that may contribute to a person's gender-related distress. Therapeutically speaking, then, a developmental approach to gender dysphoria "typically involves learning about how the imposition of gender roles might affect an individual, while building self-awareness, self-acceptance and, perhaps, tolerance of distress" (p. 239).

In terms of the book's main aim, which is to offer practical parental guidance, this begins in earnest in chapter 4: "Parenting Alternatives to Affirmation." Here the authors draw an important distinction between acceptance and affirmation, suggesting that there are ways to "meet your child's gender-nonconformity with acceptance while affirming the reality of biological sex." Likewise, with teens particularly in mind, they advise: "Apologise for the times when you lost your temper, and take responsibility for things you regret saying. But don't lie to them" (p. 62). They even suggest language that a parent might find helpful to use with their child, for example:

> I know you really want us to use different pronouns. This is something I've reflected on a lot, and it just feels inauthentic for me. We have always been honest with each other, and I can't refer to you in a way that feels like I'm lying to you or being false. (p. 63)

Equally practical is chapter 7: "Dealing with Therapists, Schools, Universities and Other Professionals." This chapter is necessitated by the sad fact that, right across the world, numerous institutions and health practitioners, "though tasked with supporting the well-being of youth, have adopted contemporary gender beliefs that only confuse kids and exacerbate their vulnerabilities" (p. 108). Consequently, when seeking psychological help, discernment and patience are required, for it is not always easy to find a therapist "who treats your child as an individual rather than a walking gender identity" or who is "aware of the risk of exacerbating rifts in the parent-child dynamic" (pp. 110–11). After providing equally sagacious advice about how to deal with schools and choosing a university, the chapter ends with a timely word on the need for parents to exercise self-compassion and avoid needless self-blame. The fact is this: "A certain type of naïve, socially awkward, cerebral, gullible child is vulnerable to this issue, and it's important that parents don't weaken themselves at this crucial time by trawling over the previous twenty or so years worrying about what they did wrong" (p. 122).

Also of particular practical value is chapter 9: "Managing Conflict with Your Child." Here the authors' stress on parental authority is welcome, as is their challenge to an excessively responsive approach to parenting that "gives the child too much power, and risks communicating to kids that they can't tolerate distress" (pp. 142–43). Along with counsel on how to navigate conflict with prepubertal children, adolescents, and adult children, the chapter concludes with a calm and clarifying section on suicidality. Here the authors expose the harms caused by exaggerated statistics and alarmist rhetoric. The truth is that "suicidality among trans-identifying teens is only slightly higher than rates among youths referred to clinics for other mental health difficulties" (p. 155). While this is still a cause for concern, there is "no robust evidence that transition reduces suicidality in the long term" (p. 156). Mercifully, however, there is a range of other more effective (and less destructive) strategies, which the book goes on to outline, that are known to encourage "stability, capacity and resilience" in a depressed person's life (p. 157). The take-home for parents is this: "if you have been told by a professional that your child may kill herself if you do not allow her to access transition interventions, you have been misinformed and your parental authority has been stripped from you" (p. 156).

The authors are painfully aware that not all conflicts resolve happily and that in the attempt to manage a child's declaration of a trans identity many parent-child relationships are damaged. Indeed, where this damage is significant, it is not uncommon for trans-identified young adults to cut off contact with one or both of their parents—at least for a time. Hence the importance of chapter 11: "Alienation and Estrangement." After defining and distinguishing these terms and an illuminating discussion of the "factors at play in cases of estrangement" (including the reality of "indoctrination" and "online radicalisation" [p. 178]), the authors ask how estrangement might best be addressed. Drawing on the work of estrangement expert Jonathan Coleman, they commend various strategies, including writing an amends letter, and provide a helpful list of dos and don'ts (see p. 186). However, the authors do not want to be overly prescriptive, as the history and dynamics of each parent-child relationship are unique. Consequently, they write, "As with all suggestions in this book, we recommend that you take what you need and leave the rest" (p. 188).

The book's latter chapters cover the realities of "Desistance" (ch. 12), "Detransition" (ch. 13), and an answer to the question, particularly poignant for some parents, "How to Row Back After Affirmation"

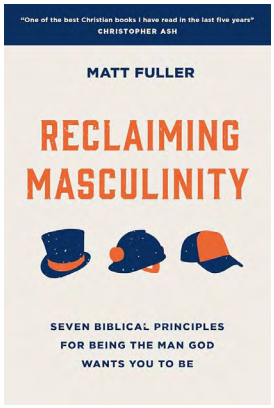
(ch. 14). The final chapter, titled "It's Not *Really* About Gender" (ch. 15), looks behind the curtain to see what is actually driving the gender crisis—at least for many young people. Here the authors identify "the seductive idea that a single solution will resolve our painful and difficult problems," the desire to feel like part of a tribe—"especially during adolescence and young adulthood," and the perennial need for teenagers to differentiate themselves from their parents. The problem, however, is that while the "adoption of a transgender identity, and social and medical transition, offer adolescents a prefabricated, easily accessible and culturally salient way to individuate," the solution is a "maladaptive" one, "with potentially long-term consequences" (pp. 228–29). Nonetheless, the authors believe there is hope even for those parents whose children have chosen to medicalise their identities, for "living inauthentically is unsustainable for our mental well-being." Therefore, although there are no guarantees, they are confident that, "at some point, something will shift" (p. 232). In the meantime, parents need to learn to love wisely and to wait patiently. To this end, the chapter concludes on this sobering yet fortifying note:

> This is an unfolding medical scandal. You, your child and society are in the middle of a process. Few of us understand what's going on, and none of us know where this is going. You and your family have been caught up in something larger, an enormous maelstrom from which it is difficult to emerge with your sanity intact. For many parents, this will be the hardest experience you've ever faced. This journey may alter the way you understand the world. It may test your strength and courage. Facing this test will require an act of heroism. (p. 233)

Christians, of course, know precisely where to turn for the strength we need to face such a test: "be strong in *the Lord* and in the strength of *his might*" (Eph 6:10). Nevertheless, there are many reasons to be grateful for *When Kids Say They're Trans* and for the courage and compassion of its authors. The fact that they do not share our faith does not diminish its helpfulness, nor is it a barrier to believers benefitting from the wisdom it contains. In my judgment, it is a timely gift of God's common grace, and we have every reason to "spoil the Egyptians" in this instance.

Robert S. Smith
Sydney Missionary & Bible College
Croydon, New South Wales, Australia

Matt Fuller. *Reclaiming Masculinity: Eight Biblical Principles for Being the Man God Wants You to Be*. Washington, DC: The Good Book, 2023. 165 pp. £8.99/$14.99.



I have something of a tortured relationship with Christian books about masculinity. They either baptize masculine traits from a very narrow culture (think beards and barbeques), or they masculinize aspects of godliness that are just as true of women as they are of men (think self-control and sacrifice). *Reclaiming Masculinity* is uniquely helpful in resisting these twin temptations; it is biblically faithful without being culturally prescriptive. In just 165 pages, Matt Fuller, senior minister of Christ Church Mayfair, presents a biblical vision of masculinity that is careful to not be conflated with a particular cultural stereotype. His goal in this book is to complete the sentence, "*To be a godly man means…*" (p. 23, emphasis original).

In his introduction, the author surveys contemporary Western culture to highlight the difficulty of his task. He draws attention to the confusion faced by young men across the West who feel "stuck, unsure," and "sort of stranded" (pp. 12–13) in a culture that treats traditional masculinity as inherently toxic. But instead of engaging in a culture war, Fuller seeks to "outline a positive picture of biblical masculinity" (p. 19). His tone is consistently warm, sensitive, and at times humorous, reflecting over 20 years' experience as a pastor. That experience also shows in his concern to not simply collapse masculinity into marriage but to write a book for both married and single men alike. What then does it mean to be a godly man? Fuller defines godly masculinity by employing seven key principles.

The first principle frames all others. In chapter 1, the author sets out three different approaches that Christians tend to take when considering the differences between men and women: (1) the "no difference" perspective; (2) the "only two differences" position; and (3) the "differences are clear and must be maintained in a wide-ranging fashion" approach (pp. 28–29). As it happens, these three categories broadly map onto egalitarian and what some have termed "narrow complementarian" and "broad complementarian" perspectives. Charting a *via media*, Fuller offers "Position 2.5": "Differences are real and unchanging, but show themselves culturally and therefore differently" (p. 32). In this chapter, the author exegetes 1 Corinthians 11 to lay the theological foundation that makes every other principle plausible. By grounding his approach in the "*timeless truths*" of creation while allowing for diverse "*cultural manifestations of those timeless truths*" (p. 36, emphasis original), he deftly avoids the rigid prescriptivism of so many other Christian books about masculinity.

Chapter 2 offers the first substantive principle: "Take Responsibility." Fuller observes eight creational differences between Adam and Eve in Genesis 1–3, which lead him to conclude: "the man is given responsibility to lead in a way which the woman is not" (p. 48). This responsibility, he suggests, "*must* have some application to marriage," "*may* have some echo of application to single men," and "*definitely* has an application to church life" (p. 49, emphasis original). Turning to marriage, Fuller's explanation of headship (or what he calls "leadership") is both biblically faithful and pastorally sensitive. He illustrates "what gentle leading looks like" in a way that condemns spousal abuse and cautions against formulaic or mechanistic approaches to decision-making (pp. 54–57). The chapter ends with some reflections on what responsibility might look like for single men.

Chapter 3 begins with the premise that, in general, men are "built to be ambitious" (p. 65). Fuller challenges ambitions that are selfish and builds on the previous chapter by showing that Adam's

leadership was expressed in productive work (Gen 2:15). The chapter concludes by summoning Christian men to be ambitious for "the work of the Lord" (1 Cor 15:58), which, persuaded by the work of Peter Orr ("Abounding in the Work of the Lord: 1 Cor 15:58," *Themelios* 38 [2013]: 205–14), Fuller takes to refer specifically to "the ministry of evangelising non-Christians and of building up Christians" (p. 79).

