Journal of BIBLICAL THEOLOGY & WORLDVIEW

Journal of Biblical Theology & Worldview

published by
BJU Seminary

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BJU SEMINARY
EST. 1932

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Vol. 2, No. 2

Did Elijah *Really* Ascend into Heaven in a Whirlwind?

Ken Burkett[1]

The story of Elijah's ascension to heaven is a beloved staple of Sunday School lessons and sermons. Unfortunately, the average churchgoer may not be getting the full story, and worse yet, not even a story that is faithful to the Scriptures. This is not merely an issue of Bible scholars debating fine points of Hebrew grammar and arcane details of the text; rather, it is an issue with profound theological ramifications.

The Problem of Elijah's Letter

Nearly everything we know about Elijah comes from the books of 1 and 2 Kings. The account of his ministry begins in 1 Kings 17 and concludes with the story of his heavenly ascension in 2 Kings 2. There is, however, one brief reference to the prophet in 2 Chronicles 21:12–15, which mentions a letter he sent to King Jehoram of Judah in which he confronted him about the sin of murdering his brothers upon the death of his father, King Jehoshaphat.[2] The passage is problematic because the Chronicler has Elijah sending the letter subsequent to the close of his earthly ministry and his heavenly ascent.

Bible chronology is notoriously difficult, but the date of Elijah's translation seems clear. The author of 2 Kings places his translation immediately after the death of King Ahaziah of Israel and the succession of his brother, King Jehoram (2 Kgs 1:17). This event happened in the year 852 B.C., and it corresponds to the eighteenth year of King Jehoshaphat in Judah (2 Kgs 3:1) and the second year of his son's co-reign with him (2 Kgs 1:17). Jehoshaphat did not die until four years later, in 848 B.C. It is at this point that Jehoram succeeded him to the throne as sole regent and murdered his brothers in order to secure that throne for himself (2 Kgs 8:16). Hence, the earliest possible point at which Elijah could have sent the letter of rebuke is four years subsequent to his translation (i.e., 848 B.C.).

Second Chronicles 21:15 reports Elijah's prophecy that King Jehoram of Judah would pay for his murderous sin with a disease in his bowels that would gradually result in death. Second Chronicles 21:18–19 then reports the fulfillment of this prophecy by recording that Jehoram contracted a disease that progressed for two years and eventuated in his demise. Though the text does not explicitly state so, the implication is that Elijah wrote the letter just prior to the commencement of Jehoram's two-year disease in his sixth year, which corresponds to the year 843 B.C. At any rate, he certainly could not have written the prophetic letter any later than that. In summary, as the following chart illustrates

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[2] The focus of Elijah's ministry is primarily on the Northern Kingdom and ridding it of idolatry. By contrast, the focus of Chronicles is on the Davidic dynasty and Temple-based worship. This accounts for the absence of Elijah from Chronicles, except for the isolated incident when he confronted a Judean king with family ties to King Ahab.

the *terminus a quo* for the letter is 848 B.C., and the *terminus ad quem* is 843 B.C, meaning that Elijah sent this letter somewhere between four and nine years after his translation.[3]

Table 1. The Date of Elijah's Letter to King Jehoram of Judah

Date	Jehoshaphat		Jehoram: Judah		Jehoram: Israel	Elijah	References
B.C.	*Co-Reign*	*Sole Reign*	*Co-Reign*	*Sole Reign*	*Reign*		
Summer 853	19	17	1				
Summer 852	20	18	2		accession	translation	2 Kgs 1:17; 3:1
Fall 852	21	19	3		1		
Fall 851	22	20	4		2		
Fall 850	23	21	5		3		
Fall 849	24	22	6		4		
Fall 848	25	23	7	1 fratricide	5	Elijah's letter sent during this time frame 2 Chr 21:12–15	2 Kgs 8:16–17a 2 Chr 21:1, 4–5a
Fall 847				2	6		
Fall 846				3	7		
Fall 845				4	8		
Fall 844				5	9		
Fall 843				6	10		
Fall 842				7	11		
Fall 841				8	12		2 Kgs 8:17b, 25 2 Chr 21:5b, 18–20

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[3] The dates of reigns and co-reigns represented in this chart are based on the calculations of Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1984), 96–101. In general, there is widespread agreement among conservative scholars about this chronology, with room for minor variances of a year or so either way. Such variations in no way eliminate the chronological difficulty involved with Elijah's letter. Other scholars who concur with this chronology include Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 245–51, 261; K. A. Kitchen and T. C. Mitchell, "Chronology of the Old Testament," *New Bible Dictionary,* ed. D. R. W. Wood, et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 190, 193; Eugene H. Merrill, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2015), 444–445; Martin J. Selman, *2 Chronicles: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 11 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 452, 455; and John H Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 3:341.

At this time both Judah and Israel utilized non-accession year reckoning, but Judah counted regnal years from the fall (Tishri), whereas Israel counted regnal years from the spring (Nisan). Hence, Jehoram of Judah entered the second year of his co-reign in the fall of 853 (just a couple months after it began), and correspondingly he entered the third year of his co-reign in the fall of 852 while Jehoram of Israel was still in his first year. Second Kings 9:29 utilizes accession-year reckoning and therefore counts Jehoram of Israel's twelfth year as his eleventh year.

Untenable Solutions to the Problem

Bible commentators acknowledge the problem, and they offer several possible solutions to the apparent discrepancy, but none of them is tenable.[4] A proposal common among older commentators is represented by the Catholic scholar Estius (A.D. 1542–1613). He agrees that the letter was written subsequent to Elijah's translation, but he suggests that Elijah simply wrote the letter from his new home in heaven and had it delivered from there, presumably by an angel.[5] The problem with his suggestion is that the letter is introduced into the narrative in a matter-of-fact manner with no suggestion that there was anything miraculous or supernatural about its arrival. Furthermore, Elijah's sending a letter from the beyond would violate the biblical principle that those in the afterlife no longer have knowledge of or participation in the current events of this temporal world (Eccl 9:5–6; cf. Lk 16:27–31).[6]

Scholars such as C. F. Keil, J. Barton Payne, and Charles Ryrie[7] are open to an alternate suggestion: that Elijah wrote the letter years in advance while still on earth and then entrusted it to the care of another (probably Elisha) to deliver at the appropriate time, since Elijah would be gone by then.[8] Of course, there is not the slightest hint of any of this in the text, and that alone makes it a weak proposal, but there are additional reasons to reject this theory. For example, if Elijah had known in

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[4] Critical scholars simply dismiss the letter as a fraud or an invention of the biblical narrator. Paul J. Achtemeier, "Elijah," *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 258; Allen C. Myers, "Elijah," *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 326; Jacob M. Myers, *II Chronicles: Introduction, Translation and Notes*, AYB 13 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 121–22. This article will focus upon the proposals of those who believe the text and take it seriously, but for a helpful response to the critics see Selman, 455.

[5] Willem Hessels van Est, *Annotationes in Præcipua ac Difficiliora Sacræ Scripturæ Loca*, 5th ed. (Paris, 1684), 164. Few modern scholars are attracted to this solution, but an exception is J. Gordon McConville, who proposes it as a possibility. *I & II Chronicles*, The Daily Study Bible Series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 199.

[6] Joseph Benson observes, "We find the prophets were sent to those of their own time, and not to those who should come after (there being a succession of prophets raised up for every age)." *Commentary on the Old and New Testaments,* Kindle ed. (Omaha: Patristic, 2019), 2788. Of course, it is possible that this was an exception to the general rule, similar to Samuel's encounter with Saul after his death (1 Sm 28:12–15). But in the case of Samuel, the text is abundantly clear that something exceptional and supernatural had happened; there is no such indication in the case of Elijah's letter.

[7] Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, "1 and 2 Chronicles," trans. Andrew Harper, in *Commentary on the Old Testament* (1866–91; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 3:645; J. Barton Payne, "1, 2 Chronicles," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 4:506–7; and Charles Caldwell Ryrie, Note on 2 Chr 21:12 in *Ryrie Study Bible: Expanded Edition* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 705–6. See also M. G. Easton, "Elijah," *Illustrated Bible Dictionary and Treasury of Biblical History, Biography, Geography, Doctrine, and Literature* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), 223; F. K. Farr, "Elijah," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia,* ed. James Orr, et al. (Chicago: Howard-Severance, 1915), 932; and B. L. Smith, "Elijah," *New Bible Dictionary,* 311.

[8] In *Lange's Commentary* Otto Zöckler offers a variant of this view. He suggests that Elijah merely uttered the prophecy verbally to Elisha before his translation, and then some years later Elisha reduced the prophecy to writing and sent it to the king. His rationale for this approach is that "it avoids the inherently improbable supposition, that Elijah wrote with his own hand a letter, which he knew could only be delivered in the course of at least five or six years after his ascension to God." The problem is that the text specifically identifies a "writing" (מִכְתָּב) as coming from the prophet, not merely a "prophecy." The implication is that Elijah is the author of the letter, not merely the inspiration or source for its content. John Peter Lange, et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: 1 & 2 Chronicles* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 228.

advance about Jehoram's murderous intent, would there not have been a moral obligation to warn Jehoram's brothers, so that they might flee to safety? Then, if in the sovereignty of God, Jehoram succeeded in carrying out the bloody deed, at least there would be no blood on Elijah's hands. Also, when the Hebrew text says that King Jehoram received a letter from Elijah (2 Chr 21:12), the prepositional phrase "from Elijah" appears to be identifying him—not merely as the author of the letter—but rather as the source who sent the document: it "came from Elijah."[9] Finally, the precise wording of the letter itself suggests that it was a current production of the prophet and not something that had been written entirely in the past. This is because the letter conveys two distinct tenses: the past tense describes the sinful deeds of the king, and the future tense is utilized to predict the resulting consequences of his sin.[10] Thus the author of the letter situates himself chronologically in the middle, precisely between the past acts that had already occurred and the future consequences yet to come. Had the letter been written as a prophecy of events yet to unfold, one might have expected instead that the entire letter would convey a future orientation, or perhaps employ the "prophetic perfect" throughout.[11]

Perhaps the solution most favored by modern conservative scholars is that the story of Elijah's translation to heaven is chronologically misplaced in 2 Kings, such that it actually occurred around 2 Kings 8:16,[12] even though the event is recorded six chapters earlier. In *The Pulpit Commentary* Barker

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[9] The Hebrew reads וַיָּבֹא אֵלָיו מִכְתָּב מֵאֵלִיָּהוּ הַנָּבִיא. There is some ambiguity in the text about the role of the prepositional phrase "from Elijah." Does it modify the noun *letter:* there came "a letter from Elijah"? Or does it modify the verb *came:* a letter "came from Elijah"? The former option could identify Elijah as the *author* without offering any clues as to the *sender* of the letter. By contrast, the latter option identifies Elijah explicitly as the *sender* of the letter and also implicitly as its prophetic author. It is this latter option that is reflected in most of the major modern translations (e.g., ASV, ESV, HCSB, NASB95, NKJV, and NRSV). Jamieson, however, holds to the former option, stating, "The preposition מ connects with מִכְתָּב, a writing, more readily than with the verb בא, and refers to Elijah as its author, so that it may have been composed years before it reached the hands of the wicked monarch whom it was designed to reprove." Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments: Joshua–Esther* (London: William Collins, Sons, & Company, n.d.), 2:545.

[10] The leading translations are unanimous in recognizing the switch from a past perspective to a future perspective in these verses: ASV, ESV, HSCB, KJV, NASB95, NET, NIV84, NKJV, NLT, and RSV. The past is narrated through the following sequence of actions and tenses: "Because you have not walked [perfect] . . . but you have walked [waw-consecutive imperfect] . . . and you have caused whoredom [waw-consecutive imperfect] . . . and also your brothers you have killed [perfect]." The future consequences are conveyed through the following: "Yahweh is about to smite [participle, *futurum instans*] . . . and you will have a great illness [verbless clause] . . . until your bowels come out [imperfect] day by day." For the various grammatical forms utilized in these verses, see Ronald J. Williams, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax,* 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 74–75, 88, 119, 209. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Greek and Hebrew texts in this article are my own.

[11] In modern English, we might express a consistent future orientation along these lines: "You will commit this sin, and you will suffer this consequence." Representing the certitude of a prophetic perfect, we might say something like, "You have committed this sin, and you have suffered this consequence."

[12] This is when Jehoram succeeded his father Jehoshaphat to the throne and murdered his brothers; hence, the condemnatory letter from Elijah must have been sent sometime around 2 Kings 8:16 (848 B.C.), and correspondingly the theory supposes that his ascension to heaven would have taken place subsequent to that, rather than in 852 B.C. as the narrative's placement in 2 Kings 2 would suggest.

By contrast, some commentators acknowledge that the translation of Elijah must have occurred sometime before the reign of Jehoram began, so they suggest that the fratricide could have taken place during the earlier part of his co-reign (852 B.C.), just prior to Elijah's ascent, rather than in 848 B.C. at the beginning of his sole reign. Raymond B. Dillard, *2*

confidently affirms that the letter reached Jehoram "before the chronologically misplaced translation of Elijah as given in 2 Kings 2."[13] Likewise, Matthew Henry states, "It is certain that the history is put out of its proper place."[14] Despite the account's placement in 2 Kings 2, Eugene Merrill insists that "there is no certain way to date Elijah's translation," and therefore "perhaps it did not take place until 848."[15] Gleason Archer, who also subscribes to this theory, offers a rationale for the supposed displacement by explaining that the biblical author of Kings occasionally "carries a theme through in

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Chronicles, WBC 15 (Dallas: Word, 1987), 167; Easton, 223; Andrew E. Hill, *1 & 2 Chronicles,* NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 515; John MacArthur, Note on 2 Chr 21:12-15 in *The MacArthur Study Bible: NKJV* (Nashville: Word, 1997), 619; C. I. Scofield, et al., eds., *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), 513n1; Selman, 455; B. L. Smith, 311; and J. A. Thompson, *1, 2 Chronicles,* NAC 9 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 299.

      The problem with this suggestion is that the narrative in 2 Kings 8:16–17, taken together with its parallel account in 2 Chronicles 21:1–5, makes it clear that the fratricide took place subsequent to Jehoshaphat's death. 2 Chronicles 21:4 explicitly states that it happened "when Jehoram had ascended to the kingdom of his father" (וַיָּקָם יְהוֹרָם עַל־מַמְלֶכֶת אָבִיו), and 2 Chronicles 21:1 defines this phrase as meaning that Jehoshaphat had died and Jehoram was now reigning "in his stead" (תַּחְתָּיו). It is hard to see a co-reign described in this terminology.

      Perhaps one could argue that the paragraph consisting of 2 Chronicles 21:1–4 belongs to the official narrative of Jehoshaphat's reign. Even though his death is reported in v. 1, therefore, verses 2–4 do not progress forward but rather backward in time to explain parenthetically that *prior* to his death he had gifted his sons with cities (vv. 2–3) *and* Jehoram slew his brothers while co-reigning (v. 4). Thus, the official narrative of Jehoram's sole reign does not begin until v. 5, subsequent to the fratricide. Even if this were the correct way to read 2 Chronicles 21:1–4, it nonetheless remains a fact that the letter from Elijah does not arrive until 2 Chronicles 21:12, well into the official narrative of Jehoram's sole reign. Besides, even those who suggest that the fratricide took place during the co-reign do not identify v. 4 with the closing narrative of Jehoshaphat's reign, but rather with the opening narrative of Jehoram's sole reign (e.g., Dillard, 162; Hill, 508; Selman, 450; Thompson, 296). It is for this reason that many scholars feel compelled to suggest that the account of Elijah's translation *must* be chronologically misplaced in 2 Kings 2, for it would seem that the only other alternative is to concede that the letter came after his translation.