In chapters 4 and 5, the book exhorts men to use their strength for a purpose: to protect the church and to serve others. It begins by exploring Adam's responsibility not only to work but also to guard the garden (Gen 2:15). This task is later taken up by Israel's male priesthood and in the New Testament by "men who are qualified by their godly character and biblical doctrine" to be shepherds of the church (p. 96). Chapter 5 importantly acknowledges the embodied reality of male strength which should be used "to protect those who are more vulnerable" (p. 103). It then expands on 1 Timothy 5:1–2 as a framework for masculinity not only in relation to marriage but also to fathers, brothers, mothers, and sisters in the church.

The final two chapters (6 and 7) expand on these broader relationships by calling men to "Invest in Friendships" and "Raise Healthy 'Sons.'" Fuller writes with honesty, humility, and self-deprecating humour as he shares his own experiences of friendship and fatherhood. These are the most pastorally sensitive chapters of the book as they speak to the "perceived male problems" of loneliness (p. 122) and include single men in the crucial task of being "a father figure in the lives of younger men," like the apostle Paul was to Timothy and Onesimus (p. 140).

Among the multitude of Christian books on masculinity, this book is unique in its restraint. It avoids caricatures, stereotypes, and tropes that culturally straitjacket biblical truths. Its language is nuanced and its claims carefully worded: e.g., "I think we should expect *some echo* of this taking of responsibility in all manhood" (p. 62); "*on average*, men are stronger than women" (p. 103); and Fuller's favorite phrase, which he often italicizes, "*in general*" (e.g., p. 20). But this nuance does not compromise the clarity of his message. The book still makes firm biblical claims about the inherent createdness of men as distinct from women. It is not afraid to make general observations from creation about most men, nor does it allow the possibility of exceptions to silence articulating the norm. In this respect, principles 4 and 5 are especially persuasive because they ground biblical masculinity in the general embodied reality of male strength as created.

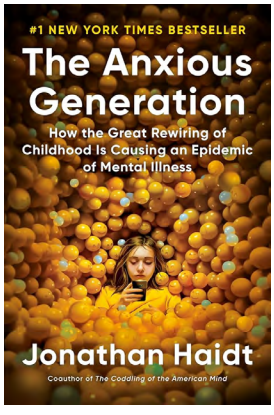
In some parts of the book, the author makes claims that are theologically fitting but may lack firm exegetical support. For example, he asserts the following about male eldership: "The Bible assumes that there is … something suitable for this role in the male temperament (in general)," such as stoicism, stubbornness, and aggression (p. 96). While this connection might be observable in the created order and even be theologically coherent at an intuitive level, its biblical warrant is less stable. The Bible's witness about the created temperamental differences between men and women is largely implicit, which should caution us against reading too far beyond the text. Nevertheless, if we are to attempt to articulate these differences at all, we must be willing to at least tentatively consider such theological connections as those made in this book.

Reclaiming Masculinity is a short practical guide for men (and women) seeking a clearer understanding of biblical masculinity without the cultural baggage. It walks the tightrope between

the twin temptations of baptizing cultural masculinity and masculinizing aspects of godliness that are shared with women better than any other Christian book I have read.

Adam Ch'ng
Cross & Crown Church
Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Jonathan Haidt. *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. London: Lane, 2024. 400 pp. £10.99/$49.90.



The lecture hall in Sydney University was packed with staff, lecturers, and administrators. There was a sense of anticipation as the American social psychologist, Jonathan Haidt, stood up to speak. What followed was one of the most riveting, stimulating, and challenging talks I have ever heard.

Fast forward four years and we now have the main thesis of that lecture in book form. *The Anxious Generation* is a tour de force of psychology, biology, philosophy, politics, religion, and culture. Occasionally you will hear of a book being "life changing," but rarely of one that is "society changing." However, I suspect that Haidt's book will find a place in that latter category. For example, the work of Haidt and others has recently led the Australian government to announce that it is going to ban social media for children and younger teenagers.

Haidt's thesis is straightforward. In 1994–1995 the Internet arrives. It is one of the biggest changes ever in human society and seems overwhelmingly positive. You can now know everything. (Remember Google's mantra, "you won't need memory" and motto, "do no evil"?) In 2007 we have the arrival of the smartphone and the thousands of apps. By 2012 there is a noticeable decrease in the mental health of teenagers, especially girls. Haidt links these directly.

There has been significant pushback. For example, Candice L. Odgers has argued that "there is no evidence that using these platforms is rewiring children's brains or driving an epidemic of mental illness" ("The Great Rewiring: Is Social Media Really Behind an Epidemic of Teenage Mental Illness?," *Nature*, 29 March 2024). Yet Haidt, while acknowledging that there were 64 correlational studies, lists a further 22 experimental studies, of which 16 found significant harm. Furthermore, although Haidt accepts that correlation is not necessarily causation, he also argues that there is no other explanation: "Social media use is a cause of anxiety, depression, and other ailments, not just a correlate" (p. 148).

He lists and discusses four significant harms: social deprivation, sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation, and addiction. The average child/teenager spends 7–9 hours a day on the internet—5 hours a day on social media alone. The consequences of this are enormous. Imagine taking seven hours out of your day. What would you have to give up? For teenagers, that includes talking to friends, losing sleep, losing attention (by developing a habit of continuous partial attention), and no real quality human connection.

You do not develop social skills. Your childhood has been transformed by technology from a play-based childhood to a phone-based childhood. There is no time for play, hobbies, face to face contact, and books. In fact, as regards reading, there is some evidence that excessive use of the Internet is rewiring our brains and making it far harder for us to concentrate on, and think, about books. (See, for example,

Martin Korte, "The Impact of the Digital Revolution on Human Brain and Behavior: Where Do We Stand?" *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 22 [2020]: 101–11).

The overall effect of this, according to Haidt, is that people are not connecting, they are performing. When you play, there are lots of mistakes, but they are low-cost mistakes. But one false move online and your whole life could literally be ruined. Little wonder that this has become the anxious generation!

Chapter 6, on why social media harms girls more than boys, is particularly fascinating. As Haidt explains, girls are more affected by visual social comparison and perfectionism; girls' aggression is more relational; girls more easily share emotions and disorders. In this regard, he points out, as does Abigail Shrier in her *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2020), that the growth in diagnoses of gender dysphoria, especially among teenage girls, may at least be partially due to social contagion through social media.

Given these disturbing realities, you might expect that this is yet another doom and gloom book, with little hope. And yet Haidt has become more optimistic. More than that, he offers practical solutions—for government, the tech corporations, schools, and parents. He cites what he hopes will become the four norms: (1) no smart phone until 14; (2) no social media until 16; (3) phone-free schools; and (4) more independence and free play. He believes that collective action by schools and parents is more important than government laws and action by the tech corporations. Given that the latter are still deliberately recruiting underage children, it is unlikely that any change will be anything other than cosmetic.

In terms of schools, the real test is to get the whole school to act. FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) is a real problem. But it ceases to be one if no one is missing out. Perhaps churches also need to think in terms of collective action? Perhaps as part of our discipleship we could encourage Christians to read Tony Reinke's brilliant and practical, *12 Ways Your Phone is Changing You?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017). At a personal level, I have found the arguments of both Haidt and Reinke to be so persuasive that I have taken all social media off my phone and just use them from my laptop.

One of the ironies of modern society is that the technology which was supposed to free us has ended up imprisoning us. As we have become more "aware," we have become more anxious. At the Sydney University lecture, Haidt conducted an experiment—he asked members of the audience to shout out when we were first allowed to walk six blocks by ourselves. Most of us were of a generation which said ages 6 and 7. Haidt told us that the norm in the US today was 13 and 14. In order to protect our children from the world, we have imprisoned them and brought the world, in all its harmful forms, into their bedrooms. When I was a child, my mother sent me out to play on old disused fortifications on top of 100 metre cliffs. As a 16-year-old, I hitchhiked round Europe for six weeks. Today any parent permitting such activities would be in danger of being charged with neglect! However, Haidt insists that risk-free play and risk-averse parenting (ironically) lead to greater risk of harm, especially when parents/society do not recognise the harm that is being done when children's minds are handed over to internet "influencers."

One of the most challenging parts in the book is chapter 8: "Spiritual Elevation and Degradation." Haidt verdict is confronting: "The phone-based life produces spiritual degradation, not just in adolescents but in all of us" (p. 199). As a pastor, if I had my way, I would ban smart phones from the pew as well as the dinner table, the bedroom, and the classroom!

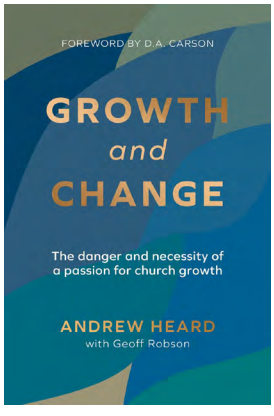
Haidt argues that the best way to get rid of anxiety is by exposing yourself to what is causing it. In one sense he is right. But in another he misses the greatest antidote to anxiety—the certainty and security that comes from knowing Christ. Every child (and indeed every adult, too) needs to hear and

take to heart the words of Jesus: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? (Matt 6:25).

The Anxious Generation is a much-needed book, and Christians (especially parents and pastors) will be served well and will serve the emerging generations better by reading, marking, and learning from it. But let us never lose sight of the fact that what this anxious generation needs most of all is the peace of God which passes all understanding (Phil 4:6–7)—even the understanding of a psychologist as insightful as Haidt.

David Robertson
Scots Kirk Presbyterian
Hamilton, New South Wales, Australia

Andrew Heard. *Growth and Change: The Danger and Necessity of a Passion for Church Growth*. Sydney: Matthias Media, 2024. 264 pp. £9.99/$19.99.



I first met Andrew Heard in 2015, when we spoke together at a conference for younger ministers in Sydney, Australia. I recognised a man whose analysis of the systematic management, organisation, and structuring of church life necessary for real growth was remarkable. Yet it was also disconcerting, because I could not easily avoid the (rather unwanted) acute challenge I felt in his message by faulting his theology or dismissing his approach as lightweight 'church growth guruism'! It made me uncomfortable. But I am glad it did, for since then our church has benefitted greatly from Andrew's wisdom. His generosity in inviting us to visit EV Church, as well as travelling across the world to help us work through structuring our church life, has borne much fruit for the gospel among us. So, I am delighted that in *Growth and Change* he has made available to a wider audience material from which many, like ourselves, have so greatly benefitted.