      The issue is somewhat further complicated by the fact that 2 Kings 8:16 would seem to contradict the chronology that virtually all scholars accept. That is, based on 2 Kings 1:17 scholars are in agreement that Jehoram of Judah began to co-reign with Jehoshaphat about a year *before* Jehoram of Israel became king in 852 B.C. Yet 2 Kings 8:16 seems to suggest that he began to co-reign with his father in the *fifth year* of Jehoram of Israel (848 B.C.). Most scholars find a resolution to the problem by observing the double reference to "Jehoshaphat, King of Judah" in the verse, which looks suspiciously like a case of dittography by a copyist. Remove the first reference to Jehoshaphat, and the verse is a straightforward statement that he began his sole reign in the fifth year of Jehoram of Israel, with no reference to his co-reign at all (cf. Thiele, 100; RSV, NRSV, NLT, HCSB, NET, and GNB). A handful of ancient manuscripts and versions omit the extra reference to Jehoshaphat, but the textual justification for the omission is slim. G. Rawlinson, "2 Kings," in *The Pulpit Commentary*, ed. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1909), 5:168. The phrase is retained by the ASV, NIV84, NASB95, and ESV. The NKJV retains the phrase but interprets it to mean that Jehoshaphat had been reigning prior to Jehoram's accession, and not that he continued to reign contemporaneously with Jehoram.

      [13] Philip C. Barker, "2 Chronicles," in *The Pulpit Commentary*, 6:254.

      [14] *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 598.

      [15] Eugene H. Merrill, "2 Chronicles," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor, 1985) 1:636; and in *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles,* 444–45. Likewise, Dillard suggests that the events following the translation narrative may be "dischronologized, i.e., not to be read as chronologically subsequent to Elijah's assumption in 2 Kgs 2," (*2 Chronicles,* 168). The *EHVSB* remarks, "In 2 Kings Elijah's ascent to heaven is recorded before the reign of Jehoram, indicating that the events in these books are not always recorded in chronological order." The Wartburg Project, Note on 2 Chr 21:12, *Holy Bible: Evangelical Heritage Version Study Bible* (Midland, MI: Northwestern, 2019).

a proleptic way when he is describing the exploits of Elijah, not desiring to leave off that theme until he is through with it. So it was with the story of Elijah's departure to heaven."[16]

There are several flaws with this proposal. First, the books of Kings generally present the history in chronological sequence. Certainly, it is difficult for the author to narrate the history in a direct linear sequence because the kings of the north and south lived contemporaneously and their reigns overlapped. The literary technique that he adopts to navigate the challenge is to switch back and forth between the accounts of the northern kings and the southern kings. Each time he makes the shift, he must go either backward or forward in time to resume the narrative where he had previously left off. But within the confines of an individual pericope devoted to north or south the author follows chronological sequence. Hence, the sequence of his presentation in this era is as follows: Ahab of Israel (1 Kgs 16:29–22:40), Jehoshaphat of Judah (1 Kgs 22:41–50), Ahaziah and Jehoram of Israel (1 Kgs 22:51–2 Kgs 8:15), and finally Jehoram of Judah (2 Kgs 8:16–24).

Utilizing this scheme, then, the author formally records Jehoshaphat's reign and death in 1 Kings 22. Yet subsequently Jehoshaphat reappears in 2 King 3. His reappearance does not represent a true chronological misplacement, however, nor is the previous record of his death proleptic. Rather, in 2 Kings 3 Jehoram of Israel is the primary character whose reign is being narrated, and Jehoshaphat (a southern king) is merely interweaved into the formal account of the northern king's reign as a secondary character when their lives intersect (in this case, they unite as allies in battle). Thus, the biblical author successfully navigates the challenge without resorting to actual chronological misplacements, though on the surface that may be the artificial impression created by his narratorial technique.

Now unlike Jehoshaphat, who is a southern king, Elijah is a prophet of the north. His activities are entirely within context when he is introduced into the narrative involving a northern king. There is no need to switch back and forth between accounts involving a northern king and Elijah as there is to switch between a northern king and a southern king. Hence, the activities of Elijah are introduced at the time and place within the narrative that they actually occurred. In this case, his translation is

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[16] Gleason L. Archer Jr., *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 226–227. It is not clear why Archer thinks that the biblical author is unwilling to break up the accounts of Elijah's exploits in order to put them into proper chronological sequence. After all, the sequence of events in 1 Kings 17–2 Kings 2 is as follows: Elijah's confrontations with Ahab over Baal worship (17:1–19:21); Ahab and war with the Syrians (20:1–43); Ahab, Naboth's vineyard, and Elijah's rebuke (21:1–29); Ahab and war with the Syrians (22:1-40); the reign of Jehoshaphat in Judah (22:41-50); Elijah's confrontation with Ahaziah over Baal worship (1 Kgs 22:51–2 Kgs 1:18); the translation of Elijah (2 Kgs 2:1-18). It is apparent that the author does not seem preoccupied with completing the whole story of Elijah within a single section of narrative, so there is no reason that he should feel compelled to relate the account of his translation proleptically. Furthermore, there is no direct connection between the account of his translation and his prior confrontation with King Ahaziah, so there is no story or thematic element that the author must feel compelled to carry over and complete in the following chapter. Moreover, if the author were willing to abandon chronological sequence for the sake of thematic unity, why not join together the accounts of Elijah's confrontations with Ahab and Ahaziah over Baal worship? Certainly, Elijah's zeal to rid the nation of Baal is a common thematic element that should have been told in a single section if that were the author's goal.

The LXX transposes chapters 20 and 21 of 1 Kings, thus putting the two accounts of Ahab's conflicts with the Syrians together as a single unit and preceding it with the story of Naboth's vineyard. Still, this arrangement does not alter the fact that the biblical author is perfectly willing to interrupt the narrative of Elijah's exploits with intervening accounts of battles with Syria and the reign of Jehoshaphat in Judah.

recorded in the middle of a single pericope—presented in chronological sequence— about the reigns of two northern kings; the chronological sequence maintained within this single section of narrative gives the clear impression that the translation took place right at the transition from one reign to the next.

Moreover, subsequent to the record of his translation, Elijah never again appeared on the scene. Rather, Elisha immediately rose to the fore, and the reader encounters him frequently and dominantly in the remaining chapters of this section. Indeed, as soon as the following chapter the king's servant characterizes Elisha as the one "who had poured water on the hands of Elijah" (2 Kgs 3:11).[17] The use of the past tense ("had poured"/"used to pour") suggests that Elisha is no longer "playing second fiddle" to Elijah, but rather that Elijah is gone and Elisha is now the dominant prophet in Israel.[18]

Finally, the biblical author creates an *inclusio* by framing the story of Elijah's ascension on both ends with a reference to Jehoram's succession to the throne (2 Kgs 1:17, 3:1). This is a literary technique that enables the author to "pause" the linear progression of the action (going neither backward nor forward in time) to relate an event that occurred simultaneously with Jehoram's royal accession. In other words, the author first tells the reader that Jehoram had just ascended to the throne. Then he pauses the story of Jehoram to explain that at this same time Elijah's translation took place. Then he "un-pauses" the story of Jehoram, repeating the prior reference to his royal accession and continuing forward with the narrative of his reign. Thus, the *inclusio* functions to alert the reader to the precise timing of Elijah's translation.[19]

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[17] פֹּה אֱלִישָׁע בֶּן־שָׁפָט אֲשֶׁר־יָצַק מַיִם עַל־יְדֵי אֵלִיָּהוּ

[18] Keil recognizes the significance of the past tense here (Qal perfect 3MS of יָצַק), but he tries to downplay its importance by explaining that "the only conclusion to be drawn from that is, that in the camp, or near it, was Elisha, Elijah's servant, not that Elijah was no longer upon earth. The perfect אֲשֶׁר יָצַק seems indeed to imply this; but it is questionable if we may so press the perfect, i.e., whether the speaker made use of it, or whether it was employed only by the later historian," 3:643. His suggestion that those exact words were not uttered by the speaker in the story but rather represent editorial work by the biblical narrator is unconvincing. Modern translations are unanimous in recognizing the past tense here and in assigning these words to the king's servant (ASV, ESV, HSCB, NASB95, NET, NIV84, NKJV, NLT, NRSV).