The stated purpose of the book is laid out in its opening chapter: 'to encourage Christian leaders to initiate change' (p. 10). Heard contends that 'it is possible for God's people—especially leaders among God's people—to make changes that facilitate numerical and spiritual growth', and this is necessary because the reality is that 'many of the ways that we are exercising our leadership within our churches … has become a significant hindrance' to growth (pp. 11–12). But, as every church leader knows, change is hard and often painful. So, the truth is that '*we won't change the things that need to be changed until the pain of not changing is greater than the pain of changing*' (p. 12, emphasis original). The rest of the book seeks to help church leaders—who are vital to bringing change—feel that gospel pain and embrace the passion necessary for such change.

However, passion for growth is dangerous, hence chapter 2 is 'the most important in the whole book' (p. 27). Here Heard points out the risks inherent in being 'sinner driven' and warns leaders against seeking the praise and love of their community or city or embracing 'cultural relevance' rather than bearing the reproach of Christ, which will inevitably attend all genuine gospel ministry. Nevertheless, 'being faithful' is not enough; passion for growth and willingness to change *are* essential. Chapter 3

spells out foundational truths Scripture impresses upon the Christian leader to motivate real mission: its ultimate vision for Christ and his church, the reality of heaven and hell, the answer of the cross, the brevity of life, and the love of God for sinners, all of which animate the imperative of the Great Commission. Chapter 4 shows how this imperative is demonstrated in the New Testament's clear interest in numbers—more and *more* people coming to know God's grace and becoming disciples is always the fruit envisaged from mission. In short, the gospel call is a call to faithfulness that brings *fruitfulness*.

This means we must face up to biblical priorities. And yet, as chapter 5 explains, while 'salvation from sin is every person's greatest need' and gospel proclamation 'our highest ministry priority', there are 'many other vital expressions of Christian love' (p. 85). This brings Heard to a key point: it is *the church as a whole* that is central to all growth, and not every member has the same role. Therefore, one person 'might spend the majority of their own time serving the immediate physical and emotional needs of their community and of the people around them. But they do so as part of a Christian community that, *as a whole*, prioritizes eternal salvation and growth in Christian maturity' (p. 87, emphasis mine). We should not think in a reductionist way; rather, 'we must embrace complexity…. The New Testament might prioritize one thing over another, but it doesn't therefore despise the lower priority' (pp. 91–92). His point is that 'gospel fruit is a much larger category than mission' (p. 93), even though real fruitfulness will only flow from a right priority for mission.

Chapter 6 further grapples with such complexities, recognising that 'there is no simple solution that will guard against the dangers of compromise' (p. 97). All leaders are at risk; younger ones often succumb to the dangers related to a *passion* for growth, while the older can lose sight of the *necessity* to retain that passion. So chapters 7–8 address the responsibilities of leaders, both for the faithful inputs and the fruitful outputs of their ministries. Heard deals judiciously with the biblical tension between God's sovereignty and human agency, principally to insist that leaders cannot escape all responsibility for lack of fruit by recourse to a 'God is sovereign—we don't control outcomes' defence. While I'm personally slightly allergic to the language of finding a 'middle ground' (between hyper-Calvinism and Arminianism), it is clear what Heard means: he is articulating that Scripture teaches *both* the total sovereignty of God *and* the full responsibility of human beings for their actions before God. It is possible, then, that 'where there is a lack of fruit, the problem may not be one of faithfulness, but of foolishness, or perhaps just blindness' (p. 118). Confronting such failings means that ongoing tension and pain will be a normal part of Christian leadership, and 'we need to learn to live the life of *contented discontentment*' (p. 125)—content in God's sovereign power and providence, yet always feeling our responsibility to labour urgently in hope.

Chapters 9–11 explore the biblically defined freedoms and boundaries of what Heard calls 'theologically principled pragmatism'. Recognising that God has created a physically and morally ordered world—and that both general revelation and Scripture (especially the Wisdom literature) teach us that certain inputs tend to produce predictable outputs—we should not despise this wisdom but embrace it. Again, Heard displays a high view of the church, seeing it as an end in itself, the chief *output* of all gospel ministry; not what is planted, but what is reaped. Thus, 'church is far more important than merely a location for efficient edification. It is far more beautiful than that' (p. 148). This makes it worthy of structures and systems that promote its health and growth. These things, however, are the means to that chief end, not ends in themselves. For Heard, this explains why the New Testament displays considerable freedom in whether or not specific structures are in evidence or not, according to need.

Similar freedom and boundaries apply to the chief task of shepherding the flock, hence 'titles are not sacrosanct, but clarity in roles is vital' (p. 171).

The discussion in chapter 11 of freedom and boundaries for pastors may be the most challenging for many, since we all tend to have views shaped by traditions which believe ours to be *the biblical model.* However, this is perhaps the most important chapter for leaders and churches to digest, particularly its challenge to the oft-accepted fallacy which tends to transfer the totality of every characteristic used to describe the pastoring of God's people to every individual pastor, rather than focusing on the essence of the shepherding *task*—which is to see that the church is led, ruled, protected, and tended by feeding it with the word of God. This must be done, but, if anything other than small churches are to be possible, it simply need not be done in an intensely personal way by a single 'pastor'. Moses and David were 'shepherds' par excellence—yet over vast numbers; so we 'cannot conflate "insistently personal" with knowing everybody's name and being in their homes' (p. 169). Paul's deeply personal concern for those to whom he ministered 'didn't prevent him from stepping back, delegating and expanding his work'. While we must eschew a distant or aloof CEO model of ministry, it is no answer to embrace 'an unnecessarily narrow conception of shepherd/pastor. This profoundly reduces a leader's ability to grow the work and impact communities' (p. 170). The flock of God needs to be led, and pastors must lead in ways that don't just *feel* biblical but *are* biblical: with pulpit-centred, but not pulpit-restricted, ministries of the word, which equip and mobilise *all* the saints for ministry (Eph 4:11–16). The entire discussion in this chapter is extremely thoughtful and thought-provoking and has the potential to help liberate churches to reformulate leadership structures for—still biblical, but much more fruitful—growth.

The book's final two chapters and conclusion deal with the key change that church leaders must embrace and take responsibility for in order to lead for growth: 'leaders must be output-focused, rather than simply input-focused' (p. 179). Churches clearly do this as far as finances are concerned, setting a budget they seek to achieve; how much more important is the 'target' of making ever more mature disciples of Christ! Of course, our 'inputs' must be theologically driven—and those of us cherishing the same ministry ethos as Andrew Heard will highly value biblical preaching. But the 'output' we seek is not just that the Bible is preached faithfully, but that it is preached fruitfully: 'we preach it *to people to change their lives for eternity*' (p. 191, emphasis original). If that fruit is not being seen, we preachers may need to ask hard questions of ourselves, beyond simply 'Are we getting the text right?'

The same goes for every area of a church's ministry, and effective leadership is that which doesn't just 'oversee' a particular ministry (which tends to be merely input focused) but actually 'takes responsibility' for achieving its purposed outcome. This kind of leadership inevitably weighs heavily, and Heard helpfully deals with how to minister both with a clear focus on God's sovereignty while also recognising the limits of our humanity. Unafraid to reference the biblical pattern of a six-day working week, against our leisure-focused culture today, there is need for both a pattern of genuinely hard work as well as regular rest—in terms of weekly 'sabbath' and planned vacation.

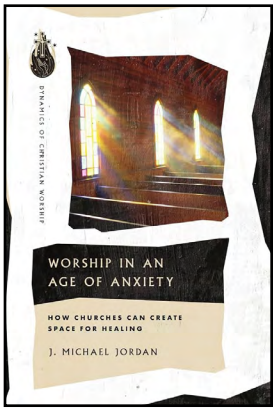
An appendix gives a glimpse into what some instances of leading for change might look like in practice, as well as a starter on the 'how' of change: laying some foundations for purposeful 'Team Pastoring' for growth. This begins with learning to lead yourself, then leading others, then leading leaders, and finally leading the organisation of the church as a whole—the whole 'ecosystem'. The goal is a people deep in the word, loving God in community, serving others, and on mission together. Exploring the 'how' of change would be a worthy subject of another whole book.

This book, however, firmly focuses on the 'why': why real gospel growth will inevitably require change. It is not a critique of the state of the contemporary church in general, nor a discussion of why Christianity in the west seems to be almost universally in decline. That is a bigger issue and part of a far larger discussion. Rather, this is a book aimed at gospel-hearted, mission-loving churches, and particularly church leaders, giving a biblically driven challenge to grapple with our responsibilities under God, be willing to critique our own churches and ministries, and go on making wise and courageous changes in order to be as fruitful in our mission as we can be.

To end as I began: under God, the biblical light shed by *Growth and Change* has been a great help to our own church leaders, and many others similarly, in guiding us towards greater fruitfulness in the task of mission. I would urge any church leadership team to read it and discuss it together, confident that it will be greatly profitable.

William J. U. Philip
The Tron Church
Glasgow, Scotland, UK

J. Michael Jordan. *Worship in an Age of Anxiety: How Churches Can Create Space for Healing.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2024. 248 pp. £26.99/$32.00.



With pastoral ministry experience in Methodist and Baptist churches, J. Michael Jordan brings a diverse ecclesial background to the topic of worship. Jordan received his PhD in Liturgical Studies from Drew University and currently serves as Dean of the Chapel and Associate Professor of Religion at Houghton University. In *Worship in an Age of Anxiety,* Jordan's pastoral intuitions and liturgical background shine through to produce a timely and well-written work.

The author begins by identifying one of the significant but often unspoken issues facing those coming into worship services on Sunday mornings: "We come to worship far more informed about our anxiety than we used to be, or at least with new words and taxonomies to describe and categorize our situations" (p. 3). The reality of this problem leads to the thesis of the book: "in worship, we should speak plainly about anxiety, not ignoring its presence but speaking honestly about the limits of its power in the Christian's life, giving realistic hope to those who experience anxiety" (pp. 4–5). Jordan approaches this thesis in two phases. First, he establishes the problem of anxiety by considering its development and use in the church. Then, in the second section, he focuses on liturgical solutions to address anxiety through Christian worship.