In a similar fashion, some modern scholars suggest that perhaps Elisha had begun his own independent ministry prior to Elijah's translation, such that their ministries overlapped, and he was simply the closer of the two prophets on this occasion (Dillard, 168; Hill, 515; McConville, 199; Selman, 455). The problem with the suggestion is twofold. First, Elijah is not merely absent from this particular episode, but rather he is absent from all of 2 Kings 3–8; after 2 Kings 2, he *never* appears on the scene. Second, the translation narrative conveys that as late as the day of the translation itself, he was still functioning in a subordinate role, for Elijah is still his authority ("head," 2 Kgs 2:3,5), and he calls Elijah "my father" (v. 12). The suggestion, therefore, that he was subordinate to Elijah while nonetheless consistently functioning independently of Elijah throughout all of 2 Kings 3–8 strains the text, for in these chapters we see the portrait of a prophet who performs twice the miracles of Elijah with a double portion of his spirit.

[19] In summary, some scholars attempt to move the fratricide and letter *back* to the time of Jehoram's co-regency, just prior to Elijah's departure in 2 Kings 2 (852 B.C.); this approach accounts for Elijah's absence from 2 Kings 3–8, but it contradicts the assertion of 2 Chronicles 21 that these events did not transpire until his sole reign. Others attempt to move Elijah's translation *up* to the beginning of Jehoram's sole reign, just subsequent to the fratricide and letter (848 B.C.); this approach accords with the data of 2 Chronicles 21, but it requires that 2 Kings 2 be chronologically displaced and offers no rationale for the absence of Elijah from 2 Kings 3–8, not to mention the prominent independent ministry of Elisha in those chapters (especially 3:11).

Yet another proposed solution assumes the existence of a copyist error in 2 Chronicles 21:12. Joseph Benson explains, "The difficulty has arisen by the inaccuracy of transcribers of the Scriptures, and that it should be, and was at first written Elisha, and not Elijah."[20] Likewise, Whiston confidently affirms, "The name of Elijah has very anciently crept into the text instead of Elisha, by the copiers."[21] The problem with this theory is that there is absolutely no textual or versional evidence to support the claim.[22] No doubt, this is why Whiston insists that it happened "very anciently," but emending the biblical text on a whim is neither a helpful nor a realistic solution. Furthermore, since Elijah is never mentioned elsewhere in the books of Chronicles, there is no reason that a scribe should have expected to encounter the name of Elijah in this passage any more than Elisha; hence, there is no rationale to explain how the supposed error arose.

Finally, there is the suggestion of James G. Murphy that the author of the letter is a different and lesser-known prophet by the same name.[23] Of course, there is no biblical evidence for another Elijah who functioned as a prophet at that time. Moreover, Chronicles refers to the author of the writing as "Elijah, the prophet," and the designation "the prophet" signals that the biblical author is speaking of the well-known prophet by that name, not some unknown seer.

John Lightfoot and Matthew Poole offer another version of this approach.[24] They argue that the writer of the letter is not actually Elijah, but rather Elisha or some other prophet whom the biblical author purposely calls "Elijah" to indicate that he is operating in the "power and spirit" of Elijah, much like John the Baptist. But there is no other instance in the Old Testament where a prophet is called "Elijah" in such a manner, and if there were many such prophets in Israel's history, then it makes John the Baptist far less compelling.

A Workable Solution

Often the simplest explanation is the best. A simple observation is that the word translated as "heaven" (שָׁמַיִם) commonly refers to the sky or atmosphere. It frequently refers to the "third heaven," where God dwells, but in the context of 2 Kings 2:1,11 it is perfectly natural to read this as a reference

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[20] *Commentary on the Old and New Testaments,* 2789.

[21] Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 252, note a.

[22] T. Whitelaw observes, "Besides being in the text, the word occurs in all existing Hebrew manuscripts and in all the Oriental versions." *The Pulpit Commentary*, 6:260. Likewise, Merrill affirms, "There is no question as to the integrity of the Masoretic Text as the absence of variant readings well attests," *Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles*, 444. See also Jamieson, 2:545.

[23] He makes the following arguments in favor of his position: "This prophet was distinct, as Cajetan concluded, from the Tishbite in time, place, and circumstance. He lived in the reign of Jehoram; the Tishbite was translated in the lifetime of his father (2 Kings 3:11). He acted in Judah; the Tishbite had his sphere of action in the northern kingdom. He wrote a prophecy; the Tishbite was engaged in speaking and acting. His description as 'the prophet' is quite common, and his name is the same in letters as Elihu, and therefore not unusual. A writing from a prophet is nothing strange (1 Chron. 28:19; Jer. 36)." James G. Murphy, *The Books of Chronicles*, Handbooks for Bible Classes (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1880), 126–127.

[24] John Lightfoot, *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot, D.D.*, ed. John Rogers Pitman (London: J. F. Dove, 1823), 12:19–20. Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1853), 1:844.

to the place where birds fly and clouds float.[25] Furthermore, in neither instance is the word "heaven" preceded by the preposition "to"; rather, the noun is in the accusative and functions in a directive manner.[26] In other words, the Hebrew merely conveys the notion of ascending in the direction of heaven, or "skyward." It does not actually affirm that he went "to heaven."[27] As an illustration of biblical usage, one will observe that the exact same three key words in 2 Kings 2:1,11 are used in Psalm 107:25–26: "whirlwind/stormy wind" (סְעָרָה),[28] "ascend" (עָלָה), and "heaven" (שָׁמַיִם). Like Elijah, the psalm says that the sailors on their ships "ascend heavenward" by means of a "stormy wind" that raises up the waves. Therefore, rather than re-arranging the chronology, emending the text, inventing new prophets, or assuming actions not actually stated, it is much simpler to understand that God lifted up Elijah with a whirlwind toward the sky and then transported him to some other unknown geographic location (probably in or near Israel), where he lived out the rest of his life in quiet retirement, save for the one exceptional instance when he broke his silence with a letter.[29]

There are several indicators within the story of Elijah that function as converging lines of evidence for this straightforward reading of 2 Kings 2. First, Elijah had a history of hiding in undisclosed locations where nobody could find him for extended periods of time. One thinks of his hiding at the brook Cherith (1 Kgs 17:2–6). Later, when Obadiah encountered Elijah he said, "As Yahweh your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my lord has not sent to seek you, and when they would say 'He is not here,' he would make the kingdom or the nation swear that they had not found you" (1 Kgs 18:10). Subsequently, he went alone into the southern wilderness and Mount Sinai (1 Kgs 19:3–8). Thus, to "vanish" Elijah did not have to leave this world; he knew how to hide.

Second, Elijah had a reputation for being transported suddenly and supernaturally to other geographic locations by the Holy Spirit. Obadiah referenced this when he said to Elijah, "Yet now you say, 'Go tell your lord, "Behold, Elijah!"' And as soon as I am gone from you, the Spirit of Yahweh will carry you somewhere I do not know, so when I come and tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will kill me" (1 Kgs 18:11–12). This mode of transportation was not unique to Elijah. Ezekiel was transported this way (Ez 3:12,14) as well as Philip (Acts 8:39–40).

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[25] Some scholars who believe in Elijah's bodily assumption to heaven nonetheless concede that here in 2 Kings 2 the term *heaven* refers merely to the sky. G. Rawlinson, 5:21; Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, NAC 8 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 257–59. This leaves one to wonder about the basis of their belief in Elijah's heavenly assumption, since this is the only passage in the entire Bible that describes his removal, and it mentions only the sky—not heaven.

[26] Williams, 20. Keil, 3:206. This construction is common with the word *heaven*. Alternatively, House translates the phrase as a construct: "the storm of the heavens," 257.

[27] The LXX says that the Lord brought him up "as it were, into heaven" (ὡς εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν), indicating that the translators did not believe he actually went to heaven.

[28] The Hebrew term translated as "whirlwind" means "storm, tempest, gale, i.e., a naturally occurring weather storm with a focus on rapid movement of air blowing (or swirling) in the storm, but may include rain and lightning, often with a focus on destructive force." James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), s.v. סְעָרָה

[29] Compare Roy E. Knuteson, "Elijah's Little-Known Letter in 2 Chronicles 21:12–15," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162 (2005): 23–32. He aptly remarks (30) that the text "does not demand an entrance into the celestial heaven by means of a whirlwind. Consistent with the rest of the story, 2 Kings 2:1,11 simply means he was taken *upward in the direction of heaven*. . . . Unlike Jesus, he did not pass "through the heavens" (Heb 4:14) in his brief ride through the atmosphere above."

Third, there were fifty eyewitnesses of this event among the sons of the prophets. They all knew in advance that Elijah's public ministry was coming to a close that day (2 Kgs 2:3–7), so they fully understood what was about to happen. When the event transpired, these fifty men were unanimous in their assessment and interpretation of what they had just witnessed. They believed that the Holy Spirit had merely lifted Elijah up from the earth and then dropped him off on some mountain or in some valley (2 Kgs 2:16);[30] none believed that he had entered the afterlife by bodily assumption. They were so convinced of this that they wanted to go look for him. If they were mistaken in their understanding, Elisha never corrected them. He only insisted that it would be a waste of time to seek for him because they would not find him (2 Kgs 2:16–18).

Despite these indicators within the text, however, most scholars read the account of Elijah's ascension in 2 Kings 2 as an event that parallels Enoch's translation in Genesis 5. Yet a careful reading of the text reveals that the author of Kings is describing a different kind of event. Genesis 5:24 characterizes Enoch's removal in absolute and existential terms: it says simply that "he was not," or literally "there was non-existence of him" (וְאֵינֶנּוּ). The absolute and unqualified nature of the statement conveys that he no longer existed *anywhere* in the world.[31] There is no comparable statement made about Elijah; rather, the text says only that he was "not found" by the sons of the prophets (וְלֹא מְצָאֻהוּ, 2 Kgs 2:17) and he was "not seen" again by Elisha (וְלֹ רָאָהוּ עוֹד, 2 Kgs 2:12), but it never says in absolute terms that "he was not." A true parallel would require an explicit negation of his existence in this world, as with Enoch.

It is true that both Enoch and Elisha are said to be "taken" (לָקַח), but not in the same way. Once again, the taking of Enoch is stated in absolute terms. Genesis 5:24 says merely that "God took him" (לָקַח אֹתוֹ אֱלֹהִים). There is no prepositional phrase to limit or define that from which God took him. The implication of this unqualified statement is that God took him from our entire realm, for Moses is here offering the explanation for Enoch's "non-existence" in this world. By contrast, the "taking" of Elijah is always stated in a restricted and qualified manner. That is, his taking is defined solely in terms of his relationship to Elisha. In fact, no fewer than four times does the text speak of God taking Elijah, and in all four instances it is Elisha from whom he is taken. Twice the text explicitly

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[30] The form of the Hebrew grammar that they used indicates that they truly believed that Elijah had been transported to another location, and thus they were not merely "hoping against hope." They use the word פֶּן followed by a perfect verb. Gesenius explains that the word is normally followed by the imperfect, but in the rare exception, as here, it conveys "a vivid presentment of the time when the fear is realized." Friedrich Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch and Arthur Ernest Cowley, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), 318 (§ 107 q, n. 3). Similarly, Ewald's grammar explains that פֶּן is used "with the perfect to indicate fear for an action which may almost certainly be expected to have actually been accomplished already." Heinrich Ewald, *Syntax of the Hebrew Language of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1891), 227. Of its 133 occurrences in the OT, there is only one other passage where the term is utilized with a perfect rather than an imperfect verb: 2 Samuel 20:6, where David expresses his fear that Sheba has likely already had enough time to capture fortified cities due to Amasa's delay. Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, "פֶּן," *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 814–815. Victor P. Hamilton, "1780 פֶּן," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 2:726–727.

[31] Clearly, Enoch did not cease to exist altogether, for Hebrews 11:5 speaks of his "translation" (μετάθεσις), which means that he was either transported to another location or underwent some kind of transformation. Hence, the meaning of Genesis 5:24 is that he no longer existed in our realm. Compare Psalm 39:13, where the psalmist uses the same terminology to express the idea of departing this world by means of death, and hence he would exist no more in this world.

affirms that he would be taken "away from" Elisha (מֵעִמָּךְ in 2 Kgs 2:9, and מֵאִתָּךְ in 2 Kgs 2:10). An additional two times the text affirms that God would take him specifically from his position of *authority* over Elisha ("Today Yahweh is taking away your master from over your head," 2 Kgs 2:3, 5).[32] Thus, rather than stating that Elijah left this world, the Bible more modestly claims that God took him away from the limelight and allowed Elisha to rise to the fore. It is his leadership and mentorship of Elisha from which God took him; the text explicitly states that, and nothing more. In summary, the biblical author seems to go out of his way to describe the translation of Elijah in very restricted and qualified terms, whereas Moses describes the translation of Enoch in absolute terms.[33]

The Extra-Biblical Data

The suggestion that Elijah did not leave this world in the whirlwind is not a new one. On the contrary, this seems to have been a common interpretation among ancient Jews and early Christians. The Jewish apocryphal book of Sirach (c. 200–175 B.C.) says only that Elijah was "taken up" (48:9)[34] and that he was "covered/hidden" in the whirlwind (48:12);[35] it does not affirm that he went to heaven. More explicitly, Josephus says that at the time of King Ahaziah's death "Elijah vanished from among men, and until this day no one knows of his death."[36] Additionally, some copies of Josephus explain that Elijah was subsequently able to send the letter to King Jehoram precisely because "he was yet upon the earth."[37] Likewise, *Seder Olam Rabbah* (c. A.D. 160) says, "In the second year of Ahaziah Elijah was hidden, and he will not be seen again until King Messiah comes . . . . And there came to him [Jehoram] a writing from Elijah . . . after Elijah had been hidden for seven years."[38] The *Talmud* quotes Rabbi Yosei as asserting that "Elijah never actually ascended to heaven on high."[39] These Jewish sources agree that Elijah disappeared from among men, but they seem rather ambivalent about

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[32] הַיּוֹם יְהוָה לֹקֵחַ אֶת־אֲדֹנֶיךָ מֵעַל רֹאשֶׁךָ

[33] In Genesis 5:24 the LXX offers a very loose and interpretational translation of the Hebrew: καὶ εὐηρέστησεν Ενωχ τῷ θεῷ καὶ οὐχ ηὑρίσκετο, ὅτι μετέθηκεν αὐτὸν ὁ θεός. This translation deviates from the MT in three key ways: (1) it says that Enoch "pleased" God, rather than "walked" with God; (2) it says that he "was not being found," rather than "he was not"; and (3) it says that God "translated" him rather than "took" him. Certainly, its overall interpretation of what happened to Enoch is accurate, for Hebrews 11:5 quotes from the LXX, but its choice of wording blurs the sharp distinctions between Enoch and Elijah that are more evident in the MT.

[34] The LXX adds that he was taken up in both "a whirlwind of fire and a chariot of fiery horses." The Syriac adds that he was taken "heavenward," presumably on the basis of 2 Kings 2:2, 11.

[35] Admittedly, however, the original Hebrew version of this verse is badly preserved at the end. Based upon some partial manuscript evidence, Smend and Charles reconstruct the text to read that he was "hidden in heavenly chambers," whereas the LXX, KJV, and Peters have the text as "he was hidden in a whirlwind." Robert Henry Charles, ed., *Apocrypha of the Old Testament: Apparatuses* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), 1:500–501.

[36] Ἠλίας ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἠφανίσθη καὶ οὐδεὶς ἔγνω μέχρι τῆς σήμερον αὐτοῦ τὴν τελευτήν. *Antiquities of the Jews*, IX.2.2§28.

[37] William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 252, note a.

[38] ובשנה השנית לאחזיה נגנז אליהו ולא נראה עד שיבא מלך המשיח ... ויבא אליו מכתב מאליהו ... כבר היה לאליהו זי שנים משנגנז: Accessed September 8, 2020, https://www.sefaria.org/Seder_Olam_Rabbah.17?vhe=Seder_Olam,_Warsaw_1904&lang=he.

[39] Sukkah 5a, *The William Davidson Talmud*; accessed October 3, 2020, www.sefaria.org/Sukkah.5a.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en.

the matter of *where* he went; they do not insist upon a bodily assumption to heaven. Furthermore, both Josephus and *Seder Olam* agree that his translation occurred at the end of Ahaziah's reign (852 B.C.), thus indicating that they do not believe the event is "chronologically misplaced" in 2 Kings. Finally, it is noteworthy that none seems puzzled or troubled by Elijah's sending a letter some years later, as if the account introduces some kind of apparent discrepancy into the narrative that needs to be resolved.