Chapter 1 places anxiety in the contemporary context. For Jordan, "anxiety can best be defined as a 'future-oriented mood state' accompanied by various negative emotional symptoms (like intense worry and apprehension), and/or bodily symptoms like muscle tension" (p. 11). To fill out this definition, he then surveys the results of modern research on anxiety in order to provide more insight into the extent and complexities of the problem. Chapter 2 further establishes the issue in the context of the worship service through a historical study of the use of anxiety as a tool of revivalism. The author highlights several examples, but the preaching ministries of Charles Finney, D. L. Moody, and Billy Graham are his

primary cases. In chapter 3, he considers the impact of these figures and their ministries by evaluating the implicit theologies of anxiety in worship today.

The remainder of the book considers the healing opportunities found in worship practices. Chapters 4–8 each focus on a specific liturgical element: liturgical time, liturgical space, church music, preaching, and the sacraments. The author's key argument is that liturgy—through its repetition, structure, and rich symbolism—provides a sense of stability and safety in a world of chaos and unpredictability. One example of this approach is in the author's treatment of the sacraments. On this liturgical act, the author reacts to reductionism and individualism often common in the Lord's Supper, stating, "Communion could be an ordinance and still be something other than an object lesson; it could be a time of meeting with God and a chance to receive grace" (p. 220). The author's idea of grace in this context is related to sustaining the believer in the midst of anxious circumstances.

In evaluating Jordan's work, the reader will identify many strengths within its pages. Perhaps the most insightful section is contained in chapter 3, where the author considers the results of the anxiety-laced methodologies of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century revivalist preachers. Specifically, the author traces these practices to the seeker-sensitive movement, the practice of rededication, and the shift toward evaluating worship services based on the number of decisions made. Understanding these connections allows the opportunity to correct some of the issues facing churches today.

A second strength of Jordan's work is his thoroughness in advocating for specific liturgical elements to be sources of healing from anxiety. Instead of looking at some of the issues in the church and finding external solutions, the author rightly refocuses the reader's attention on the church as a place of healing and comfort. In an age of deconstruction and "church hurt," Jordan gives the reader another way to heal without abandoning ecclesial devotion. He asserts, "Regular worship attendance is one of the very few routines that many people continue to have that are explicitly about the big things of life: meaning, repentance, renewal, reconciliation, death, resurrection" (p. 228). Implied in this statement is the exhortation to find healing in the church.

Along with his thoroughness in advocating for liturgical elements as sources of healing, Jordan's work as a whole is academically thorough. With each chapter, the reader will be encouraged by the author's engagement with other works, church traditions, and contemporary worship issues.

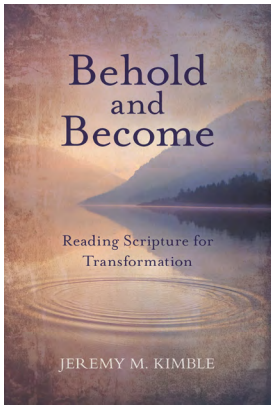
Without overly detracting from its immense helpfulness, Jordan's work has two weaknesses. First, his analysis of the revival methodology of the twentieth century and the subsequent trends in contemporary worship may swing to an unhelpful extreme. In chapter 2, the author identifies the cycle of anxiety, repentance, and relief as the primary tool of well-known revivalists like Finney and Moody. The author believes that the goal of this cycle is to produce specific results by cultivating anxiety in the hearts of the listeners. Jordan is right to highlight the dangers of manipulation in this context, but he does not give enough credence to the important role anxiety plays in the life of someone who recognizes their need for a savior. Secondly, the author could have more thoroughly explored the potential pitfalls of focusing too heavily on emotional healing in worship. Indeed, an over-realized emphasis on emotional healing might risk overshadowing other important elements of the Christian life and the process of sanctification.

Worship in the Age of Anxiety is a timely book that church leaders need to read to aid their work in crafting sermons and worship services that build up the body (1 Cor 14:26). Jordan's historical and

liturgical insights, coupled with his pastoral sensitivity, make this book a valuable resource for helping churches respond to the pervasive anxiety issue in contemporary society today.

Andrew M. Lucius
Charleston Southern University
Charleston, South Carolina, USA

Jeremy M. Kimble. *Behold and Become: Reading Scripture for Transformation*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2023. 256 pp. £17.40/$24.99.



What do you plan to be doing 150 years from now? I regularly put this question both to myself and to the congregation I serve. My purpose is to help recalibrate our hearts. The goal of the Christian life is to glorify God, and the endpoint of that life is being with him *forever*. As we journey toward our eternal hope, however, we often encounter circumstances that provoke questions, doubts, and tears. But God has given us all we need to endure life east of Eden: his powerful Word is sufficient to transform and fuel us on our pilgrimage home.

Behold and Become was written to help Christians understand the power of God's Word and how to engage with the Scriptures effectively. Its author, Jeremy Kimble (PhD, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary), is Associate Professor of Theology at Cedarville University and Director of the Synergy Initiative. His previous books have focused either on the church—*That His Spirit May Be Saved* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013) and *40 Questions About Church Membership* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2017)—or on Scripture—*Invitation to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2020) and *How Can I Get More Out of My Bible Reading?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021). His newest book combines these areas of interest but is focused particularly on helping readers to behold God through the Scriptures to be increasingly transformed by him.

Kimble's thesis is clear and powerful. "Scripture, in its very nature, by God's purpose and grace, in connection with the work of the Holy Spirit, as a way of beholding God's glory and thereby communing with him, is a means of transformation in the life of an individual" (p. 223). He was prompted to write *Behold and Become* to fill a gap among books on Scripture: "While many works have been written on the character of Scripture—focusing on the issues of inspiration, inerrancy, infallibility, clarity, sufficiency, necessity, and authority—few focus on the efficacy of Scripture" (p. 13). He therefore not only presents readers with a comprehensively articulated evangelical doctrine of Scripture but also with numerous practical ways to engage Scripture personally. Kimble's writing is tight, and his style moves from being academic but accessible (in the book's first half) to applied and practical (in the second half).

In his first four chapters, Kimble lays the biblical and theological foundations for the doctrine of Scripture's efficacy. In chapter 1, he directs us to the character of God and the way his revelation reveals his glory. God reveals himself in creation, Christ, and the Bible to people made to know and relate to him (p. 19). Scripture is a means of transformation because it displays God's glory and allows people to commune with him (p. 20). Readers will note the influence of Jonathan Edwards and John Owen on the author's thought, especially in his discussion of the beatific vision. The destiny that awaits believers is to see God as he is and so to be made like him (1 John 3:1–3). We should think about "gazing at the

glory of God in Scripture as a way of seeing God by faith in the present by means of his Word, a king of 'inaugurated but not consummated' beatific vision" (p. 34). Our time in the Word must be active as we take each opportunity to "prayerfully, delightfully meditate on the glories of God as displayed in Christ by means of the Spirit for our ongoing transformation" (p. 37).

In chapter 2, Kimble outlines the main attributes of an evangelical doctrine of Scripture—inspired, inerrant, infallible, clear, necessary, sufficient, and authoritative. He writes, "Scripture is meant not merely to inform—though it certainly does that—but to affect, impact, and transform (James 1:22–25). The Holy Spirit works in partnership with God's authoritative Word to save and sanctify (John 16:8; 17:17; Rom. 8:11–16)" (p. 55). To this end, Kimble encourages Bible readers to work hard at discovering not only a passage's meaning but its application to their lives.

In chapter 3, Kimble uses biblical theology to show "the interconnectedness and intertextual nature of the Bible" (p. 57). He encourages readers to pay attention to how the prophets and apostles themselves handled Scripture and, in particular, how later biblical authors interpret, refer to, and allude to earlier authors. His conviction is that "attention to these kinds of details shapes us to be certain kinds of readers with certain kinds of habits that form a certain kind of character and view of the world" (p. 72).

In chapter 4, Kimble demonstrates that Scripture is mighty to save, keep, and change God's people. Following John Feinberg, he defines Scripture's efficacy as "the power of God's Word to accomplish God's purposes in people's lives" (p. 77). Kimble points to numerous passages from both Old and New Testaments to show Scripture's self-testimony to its efficacy. The witness of John Calvin and Herman Bavinck testify that this is not a new view. Kimble then spells out the implications for the life of the Christian and the church, showing how Scripture helps us to develop a biblical worldview, habits of mind that aid our renewal, an ability to gaze at Christ's glory, and persevering faith in God's promises.

The rest of the book presses deeper into the practical outworking of the doctrine of Scripture for the lives of individuals and families (ch. 5), churches (ch. 6), and church leaders (ch. 7). In chapter 5, Kimble highlights the various ways God's Word should saturate the Christian's life. Believers ought to immerse themselves in the Scriptures, reading, hearing, studying, meditating, and praying God's Word. The more we engage with Scripture, the more we will be transformed. In chapter 6, Kimble shows how Scripture's power should impact churches. Christians are called to participate in biblical community, listening carefully to Bible preaching and sharing God's Word with others. In chapter 7, he explores Scripture's power in the lives of preachers and leaders. He encourages them to devote themselves to "text-driven" teaching and preaching (pp. 196–213), urging them to think of themselves as stewards (pp. 213–17).

I recommend *Behold and Become* for several reasons. First, Kimble ably demonstrates why the efficacy of the Scriptures matters. It's not often that an author combines a rigorous biblical and theological articulation of a doctrine with extensive practical application for both individual and church life. Second, Kimble's love for Christ's bride is tangible throughout and a needed corrective for those who live in or write from an ivory tower. Third, I appreciate Kimble's emphasis on the Spirit's work in enabling believers to behold God and his work of transformation as we engage with the Scriptures. Finally, Kimble helpfully ties Scripture's power to the gospel, showing that he grasps the gospel's centrality to Scripture's message and its biblical status as a matter of first importance (1 Cor 15:1–4).

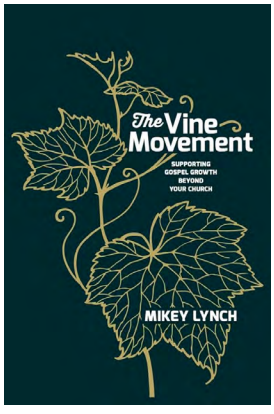
Furthermore, readers could use this book in a variety of ways. It could easily serve as a textbook for a tertiary-level class on the doctrine of Scripture or a Christian ministry course. It could also work as

part of an internship program at a local church or in a small group setting. Kimble's footnotes give eager learners numerous resources for further study.

Behold and Become encouraged me to pick up my Bible and read, not simply for more information for preaching and teaching, but because the primary pursuit of every Christian should be to "behold, delight, become, and declare" (p. 195). I trust that many will likewise pick up Kimble's book and return with fresh eyes to behold the beauty and power of our God in his transforming Word.

Scott Lucky
Parkway Baptist Church
Clinton, Mississippi, USA

Mikey Lynch. *The Vine Movement: Supporting Gospel Growth Beyond Your Church*. Sydney: Matthias Media, 2023. 425 pp. £12.99/$24.99.



Mikey Lynch has provided a theologically driven account of parachurches and their relationship to both local churches and the universal church. Building on the success of *The Trellis and the Vine* (Sydney: Matthias Media, 2009), by Australian authors Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, Lynch (a Tasmanian) has widened the scope. While *The Trellis and the Vine* was about the bread and butter of Christian word and prayer ministry and how it interacts with ministry structures (trellises), *The Vine Movement* asks how churches, denominations, and parachurches can all work together so that God's people (the vine) are continually expanding and growing. Lynch achieves this by forefronting the witness of the Scriptures. While much of the second half of the book details both lived examples and practical suggestions, his is a principles-first approach.

The Vine Movement would be well-suited to ministry interns or trainees learning about the global mission of Jesus; a local church staff team seeking wisdom on how to shape their annual calendar and budget; a parachurch team thinking through their support structure; an eldership board considering partnering with other organisations; or enthusiastic individuals keen on growing their understanding of how to engage with both local churches and other Christian movements.

Some of the questions Lynch covers include: What is a parachurch as distinct from a church? What is the right relationship between churches, denominations, and parachurches (and should the local church have some kind of priority)? What are the opportunities for churches and parachurches when it comes to working together? And what are the challenges?

Part 1, "Theological Foundations," provides a biblical framing of the discussion that informs the remainder of the book. It deals with the theology of church, parachurches, and denominations, alongside concepts such as God's kingdom and mission. It is comprehensive though not overly technical and reads like a systematic theology textbook. Among other sources, Lynch draws on the ecclesiology of Sydney evangelical Anglicans, Broughton Knox and Donald Robinson, who emphasize church as a gathering of believers. He also nuances their position with the phrase, "The local church is a community of Christians who gather," highlighting the ongoing existence of the church outside of the times it gathers (pp. 43–44).

For a subject as lively as parachurch movements, the early chapters may feel like a slow start—a point Lynch concedes at the beginning of the book's third (and practical) section, where he guesses

some readers may be tempted to begin. However, the theological section is well-structured, argued deftly from Scripture, and rich in substance. It is logically placed first and, whether or not it is read first, needs to be read to make sense of arguments that Lynch will later make.

If his book is used more like a handbook than a book to be read cover to cover, I would recommend starting at chapter 6 (which is on the relationship between parachurches and local churches), and then returning to the beginning. Chapter 6 demonstrates why Lynch has done Christians such a service in writing *The Vine Movement* as it homes in on some specific questions of how parachurches should function next to the local church.

He resists the temptation to say that parachurches and other non-church organisations are easy to grasp. He works hard to show what parachurches are and are not. His definition is broad enough that activities within a local church could even be called parachurches. He writes:

> Some ministries are a subset of a local church. There are any number of classes, groups, activities, teams and programs that a local church (or denomination) might establish and oversee, and which can be seen as in-house parachurch ministries. These may never be seriously considered as parachurches—we normally use the word 'ministry' rather than 'parachurch' for these subgroups. But it can be enlightening to look at them through the lens of 'parachurch', for they, too, need to be conscious of their relationship and interaction with the church of which they are a part. (p. 60)

Lynch's definition of parachurch is close to that of Jerry White in *The Church and the Parachurch* (who Lynch quotes on p. 53): "Any spiritual ministry whose organisation is not under the control or authority of a local congregation." Lynch's alternative is this: "A parachurch is organised Christian activity that is distinct from the visible, institutional church" (p. 52). He admits it is a broad definition, but when understood as Lynch intends, it avoids having everything Christians do lumped into it, since it must be "organised" and "Christian."

Part 2, "Practical Recommendations," begins to apply the book's theological foundations. Lynch is both practical and broad in scope. The chapters deal well with a range of important questions: "How are we serving the Lord's mission?" (ch. 5); "Local church partnership with parachurches" (ch. 6); and "The primacy of local church and parachurch involvement" (ch. 7). On some points, readers who align closely with Lynch's theological convictions may wish to test some of his suggestions in their own contexts—which is precisely what he encourages throughout the book. For example, a strongly worded section in chapter 6 might be read differently by a leader of a church of 50 people, as opposed to a pastor of a megachurch:

> Because the ultimate reality is our heavenly Father's universal church, which he is building for his glory, we are wicked and foolish if we set our ambitions exclusively on building up our local church. Ministry can so easily become about our convenience, our tribal identity, or our ego. But even if our motives are purer than this, simple carelessness can lead to a very narrow scope of concern, which fails to delight in or contribute to God's work in the world. (pp. 166–67)

The point—possibly uncomfortable for larger churches to hear—is well made and important to grapple with. (Megachurches get their own treatment in chapter 12, and Lynch challenges them directly about competing with parachurches there.) He suggests that often there are existing parachurch

ministries already at work in a place, and so even bigger churches may not need to reinvent the wheel (p. 169).

By emphasising the "ecosystem" of ministry activity around local churches and parachurches, Lynch attempts to overcome common rivalries. As Lynch is someone who has straddled both church and parachurch contexts, wise suggestions abound about how a healthier relationship between the two entities could emerge. Take this example: "The healthiest parachurches don't merely swallow up existing Christians; they contribute to the spiritual birth of new Christians who go on to become members of local churches—often the churches which are more supportive than suspicious of the parachurch" (p. 166). In an arena where competitive, threatened feelings often prevail, Lynch's perspective is both rare and refreshing.

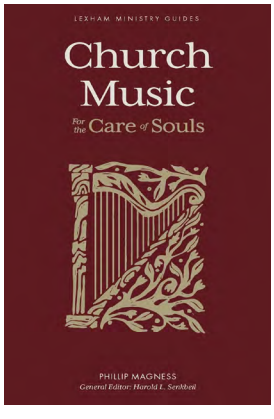
His advice is often simple and practical, such as the idea of churches taking key parachurch events into account when planning their calendar (and vice versa). Even as a collection of hard-won wisdom from an experienced—perhaps battle-scarred?—servant in the wider Christian ecosystem, Lynch's book is worth its price tag. But the book is soaked in biblical depth and nuance, which makes it far more than a practitioner's "top tips."

The final section, "Case Studies," marries Lynch's close experience of parachurch work (university ministry and a church-planting body he helped to found) with examples from church history, such as the founding of the Salvation Army and Wesleyanism/Methodism. Some of the practical matters Lynch raises include: the obligations of Christian authors around royalty payments; the freedom and accountability of Christian academics and the Christian press; and the benefits and challenges of megachurches.

The Vine Movement deserves to be an enduring handbook for church leaders and keen lay people. It is a reminder that God always grows his universal church—sometimes especially through people and movements beyond the walls of the local church.

Joshua Maule
The Bridge Church
Neutral Bay, New South Wales, Australia

Phillip Magness. *Church Music: For the Care of Souls*. Lexham Ministry Guides. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2023. 280 pp. £16.99/$19.99.



Phillip Magness, a Cantor for the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, parish musician, and sacred music educator in West and Central Africa, has contributed a valuable addition to Lexham Press's ministry guide series with his book, *Church Music: For the Care of Souls*. This work, part of the series initiated by Harold Senkbeil (executive director of DOXOLOGY, The Lutheran Center for Spiritual Care and Counsel and the author of *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor's Heart* [Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019]), applies the "care of souls" to church music with impressive results.

From the very beginning of the book, readers will find Magness to be an expert guide, skillfully blending thoughtful theological reflection, historical awareness, and missionary sensibility. His extensive experience in the everyday

triumphs and struggles of local church ministry lends his advice both authenticity and practicality. Even Magness's personal call to music ministry appropriately shapes his advice to church musicians. Abandoning his aspirations for a secular musical career, he transitioned from performing for crowds to ministering to congregations, saying that he'd rather sing "Salvation Unto Us Has Come" than "Slow Boat to China" (p. 19). He points church musicians in the right direction when he chooses a ministry that involves *more apostle Paul* and *less* (please, forgive the pun) *Les Paul*.

The author's central thesis is that congregational singing "should be focused on the caring of souls through the art of music" and that "the primary characteristic of Christian music is the sound of an assembly singing the praises of God" (p. 2). This Baptist found Magness's Lutheran perspective born out of ministry in local parishes and the African mission fields to be edifying and refreshing.

Throughout the book, Magness explains various ways in which music serves the congregation in the care of souls. For instance, music aids in learning truth through "the persuasion of melody and the power of repetition" (p. 24). He also advocates for a robust tradition of music, arguing that "excellence in music" is used by God "to sing faith into people's hearts" (p. 54).

Magness's perspective on the selection of church music is particularly noteworthy. He criticizes the common practice of establishing different services for different tastes, viewing it as catering to nostalgia (traditional services) or popularity (contemporary services). Pastors in churches that currently bifurcate their services by musical preference would do well to hear both Magness's concerns as well as his counsel that "each congregation should take hold of the living heritage the Lord has set before it through his word and in his people" (p. 38).