Moving to early Christian sources, Ephraem Syrus (A.D. 306–373) says the whirlwind "lifted up Elijah on high; however, to what place it transported him or when it set him down, Scripture has not said. What is certain is that some years after his seizure, the letter of Elijah was brought to Jehoram, King of Judah, with threatenings and full of terror."[40] Others stress the wording of the LXX (ὡς εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν). For example, Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 313–386) draws a contrast between Christ and Elijah: "This one, 'as if into Heaven' (4 Kg. 2:11), but Christ directly into Heaven."[41] Chrysostom (347–407) says, "Elias was taken up, as though to heaven; for he was a servant. But Jesus was taken up to heaven; for He was the Lord."[42] Likewise, Theodoret (393–458) says, "Although the great Elijah ascended, it was not into Heaven—but as if into Heaven."[43] More emphatically, Photios (c. 810–893) explains, "Elijah, as a slave, was taken to the aerial heights, but not into Heaven, but *as it were into Heaven* (4 Kg. 2:11). The Lord, as the Ruler of all, ascended not *as it were into Heaven*, but truly into Heaven did He ascend."[44]

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[40] The translation is my own, based on the Latin: "Eliam, in sublime extulit: quonam vero transtulerit aut ubi demiserit, Scriptura reticuit. Quod indubitale est, post aliquot ab hoc raptu annos Eliae literae ad Joramum regem Juda allatae fuerunt minarum, ac terroris plenae." Severus, *Sancti Patris Nostri Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia Quæ Exstant, Græce, Syriace, Latine Commentary of the Monk*, ed. and trans. Joseph Simonius Assemani, Petrus Benedictus, and Stefanus Evodius Assemani, (Rome: Typographia Pontificia Vaticana, 1737), 4:520. Severus wrote his *Commentary of the Monk* in A.D. 861, and this edition contains the original Syriac quotation of Ephraem as well as the Latin translation in parallel columns. Part of this statement is also quoted in John Peter Lange, et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: 2 Kings* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 15; and Keil, 3:209n5.

Elsewhere, however, Ephraem Syrus seems to contradict himself when he says, "For Him Elijah longed, and when Him on earth he saw not, he, through faith most throughly cleansed, mounted up in heaven to see Him. Moses saw Him and Elijah; the meek man from the depth ascended, the zealous from on high descended, and in the midst beheld the Son." "Nineteen Hymns on the Nativity of Christ in the Flesh," in *Gregory the Great (Part II), Ephraim Syrus, Aphrahat*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. J. B. Morris and A. Edward Johnston, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, vol. 13 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1898), 224.

[41] Cyril of Jerusalem, "The Catechetical Lectures of S. Cyril, Archbishop of Jerusalem," in *S. Cyril of Jerusalem, S. Gregory Nazianzen*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. R. W. Church and Edwin Hamilton Gifford, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, vol. 7 (New York: Christian Literature, 1894), 101.

[42] "Christ's Ascension Man's Exaltation," in *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, trans. and ed. M. F. Toal, vol. 2 (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1958), 438. The original Greek citation is provided by Johann Caspar Suicer, *Thesaurus Ecclesiasticus* (Amsterdam: 1682), 1:1317.

[43] Quoted in Peter Mikhalev, "Did Enoch and Elijah (Elias) Ascend into Heaven?," trans. Jesse Dominick; accessed September 12, 2020, www.orthochristian.com/105525.html. The Greek is cited in Suicer, 1:1317; he provides similar Greek quotations from Theophylact and Œcumenius.

[44] Ibid.

Ramifications

Getting the story right matters because the account of Elijah's translation has important theological ramifications. For example, if he actually went to heaven on that occasion, what happened to his body?[45] There are only two options. First, he could have entered heaven yet in his mortal and fallen body. Few theologians accept this option,[46] however, because of the principle that without holiness "no one shall see the Lord" (Heb 12:14). Furthermore, the saints in heaven have been "perfected" (Heb 12:23). The other option is that he was glorified and his body enjoyed the transformation from mortality to immortality.[47] In other words, he experienced the reality of resurrection, much the same way as living believers will be transformed instantly at the Rapture (1 Cor 15:51–55).[48] The problem here is that the NT emphatically states that Jesus was the first to enjoy that transformation into a glorified resurrection body. In 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23 Paul writes, "But now Christ has been raised from the dead as the firstfruits of those who have slept. . . . But every man in his own order: Christ, the firstfruits; then they who belong to Christ at his coming." To give this honor to Elijah is to rob Christ of his glory as "the firstborn from the dead" and his preeminence in all things (Col 1:18).

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[45] One may be tempted to ask the same question about Enoch, but unlike the narrative on Elijah, Genesis 5:24 says nothing about his going to heaven; it says only that God took him. Also, Genesis says nothing about God taking him bodily. That may be a legitimate implication of the statement in Hebrews 11:5 that he did not "see death." However, one could interpret this expression to mean only that he did not experience death in the usual fashion. That is, usually one's soul departs his body as a consequence of the body's breaking down due to disease, injury, or old age and decay. In the case of Enoch, however, he may have simply walked right out of a perfectly healthy and functioning body without experiencing the normal bodily breakdown. At any rate, there is not enough biblical data about where and how he was taken to reach theological conclusions.

[46] Perhaps Heinrich Ewald intends to represent the exceptional view when he states that Elijah's "mysterious life" continued in heaven uninterrupted by death so that someday he could return from there to earth ("als ein durch keinen Tod unterbrochenes geheimnissvolles Leben im Himmel fortsezend, daher auch als stets bereit vondort auf die Erde zurückzukehren.") *Geschichte des Volkes Israel bis Christus*, (Göttingen, 1847), 3:258.

[47] A small minority of scholars represent a third option: that he did not ascend to heaven bodily, but rather he died on that occasion and ascended spiritually. Consequently, Geisler says of Elijah at the transfiguration that he had been "dead for centuries," so he appeared on the mount in a "spiritual, disembodied form," while Packer says that he appeared there in a temporary "re-embodied" form. Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume Four: Church, Last Things* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2005), 250, 294-95. J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1993), 255. Of course, the text says nothing about his death on this occasion, but this view does avoid the theological difficulty.

[48] Matthew Henry asserts, "He would shortly take him from the world, not by death, but translate him body and soul to heaven, as Enoch was, only causing him to undergo such a change as would be necessary to the qualifying of him to be an inhabitant in that world of spirits, and such as those shall undergo who will be found alive at Christ's coming," 521. Likewise, Charles Simeon says, "The honour conferred on him was not that he alone should have a glorified body, but that he should possess it now, whilst others must wait for it till the resurrection of the just." *Horae Homileticae: Judges to 2 Kings* (London: Samuel Holdsworth, 1836), 3:458. More recently Carl F. Henry asserts that his earthly body was "transformed without any physical disintegration." *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 4:611. See also Guy P. Duffield and Nathaniel M. Van Cleave, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology* (Los Angeles: L.I.F.E. Bible College, 1983), 541; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 1025.

For the dispensationalist who interprets the book of Revelation in a literal and futurist manner,[49] the suggestion that Elijah has already received his resurrection body introduces another problem. Dispensationalists believe that Elijah is one of the two witnesses in Revelation 11:7–12 who will be killed by the Antichrist and subsequently resurrected. But if Elijah is already in his glorified and immortal body, how can he die in the tribulation period?[50]

Apart from the issue of his body, however, the concept of a heavenly ascension in the OT era raises theological questions in itself. For example, how does one square this concept with Jesus' explicit statement to Nicodemus that "no one has ascended to heaven except he who descended: the Son of Man" (Jn 3:13)?[51] This in turn introduces the related question of where the souls of the saints went upon death during the OT era. On this topic there is no widespread agreement. Many believe that they went to heaven just as saved souls do today,[52] but there is an alternate belief that they went to a

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[49] In support of this approach to Revelation, see the excellent article by Brian Collins, "The Futurist Interpretation of Revelation: Intertextual Evidence from the Prologue*," JBTW* 2/1 (2021): 33–52.