In a unique approach to song selection, Magness commends songs that the biblical authors "would want to sing were they to drop in on our worship service." That is, rather than asking "What sounds are trending right now?" the better question is "What would Moses and Elijah want to sing?" This will help to ensure that "we choose songs that would echo the whole company of heaven as they sing the praises of the lamb before his throne" (p. 40). Such an approach offers a fresh perspective on the debate over liturgical criteria, potentially bridging gaps between practitioners of the regulative and normative principles.

Magness employs Gene Edward Veith's paradigm of pop, folk, and art music to frame his recommendations. He warns against the limitations of popular and art music, advocating instead for "folk" music—not meaning in the style of Woody Guthrie, but music meant for "folks." While this paradigm is helpful, Veith's categorization may oversimplify musical diversity and override cultural differences. Not only does each musical genre have unique goals, tasks, and standards of excellence, but church musicians should choose music to serve the needs and context of their local congregation. What excels in one setting may be ineffective in another.

While Magness's insights are invariably valuable, the book is not beyond criticism. At times, his poetic and evocative language veers into extremes, sounding fundamentalist—e.g., when describing the decline of music pedagogy as demonic—or Pentecostal—e.g., when characterizing some Christian music as "an aural Tabernacle in which God dwells" (pp. 29–30). His praise for the richness of the "harmonic vocabulary that embraces the full chromatic scale" over the pentatonic scale (p. 33) also misses the complexity of some non-Western musical forms, as gamelan or sitar players might consider twelve equally tempered tones to be rather limiting.

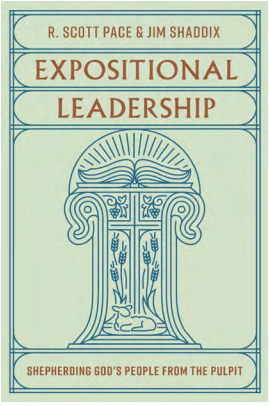
Additionally, his framing of the relationship between the words and music of a song may underestimate the significance of the nuanced interplay between the two. He writes, "Music driven by

harmony, rhythm, or texture obscures or ignores the word and is at most mood music. It may be useful on occasion to soothe Saul, but it is not a sufficient vehicle for sounding forth the trumpet of salvation and proclaiming the triumph of our King." This is a curious claim. For while I agree that "the song of the church is driven by the word" (p. 43), appropriately written (and skillfully played) music, be it "driven by harmony, rhythm, or texture," will help rather than hinder the message proclaimed.

These critiques are tangential to Magness's main burden and central claims. *Church Music* offers a compelling guide for church musicians and receives the warmest recommendation. It moves the conversation beyond discussions about style to helping church leaders see congregational music as a tool for pastoral care.

Matthew Westerholm
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Louisville, Kentucky, USA

R. Scott Pace and Jim Shaddix. *Expositional Leadership: Shepherding God's People from the Pulpit*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023. 160 pp. £12.80/$17.99.



The Christian church has recently been shaken by an unsettling number of high-profile leadership failures. The moral collapse of prominent pastors and preachers and the resulting fallout have left a tragic stain on the witness of the church, leading to disillusionment among many congregants and increased skepticism from the watching world. The once sacred trust between the pulpit and the pew has been repeatedly violated, raising urgent questions about the role of leadership within the church. How can pastors guard themselves against such catastrophic failures? How can churches develop leaders who not only preach the truth but live it?

Expositional Leadership: The Shepherd's Guide to Preaching and Leading, by R. Scott Pace and Jim Shaddix, enters this conversation at a crucial moment when church leadership is under increasing scrutiny. This book offers a roadmap for pastors who seek to lead with integrity and theological depth. Pace and Shaddix emphasize that "it must be the motive of every pastor not first to be a leader of people, but to be a useful servant of the Master. Leading people well will follow serving Jesus well" (p. 21). They argue that the heart of faithful leadership lies in expository preaching that prioritizes Scripture, allowing God's Word to shape both the message and the messenger. Their thesis is clear: effective pastoral leadership must flow out of a commitment to the careful exposition of Scripture. The book presents expository preaching as more than a communication strategy; it is the cornerstone of pastoral leadership (p. 30).

This message is particularly relevant today, as the failures of prominent preachers remind that charismatic leadership detached from biblical fidelity can, and almost always will, lead to disaster (p. 38). *Expositional Leadership* offers an antidote to this trend. Preaching is not just about delivering engaging sermons but about shaping the character of the preacher and, in turn, the life of the church. This book is unique among leadership resources as it elevates pastoral leadership in the context of regular, faithful preaching, something that many leadership books have failed to do or address altogether.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its practicality. *Expositional Leadership* avoids simply outlining the theological importance of preaching—it provides hands-on guidance for the day-to-day realities of pastoral ministry. The authors delve into the mechanics of sermon preparation, offering a clear step-by-step approach to crafting expository sermons rooted in Scripture and applicable to contemporary life. The scope of the book reaches beyond the pulpit as Pace and Shaddix acknowledge that effective leadership extends into areas like church administration, counseling, and discipleship. While the practical advice they provide addresses the full spectrum of pastoral responsibilities, the primary means by which a pastor engages in leadership, they argue, is through expository preaching.

Seminary students and young pastors alike can gain invaluable guidance on how to transition in their calling from the classroom to the pulpit. The authors present a thorough approach to sermon preparation, emphasizing both theological precision and relevance for preachers at every phase of their ministry. They offer detailed advice on how to select sermon texts, structure a message, and deliver it with "clarity and conviction that protects us from interpreting our passage through the lens of our context and circumstances" (p. 133). This pragmatic focus ensures the book is accessible to those just beginning their ministry journey while also providing seasoned pastors with practical tools for refining their leadership approach.

What sets this book apart is its insistence that pastoral leadership must be integrally tied to expository preaching of Scripture. Pace and Shaddix argue that preaching is not an isolated task within pastoral ministry but the foundation upon which all other forms of leadership are built. By faithfully preaching the Word of God, pastors not only instruct their congregations but also model the kind of biblical fidelity and character that is essential for effective leadership.

Another key strength of *Expositional Leadership* is its emphasis on the character and integrity of the pastor. In an age where moral failures have done incalculable damage to the church's witness, Pace and Shaddix make it clear that preaching the truth must be accompanied by living the truth. They call pastors to lead by example, reminding them that their leadership is not confined to the pulpit but confirmed by every area of their daily life. By embodying the principles they preach, pastors can build trust and credibility within their congregations.

The authors challenge pastors to consider how their personal lives and public ministries are interconnected. They emphasize that leadership is not just about delivering sound doctrine; it's about modeling godliness, humility, and integrity: "We can't expect people to respect us simply because we hold the office of pastor or engage in the ministry of preaching. Thus, as part of our scriptural leadership, we must earn their esteem by the way we live and lead in every area of life and ministry" (p. 30). This message is especially timely in a cultural moment when high-profile leaders have repeatedly fallen from grace, leaving their congregations wounded and confused. *Expositional Leadership* offers a counter-narrative, urging pastors to pursue holiness and accountability, ensuring that their leadership is both theologically sound and morally upright.

Despite its many strengths, *Expositional Leadership* does have its limitations. In their effort to elevate the importance of preaching, Pace and Shaddix risk downplaying the significance of other forms of pastoral leadership. Pastors are called to shepherd through a variety of means, including one-on-one discipleship, pastoral care, and administrative leadership. It is important to remember that leadership can—and should—flourish in settings beyond the pulpit. Pastors must invest in their congregations in relational and personal ways that complement and reinforce the public proclamation of the Word through the private care of individual souls.

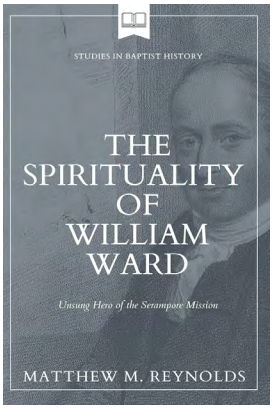
Nevertheless, *Expositional Leadership* remains a timely resource for today's church. The book is an essential for pastors and church leaders who are committed to leading their congregations with biblical fidelity. Its combination of theological depth and practical application makes it an indispensable guide for those seeking to establish expository preaching as a central tenet of their leadership philosophy. Cultural pressures are mounting against biblical Christianity, and moral compromises are becoming more prevalent within church leadership. Like a beacon of hope, *Expositional Leadership* provides pastors with a clear and uncompromising path forward.

The authors' commitment to grounding leadership in Scripture ensures that the book is both relevant and timeless. Many have found themselves disillusioned by repeated leadership failures, but *Expositional Leadership* offers a strong framework for pastors to rebuild trust, lead with integrity, and remain faithful to the task of preaching the gospel. By embracing the principles outlined in *Expositional Leadership*, pastors can navigate the complexities of modern ministry with clarity, conviction, and unwavering commitment to the truth of Scripture.

David C. Orges
Live Oak Church
Denham Springs, Louisiana, USA

– MISSION AND CULTURE –

Matthew M. Reynolds. *The Spirituality of William Ward: Unsung Hero of the Serampore Mission*. Studies in Baptist History 2. West Lorne, ON: H&E Academic, 2023. xx + 274 pp. £18.99/$24.99.



William Ward is the lesser known third member of the famed Serampore Trio, together with William Carey and Joshua Marshman. In *The Spirituality of William Ward*, Matthew Reynolds convincingly argues that Ward's irenic spirituality—even more than his service as the printer of Bibles and evangelistic literature—was indispensable in the success and longevity of the Baptist Mission Society's first endeavor. Reynolds draws on extensive research of first-hand accounts and his personal experience in Kolkata, India, to introduce his readers to this venerable missionary.

This book is not a traditional biography, merely telling the story of William Ward's life and ministry. While Reynolds's first chapter is biographical, the remainder focuses on Ward's spirituality. Reynolds explains, "This work focuses on the beliefs that animate the life—the convictions that made Ward tick—and then asks the question, 'What kind of man did these beliefs produce?'" (p. 4). Even so, if you are looking for biographical material about Ward, Reynolds does not disappoint. His biographical section is extremely informative and thorough, and he provides ample documentation for readers who desire to learn details of Ward's life.

After the introduction and biography of chapter 1, Reynolds focuses on developing Ward's spirituality. He leads readers through Ward's spiritual growth from apprentice printer and social activist to his calling to local church ministry and international missions. Chapter 2 explores the historical-theological context of Ward's evangelical Calvinism, describing the outworking of Ward's spirituality

"marked by a warmth and affability that endeared him to all who knew him" (p. 98). Chapter 3 discusses Ward's significant impact on both the unity of the Serampore mission team and peaceful relationships with missionaries from other denominations. Chapter 4 examines three case studies where the absence of Ward's peacemaking influence could have proved disastrous for the Serampore group. Finally, chapter 5 concludes with a brief assessment of Ward's legacy.

Reynolds's treatment of William Ward's spirituality is important in a polarized and contentious age. Interpersonal conflict has been a recurring problem from the beginning of missions history (Acts 15:36–41). Missionaries like Ward are needed to fulfill a Barnabas-type, peacemaker role when disagreements, conflicts, and hardships arise. Reynolds presents an opportunity for current missionaries to learn from a lesser-known missionary who served alongside names and personalities that loom as large today as they did in the 1800s.

Ward's spirituality, which includes spiritual disciplines and Christian character, provides a reminder that the spiritual lives of missionaries are essential to the missionary task. Ward was quick to place the needs of others before his own preferences. He submitted to leadership even while expressing his disagreement on matters of theology and ecclesiology. He supported others in work they felt called to, even if he disagreed with the strategic value of the work. Finally, Ward sought to partner with other denominations to the extent that it was possible but did not compromise on essentials.

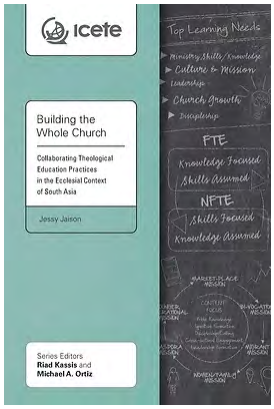
While *The Spirituality of William Ward* is an edited doctoral dissertation, Reynolds writes in a clear, accessible style. The book is heavily footnoted but is not oppressively academic. Furthermore, while appendices are rarely given much attention, Reynolds's appendices include more profound insights into Ward's spiritual practices and character. The two appendices provide a resource for those who may want to implement or adapt some of the spiritual practices described in the book.

Reynolds leaves the reader to infer contemporary applications from his description of Ward's life and spirituality. The final chapter briefly addresses some insights relevant to missionaries today, but the abbreviated treatment of these matters concludes the book. Readers looking for detailed applications and contemporary mission strategies should realize this is not the author's primary objective.

Reynolds delivers a joyful introduction to the life and spirituality of William Ward. Furthermore, he depicts and shares Ward's irenic and joyful spirit. Current and future missionaries will benefit from this book as they seek to cultivate their own spirituality. Ward provides pastors with a model for encouraging spiritual practices and character in missionaries they prepare and send out from their church. In *The Spirituality of William Ward,* Matthew Reynolds offers a compelling introduction to William Ward and serves as a reminder of the need for further research into the lives and spirituality of lesser-known missionaries whose stories can encourage, inspire, and equip future generations.

Matthew D. Hirt
North Greenville University
Tigerville, South Carolina, USA

Jessy Jaison. *Building the Whole Church: Collaborating Theological Education Practices in the Ecclesial Context of South Asia*. ICETE. Cumbria, UK: Langham, 2023. 194 pp. £19.99/$29.99.



In *Building the Whole Church*, Jessy Jaison masterfully describes contemporary challenges in theological education. She envisions a collaboration between formal theological education (FTE) and non-formal theological education (NFTE) that serves churches. Characteristics of NFTE include theological training that is structured but does not offer a degree nor require students to hold a degree to participate in the training. An example of this in the United States might be Bible Study Fellowship (BSF). Jaison uses a qualitative research methodology to gather data from a vast body of educators in South Asia (Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and India) to shed light on the challenges, attitudes, and possible solutions.

This research is a new edition to a series of books from the International Council of Evangelical Theological Educators (ICETE) and Jaison's second contribution. Her decades of teaching experience at the seminary level in India qualify her to write on this subject, which she does with care and relevance.

As the center of gravity in Christianity shifts, some changes must be considered to meet this shift's demands. There is a need for fresh ideas and avenues to re-envision theological education that help sustain the church's mission, and Jaison speaks directly into that space. Jaison states, "For theological education to sustain its relevance and effectiveness in a fast-changing world, this study proposes an essential revitalization through a church-focused collaboration of training practices" (p. 2). She proposes a closer and more developed collaboration between FTE and NFTE as a remedy for the weaknesses of both.

Chapter 1 describes the current challenges of theological education in broad terms. The shift in the center of gravity that Christianity is experiencing is related to globalization (p. 26), and the growth of Christianity in the majority world is a central factor in the need to re-envision how theological education can better serve the church. The need to focus on the mission of the church is a pressing matter in this equation. Other factors, such as contextual sensitivities, digital technology, and new learning models—especially after the COVID pandemic—are also among the factors that need to be addressed in FTE (p. 32). One reason NFTEs are growing while FTEs face enrollment challenges could be the less demanding entrance bar and lower restrictions placed on students. Jaison proposes that academically strong but shrinking FTE institutions collaborate with the more flexible, growing NFTE programs to ensure a more sustainable and effective future for global theological education.

Chapter 2 explores the challenges of FTE and NFTE, including NFTE's lack of standards and FTE's struggle to stay connected and relevant to the church's mission. In addition, it investigates gaps and tensions between the two forms of education. This highlights the need for forums where these gaps and tensions can be discussed.

In chapter 3, Jaison describes her research methodology. In chapter 4, she provides her research findings and problem analysis. Through various listening platforms, she gathers a plethora of helpful information to understand how theological education trainers, faculty, strategists, and other practitioners articulate the possibility of FTE and NFTE collaboration. She gathered data from roughly

fifty individuals and a focus group. The data reveals an overall optimistic view toward collaboration between FTE and NFTE.

Chapter 5 deals with the issue of quality assurance, which is mainly directed at NFTE but also has FTE in view. Chapter 6 then proposes some possible ways forward with collaboration toward a better future, recognizing the unique contributions of FTE and NFTE, with the church's mission in view. She proposes the Regional Training Hub as a means for possible future collaboration. The goal of the Regional Training Hub is to be a bridge between theological education and the church through regional hubs that provide personnel to help build, strengthen, and maintain this connection.

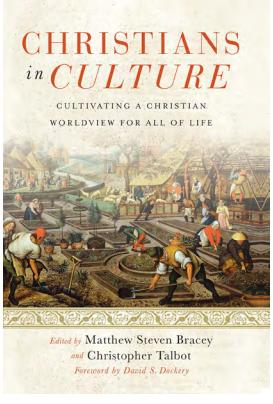
The level of detail covered in Jaison's research provides the reader with a wealth of information about the subject matter. Her use of a qualitative methodology enables the local voices of those in the theological education trenches to do much of the talking while also providing expert analysis of the topic.

After reading the book, one question that lingered in my mind was what role denominations play in the collaborative effort. Are denominations an unavoidable nuisance, or can their resources be well-leveraged in a collaborative manner? I expect the answer to this question could merit an entirely new addition to the ICETE series. However, little was mentioned about approaching this tricky but necessary discussion regarding collaborating FTE with NFTE. Jaison's descriptions of collaboration toward the end of chapter 5 and on into chapter 6 are beautiful and captivating. To realize true collaboration, denominational distinctions and issues must be recognized as more than a bothersome gadfly dividing us. How do we do this in a respectful, irenic way?

In the end, Jaison answers many critical and highly relevant questions with tremendous grace, insight, and agility. We do well to hope and pray that the picture of collaboration she is painting, where Jesus's prayer for unity (John 17:20–23) manifests itself in theological education and mission, will come closer to being realized.

Timothy J. Mountfort
Mission to the World
Taipei, Taiwan

Matthew Stephen Bracey and Christopher Talbot, eds. *Christians in Culture: Cultivating a Christian Worldview for All of Life*. Gallatin, TN: Welch College Press, 2023. 334 pp. £26.13/$29.99.



In college, I remember reading H. Richard Niebuhr's classic work, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975). The book was heavy lifting for the uninitiated undergraduate student, but it outlined five views regarding the relationship between Christianity and culture. Niebuhr wrote fifty years ago, and since then many books and articles have provided insight and guidance about the Christian's relationship to the broader culture. This has been a struggle for Christ's followers from the beginning, and I believe there has been no time in my remembrance that helping Christians navigate those treacherous waters has been more critical than today.

Christians in Culture is a timely collection of contributions that provides an introductory survey of Christian thinking about culture, with some academic

heft on thinking about, engaging with, and navigating the culture. In addition to editors Bracey and Talbot, all eight contributors serve at Welch College in Gallatin, Tennessee. Each demonstrates sound Christian thinking that is both biblically and theologically integrated and intellectually responsible.

The fifteen chapters are divided into two parts. Each chapter is written as an independent piece, obviously drawing from each contributor's area of interest and expertise. The subject matter of each chapter is related to the others by the general overarching topic but not tied to them as a progression or development of thought or argument. The articles can stand alone as a collection of contributions, though they present a shared commitment to a Christian worldview of culture—in keeping with the book's title. This is a collection of perspectives, not a collaboration. The book does not present a unified argument for a specific, systematic Christian approach to culture. With this in mind, reading the book allows one to enjoy and benefit from each chapter as separate entities rather than expecting a manifesto on "Christianity and culture." This will enable readers to pull this book from the shelf as a helpful resource on specific topics related to culture and Christian worldview.

In part 1, "Establishing the Christian Worldview," four chapters reflect on what a Christian worldview includes and what it means to think Christianly. Subjects range from Christian cultural engagement and the role of ideas to an examination of the classical conservative tradition and a primer on the essential aspects of creation, fall, and redemption (with a very thoughtful teasing out of the implications of these essentials).