[50] Wishing to avoid the theological dilemma, Pope Gregory I (c. 540–604) stated, "From the Old Testament we learn that Elias was rapt up to heaven. But the upper ethereal heaven is one, another the lower aerial heaven. The aerial is closer to the earth; so we speak of the birds of heaven, because we see them fly in this aerial heaven. Elias was raised up to this heaven that he might swiftly be brought to some hidden region of the earth, where, in great peace of body and soul, he would live till the end of the world, when he would return to pay the debt of nature. For he but postponed death; he did not escape it. But Our Redeemer, as He did not postpone it, but rose above it, and rising from the dead defeated it, ascending into heaven proclaimed the glory of His Resurrection." "Homily 29: Explanations and Reflections on the Ascension (Mark 16:14-20)," May 24, AD 591 in *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, 2:428. To this day many within the Eastern Orthodox tradition hold that Elijah yet lives in his natural body—not in heaven—but somewhere in the sky or outer space, if not on earth. Hence, he neither died on earth nor went to heaven.

[51] The usual explanation is that technically many people had indeed ascended to heaven, but Christ's meaning is that none who had been there was able fully to process and comprehend the spiritual realities they experienced there such that they could then return to earth and explain those truths to others. For example, Edwin A. Blum states, "No one has ever gone into heaven and then come back to earth, able to give clear teaching about divine matters." "John," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary,* 2:281. Likewise, H. R. Reynolds says, "Enoch, Elijah, may have been translated that they should not see death, but they are not so lifted into the abode of God that they might come thence charged with heavenly truth, and able to explain the 'how' of Divine grace." *The Gospel of John,* The Pulpit Commentary, 1:119.

This interpretation of the text, however, is not without difficulty. After Christ's resurrection the Apostle John, who had seen heaven in visionary form, gave perfectly clear teaching on the heavenly realities in the book of Revelation. Likewise, in the OT era Isaiah saw a vison of Christ upon his heavenly throne (Isa. 6), and he had no problem conveying to his contemporaries what he had experienced. If those who had experienced heaven in visionary form could convey their experiences to an earthly audience, why not those who had experienced it in person?

[52] This is probably the interpretation most preferred by conservatives. According to this view, in the few instances where the righteous speak of descending to Sheol, they are either speaking figuratively (e.g., Jon 2:2) or merely expressing fear of a premature or "bad death" (e.g., Is 38:10). Shaul Bar, "Grave Matters: Sheol in the Hebrew Bible," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 43:3 (2015), 145–153. Chad Brand, "Sheol," *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary,* ed. Chad Brand, et al., (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1482–84. Kyle Dunham, "Did OT Believers Go to Sheol?," www.dbts.edu/ 2019/05/01/did-ot-believers-go-to-sheol. Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949) 170–191. Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove,: InterVarsity, 2002), 79–82. Among others, Alexander and Ryrie point to the story of Elijah's heavenly ascent as proof that OT saints went to heaven rather than Sheol, but this argument assumes *a priori* that the term "heaven" in the narrative refers to God's abode rather than the sky. T. Desmond Alexander, "The Old Testament View of Life After Death," *Themelios* 11/2 (Jan. 1986), 44; Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 607.

The opposite view, commonly held by critical scholars, is that all people—righteous and unrighteous alike— shared a common fate in the murky, shadowy underworld that is Sheol. Supposedly, any notions of distinct destinies or a

place of paradise located in the heart of the earth.[53] It is beyond the scope of this article to argue the merits of this alternate view,[54] but it is worth making one vital observation. For any pastor who subscribes to the alternate theory, one can only imagine the confusion that results in the pews when one Sunday he preaches that OT saints did not go to heaven when they left this world, and the next Sunday he preaches that Elijah went to heaven. This is why systematic theology matters! Without synthesizing the biblical data into a coherent whole, one will contradict himself from one Sunday's exposition of a given text to the next Sunday's exposition of a different text.

The problems are compounded when one reaches unwarranted theological conclusions based on the supposition of Elijah's heavenly ascent. For example, a common assertion is that his ascension

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subsequent resurrection are later developments influenced by Persian, Greek, or Roman thought. J. Harold Ellens, "Afterlife and Underworld in the Bible," in *Heaven, Hell, and the Afterlife*, ed. J. Harold Ellens (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013), 1–5. Joachim Jeremias, s.v. "ᾅδης" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* ed. Gerhard Kittle, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:146–47.

R. Laird Harris argues that the concept of Sheol is not helpful in determining the destiny of the saved in the afterlife because it *always* refers to the grave in which the bodies of the saved and unsaved alike are buried. "The Meaning of the Word Sheol as Shown by Parallels in Poetic Texts," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society 4* (1956): 129–35. See also Eriks Galenieks, *The Nature, Function, and Purpose of the Term Sheol in the Torah, Prophets, and Writings* (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 2005), 621. It is this interpretation that lies behind the NIV's frequent translation of Sheol as "grave." R. Laird Harris, "The Translation of Sheol," in *The Making of the NIV*, ed. Kenneth L. Barker (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 56–69.

[53] If this perspective is correct, then presumably this is where Enoch was taken. Even if he went there in his mortal body, it would not pose the theological difficulty one encounters in suggesting that either he or Elijah went into the immediate presence of God in heaven while yet in their depraved state.

[54] Briefly stated, key arguments in favor of the idea include the following. (1) The implication that Christ himself was in Hades, rather than heaven, during the time of his death (Acts 2:31). (2) Christ's statement that he would be in the heart of the earth while dead for three days (Mt 12:40). (3) In the OT all who die—saved and unsaved alike—are consistently said to "go down" to Sheol, to the "lowest parts of the earth," or to the "depths of the earth"; they never go up toward heaven. Conversely, when Samuel returned from the dead he came "up" out of the earth rather than down from heaven (1 Sm 28:13–15). In this regard, sheol is the cosmological opposite of heaven (Ps 139:8). (4) Peter's usage of the term *Tartarus* in 2 Peter 2:4, which suggests that Hades is compartmentalized. (Pseudo-Apollodorus refers to Tartarus as a very dark place "in Hades": τόπος δὲ οὗτος ἐρεβώδης ἐστὶν ἐν Ἅιδου. *Library and Epitome (Greek),* ed. James George Frazer [Medford, MA: Perseus Digital Library, 1921], 1:4.) (5) The explicit statement of Christ to Nicodemus that no man had ascended to heaven (Jn 3:13).

A major problem with this interpretation is that the OT consistently portrays Sheol as a dark and dismal place; there is no reference to comfort or Abraham's bosom. Admittedly, however, most of the references to Sheol are associated with the unrighteous for whom indeed it is a dreary place. Furthermore, Alexander suggests that the hope of the OT saints was not found in the mysterious intermediate state, about which they could know little. Even if it were comfortable for the righteous, it nonetheless was a place of disembodied spirits tucked away in the heart of the earth. Hence, the righteous looked past the intermediate state and found their only hope in resurrection, full restoration, and the immediate presence of God (Ps 49:14–15). By contrast, for the unrighteous the awful realities of Sheol will simply give way to more of the same in eternity, and this accounts for the typical OT portrayal of Sheol as dreary and hopeless (41–46).

This compartmentalized view of Hades was prevalent among the ancient Jews (1 Enoch 22; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, IX.18.3§14) as well as the early Church Fathers. For example, Hippolytus of Rome gives a rather extended description of the two compartments in Hades ("Against Plato, On the Cause of the Universe," 1). In the modern era, advocates of this view include Herman A. Hoyt, *The End Times* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 36–47; Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity: The Doctrines of Salvation, the Church, and Last Things* (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 3:313–28; and Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, rev. Vernon D. Doerksen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 381–82. Other scholars who are less committed to this view but who are open to the possibility include Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 2:1370; and I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), 637.

prefigures or typifies Christ's own glorious ascension to heaven.[55] Apart from the obvious fact that Christ did not ascend in a whirlwind, Lange's commentary offers an insightful assessment of this theological assumption:

> The Scriptures speak with very different, and in fact very definite, expressions of the departure of Christ, not as a removal or translation, but as an ascent into heaven and a reception there, an entrance into the glory, which he had before the foundations of the earth were laid (Mark 16:19; Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9–11; 2:33 *sq.*; 7:55; John 17:5, 24). Christ actually tasted death, but he arose from the dead and was elevated, as victor over sin and death, to the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (Hebr. 8:1). . . . In the case of Christ, the Ascension forms an integral and essential moment in His work of salvation.