In part 2, "Applying the Christian Worldview," eleven chapters reflect the thinking of the contributors on specific elements of culture, such as tradition and history in chapter 5, the arts and entertainment in chapter 7, popular culture in chapter 8, labor and vocation in chapter 10, technology in chapter 11, and even sports and recreation in chapter 15. Each chapter contains clear and insightful Christian thinking, again possessing both academic credibility and consideration of practical implications. No new ground is broken, but the chapters address a broad spectrum of issues.

It is significant to note that while reading a collection from multiple contributors such as this, the influence of many Christian thinkers is evident. Some of these are expressly acknowledged and referenced throughout the book. From Francis Schaeffer to Kenneth Myers, Edmond Burke to Rod Dreher, and C. S. Lewis to Bruce Little, the contributions in this book are built on, or reflective of, much of the thinking on culture and Christian worldview that has preceded this publication. Also, David Dockery's foreword helps set the stage for readers. He provides thoughtful context, outlining a rationale for the work and its reading.

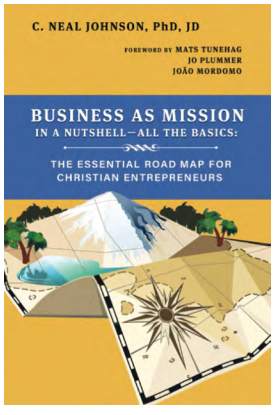
However, some limitations are worth noting in much of the work on Christianity and culture. As a social systems theorist and Christian educator, I find that most efforts dealing with this subject matter are strong on worldview and theology. Still, they either assume a shared understanding of culture as a construct or fail to define it. As a result, the literature often leaves readers without a robust understanding of what culture is, how it works, its purpose, and how it is created and shaped.

Given the complexities and challenges of the present culture in which Christians find themselves, and the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which culture influences the thinking and sensibilities of Christians, such understanding is essential. It may have been helpful to include such material in this collection. Christian thinkers must establish and articulate a workable and accurate baseline knowledge of and appreciation for culture as a dynamic, powerful, and necessary social construct. This would strengthen Christian cultural analysis, critique, engagement, and navigation.

The faculty at Welch College represent their institution well. Bracey and Talbot have put together something that should prove helpful to readers and provide relevant content and context for discussions among Christians on this subject.

Todd J. Williams
Cairn University
Langhorne, Pennsylvania, USA

C. Neal Johnson. *Business as Mission in a Nutshell—All the Basics: The Essential Roadmap for Christian Entrepreneurs*. Pagosa Springs, CO: Roadrunner, 2022. 510 pp. £24.10/$34.99.



Business as Mission (BAM) proves a growing opportunity for followers of Christ to spread the gospel while doing great work in the world. While BAM includes abundant possibilities, it also requires mission, message, and model clarity. Faithful Christians must make sure they embody gospel witness *with* value creation. Failing to bring both to the customer ensures an underwhelming experience. Although misattributed to Luther, the quote still bears worth mentioning: "The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship." Our good deeds shine a light back to our God (Matt 5:16). The world needs both word and deed, not either or.

In *Business as Mission in a Nutshell*, Neal Johnson discusses the various BAM models. His resume commands credibility—45 years of experience in banking, legal work, and businesses both internationally and domestically. BAM is a form of mission that taps into various talents and expectations and can look vastly different from one cultural context to another, making it challenging to examine and understand what that looks like from one individual to another. That's what makes Johnson's holistic approach so necessary.

The book starts with the foundation for what BAM is and how it became what it is today in its various forms. From there, Johnson calls readers to examine themselves, their motives, and their families to determine whether BAM is right for them. Throughout the book, Johnson stresses the importance of thinking of your family and how they will adjust and thrive in different environments. The book is fair and balanced in addressing the hardships and struggles involved with this path but also acknowledges the accompanying joys and opportunities of BAM.

Johnson never separates the necessity for a heart to reach the lost from the necessity for a mind to serve the marketplace. He exhorts us to increase our prayer life with God and our business skills with people. In Part 2, Johnson addresses the questions related to the practice of BAM. He shows that business people would do well to leverage their currency of marketplace talent to create a bigger change, pointing people to the Savior who canceled our debt while we were still sinners.

The book demands the need to love others stemming from a love of God and a desire to share him with others. However, that passion must also be tested and tempered by wisdom and practical skills. The book rightly calls us to examine our current talents and understanding in order to see possible blind spots and areas that might trip us up later. To accomplish this, the author includes several practical

self-quizzes in the book that could be helpful for those still exploring BAM as a calling. One of these is Steven D. Strauss's Entrepreneurial Self-Exam on page 90.

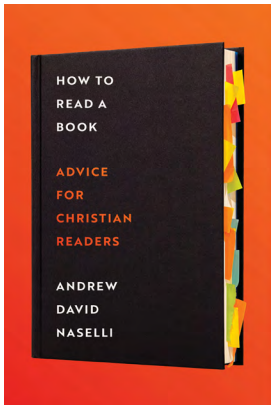
The book includes practical knowledge of how to run a business. This is predominantly found in part 3, "How Can You Own Your Own Business?" and part 5, "How Do You Lead and Manage a BAM Company?" Johnson covers topics such as loans, business structures, biblical leadership, and how to acquire or start a business. He gives readers a good sense of what choices need to be made and how individual context affects those decisions.

There are some excellent examples of how some businesses have succeeded in the past by doing BAM work internationally. The case studies give practical examples of what it looks like to have a kingdom impact through a business internationally. One thing I wish would have been covered in more detail was domestic businesses. The book mentions it as a possibility but does not cover domestic BAM in detail. Overall, the book gives a good sense of what BAM is, whether an individual is suited for it, what options are available for BAM, and some practical next steps to consider.

The author advises us, "Never in Scripture are we guaranteed 'success' as the world defines it. We are only told to use our gifts in His service, to 'go' where He leads us, and to 'do' all we can to be obedient to Him and His 'Way'––the 'Jesus Way,' as prescribed for us in His Holy Word" (p. 426). We are not called to succeed or to be great but to be faithful and obedient to Christ. In BAM, we are wise to avoid extremes: the ditch of seeking success over kingdom impact or failing to lead a business well and, in turn, being unable to have any impact.

Kary Oberbrunner
Cedarville University
Cedarville, Ohio, USA

Andrew David Naselli. *How to Read a Book: Advice for Christian Readers*. Moscow, ID: Canon, 2024. xvi + 206 pp. $21.95.



Everyone reads, but does everyone really read? Andrew Naselli believes reading and reading well is worth one's time. He offers *How to Read a Book: Advice for Christian Readers* to help Christians become better readers. The book's aim is simple: Naselli wants to aid readers in taking their reading to the next level (p. 1). To accomplish his purpose, he lays out four goals: inform readers to understand what they read better, advise them with detailed and practical tips, motivate them to read better, and encourage them to have more joy, enthusiasm, and confidence in reading (p. 3). Influenced by his favorite authors, C. S. Lewis, D. A. Carson, and John Piper, Naselli challenges his audience, "*Don't waste your reading*. Read for life; read the right way; read the right stuff; and keep reading" (p. 12).

Naselli offers his advice by presenting four vital questions about reading. In the first chapter, he asks, "Why Should You Read?" and submits three motivations for reading: to live, to grow, and to enjoy. Applying the first motivation to the Bible, Naselli points to the need for Christians to feed on God's Word, and this nourishment comes from reading Scripture. Readers grow not by remembering every detail they read but by the continual practice of reading, resulting in intellectual, spiritual, emotional,

and even vocational maturity. When done well, Naselli argues that reading can be an act of worship for God's glory and the reader's joy.

In chapter 2, Naselli asks, "How Should You Read?" and submits seven guidelines for skillful reading. The second guideline, reading at different levels, bears more attention, as the author puts forward three reading levels and provides an enlightening chart to illustrate the differences in each level (p. 48). The first level, survey, is like a helicopter tour over a city where the reader samples the book to size it up efficiently without much time. The second level, macro-reading, is more like a bus tour where the reader reads far more of the book but still looks for the overall big picture. The final level, micro-reading, is more of a slow, detailed tour, where the reader intentionally observes, seeks to understand, and then evaluates the entire book.

Chapter 3, "What Should You Read?," pushes readers to read the right kind of books. The author in no way recommends only reading Christian literature. Specifically, he encourages reading notable classics, stories about history, and fiction to provide a more holistic and tethered connection to reality (pp. 110–25).

Naselli's final question in chapter 4, "When Should You Read?," first examines two excuses why people do not read: not having enough time and not feeling like reading. Naselli challenges readers to be good stewards of their time and to fight for joy when feelings of doing what is needed are absent. He then provides eight tips for building reading into their regular life routine. To begin a regular reading practice, he encourages beginning small, even if only five minutes today, along with a feasible reading plan. He offers six different suggestions on when to read during the day, pushes for accountability with others, and presents a caution against reading too much, arguing for reading as an "escape" rather than "escapism" (pp. 155–57).

Naselli concludes the book by offering four appendices full of personal and practical help. He provides the reader with a list of forty of his favorite books, tips for cultivating reading in children, responsible ways to use social media, and strategies for organizing a personal library. These additions serve those who know what they ought to do but have no idea where to start.

The above summary highlights the obvious and overwhelming positives of Naselli's book. The book's tone is direct but not blunt, instructive but not excessive, and forgiving but not lenient. Naselli gifts his readers a vast amount of information in a very accessible way. His practical instruction, personal style, and many examples all support and supplement his aim.

Naselli's comprehensive reading advice could overwhelm novice or inconsistent readers. However, this book is a how-to manual, and this potential drawback may be the book's greatest strength, as Naselli gives the reader what they need to sharpen their reading skills. A second minor critique might be the apparent fuzziness of what constitutes reading a book. While Naselli's different reading levels are helpful, can someone assert they have read a book if they have not read all or at least most of it? Therefore, what does it truly mean to read a book?

Overall, Naselli laudably accomplishes his purpose in *How to Read a Book*. He provides needed, practical help to readers everywhere, regardless of their background and reading level. Readers can gain insight and then directly put that instruction into practice. Anyone looking to improve their reading should grab this book and keep it close for years to come.

Luke Johnson
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
Wake Forest, North Carolina, USA