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[55] Matthew Henry states, "He looked forward to the evangelical dispensation, and, in the translation of Elijah, gave a type and figure of the ascension of Christ and the opening of the kingdom of heaven to all believers" (522). Similarly, Keil affirms that Elijah was "taken to heaven as the forerunner of Christ (Mal 3:23, 24; Mt 11:10, 11) without tasting of death, to predict the ascension of our Lord, and to set it forth in Old Testament mode," 3:209. J. Orr calls the event "a striking Old Testament anticipation of the ascension of Christ," *The Pulpit Commentary,* 5:38.

With an increased interest in premodern figural interpretations of the OT, this is still a common assertion. C. F. Moore affirms that "both the ascensions of Enoch and Elijah ultimately testify (*testis*) and herald (*praenuntius*)" Christ's own ascension. "No One Has Ascended into Heaven Except the One Who Descends: The Climax of Ascension in Scripture." *Journal of Theological Interpretation* (2022): 5. Patrick Schreiner says of the narrative, "It is an ascent, witnessing, and succession story. . . . Readers should lay this story on Acts 1:9–11." *The Ascension of Christ: Recovering a Neglected Doctrine*, ed. Michael F. Bird (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 28–29. Cf. Mitchell L. Chase, *40 Questions About Typology and Allegory,* Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2020), 228; Justin Alexandru Mihoc, "The Ascension of Jesus Christ: A Critical and Exegetical Study of the Ascension in Luke-Acts and in the Jewish and Christian Contexts" (Master's thesis, Durham University, 2010), 18–21, 106.

In this regard, Elijah is commonly seen as filling a dual typological role. That is, on the one hand the Elijah-Elisha cycle is seen to prefigure the ministries of John the Baptist and his greater successor, the Christ. Yet on the other hand, the OT narrative is seen simultaneously to typify the ministry of Christ and his succession by the Church. E.g. Raymond B. Dillard, *Faith in the Face of Apostasy: The Gospel according to Elijah & Elisha*, ed. Tremper Longman III and J. Alan Groves, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999), 9–12, 84–86. See also James M. Hamilton Jr., *Typology: Understanding the Bible's Promise-Shaped Patterns: How Old Testament Expectations Are Fulfilled in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 134–140.

Steven Edward Harris acknowledges the points of contact between the prophetic ministry of Elijah and that of Christ, but he suggests that with the NT allusions to the OT narrative the intent of the author is not to invite comparison so much as to highlight the differences. For example, unlike Elijah the Church does not outdo Christ's miraculous work but rather testifies to it. Furthermore, the Church does not operate independent of the ascended Christ, but rather through his power and in union with him. "Greater Resurrections and a Greater Ascension: Figural Interpretation of Elijah and Jesus," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 13 (2019): 21–35. Similarly, Allen C. Myers remarks, "Christ's ascension produced a community of witnesses (rather than a successor)" (326–327. Benedict Pictet conceded that Elijah was "carried up by the power of another; Christ ascended by his own power. . . . The *cloud* which received the Saviour, and carried him up to heaven, was not intended as a vehicle, like the chariot of Elijah." *Christian Theology*, trans. Frederick Reyroux (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board, n.d.), 265–266. Darrell L. Bock argues that "Luke's typology is one of 'times' not 'persons.' There is allusion to Elijah's ministry in Luke, but it serves to cast Jesus' ministry in relief against the background of the great prophet of old. The time of salvation has come, and it is a time which demands response." He further suggests that "Jesus' refusal to bring down fire from heaven (9:51–56) severs the connection, while the parallel of being 'taken up to heaven' (Lk 9:51) only reflects that Jesus is specially blessed in his reception. None of these allusions require the conclusion that Jesus is identified as the 'new Elijah.'" "Elijah and Elisha," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 205. Finally, as already observed the Church Fathers commonly viewed the analogy of Elijah as a vehicle of contrast: Christ ascended to heaven, having conquered death, whereas Elijah merely ascended to the sky, yet in his mortal body. Thus, the connections between Elijah and Christ are more complex and nuanced than a simple formula that equates the supposed bodily assumptions of Enoch and Elijah to the ascension of the resurrected Christ.

There begins His kingly function, and that redemptive work which lasts into eternity (Hebr. 4:14; 5:9, 10; 9:12). In the case of Elijah, on the contrary, his entire work ceases upon his translation. It is not the entrance into a broader, higher activity in heaven, but the end, even though a glorious end, of his work, and on this account it cannot pass for a type of the Ascension of Christ.[56]

In a similar fashion, some view the narrative as a type of our own heavenly ascension at the Rapture.[57] There are no intertextual connections, however, between the OT account and the key NT passages that describe the Rapture (1 Cor 15:51–54, 1 Thes 4:13–18). The OT narrative lays stress upon the whirlwind, the fiery chariot and horses, and the successor who is "left behind" to carry on the work. None of this has a parallel in the NT passages. Likewise, apart from our ascent,[58] the NT portrayal of the Rapture includes the following elements: (1) Christ's descent from heaven, (2) the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God, (3) resurrection and transformation, and (4) a grand reunion with Christ and all the saints in the sky. Of course, a type need not correspond to the antitype in every aspect, but not one of these elements is represented in the OT account. In particular, the omission of any reference in the OT narrative to glorification and a reunion in the sky would make the account almost entirely miss the point of the Rapture, rather than illustrating it. Certainly, the story illustrates God's ability to transport people supernaturally, but it is not likely that it was intended by God to function as a prophetic portrayal of the Church's Rapture.[59]

Not only does a proper reading of the story avoid theological problems, but it also lends theological clarity. For example, many believe that the other witness who will accompany Elijah during the tribulation period is Enoch because these two men were supposedly the only ones who experienced a bodily assumption to heaven. But if, in fact, Elijah did not ascend to heaven in that

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[56] John Peter Lange et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: 2 Kings*, 19.

[57] W. A. Criswell states of Elijah's ascent, "This is a type of, and an illustration of, that final and ultimate rapture of the people of Christ into the presence of the Lord, when this mortal shall have put on immortality." https://wacriswell.com/sermons/1961/the-rapture-of-elijah. Likewise, Thomas D. Ice insists that "Enoch and Elijah stand as types of the rapture of the church." "The Rapture in History and Prophecy" (2009), 4; https://digitalcommons. liberty.edu/pretrib_arch/35. Cf. Ephraem Syrus, who claims that Elijah was taken up "in the twinkling of an eye." *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan*, trans. C. W. Mitchell (London: Williams and Norgate, 1912), 1:xlvi. He further identifies Elijah as "a type of the living, that fly to meet Him at His coming" (A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 13:224).

[58] Modern scholars commonly refer to the "rapture" of Elijah, using terminology familiar to us from the Latin translation of 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Here Paul uses the term ἁρπάζω, and elsewhere the NT uses this term to describe Philip's sudden and rapid departure from the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:39) and Paul's transport to paradise (2 Cor 12:4). In the OT, the LXX utilizes the term thirty-five times, but it is not the term employed by the LXX in 2 Kings 2. There the LXX uses the terms ἀνάγω (2:1) and ἀναλαμβάνω (2:11). In the apocryphal *Acts of Pilate*, Nicodemus illustrates the distinction when he observes that Elijah was not "raptured" (ἁρπάζω) and dropped off on some mountain, but rather he was "received up" (ἀναλαμβάνω) into heaven. "Gospel of Nicodemus/Acts of Pilate," 15:1, *Greek Apocryphal Gospels, Fragments and Agrapha: Texts and Transcriptions*, ed. Rick Brannan (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2013). In the case of Elijah, they knew in advance that he would be departing that day, and the event unfolded slowly enough that eyewitnesses could observe it; hence, Elijah's ascent was not the same kind of ascent connoted by the term "rapture."

[59] The post-tribulational view of the Rapture is that the saints return back to earth after their skyward ascent, rather than progressing onward to heaven, as in the pre-tribulational view. If, therefore, Elijah did not actually ascend to heaven, the event would better illustrate a post-tribulational Rapture than the pre-tribulation view held by Ice and Criswell.

whirlwind, then the supposed connection between the two men does not exist.[60] This opens the door to consider the other possibility that has often been suggested: that Moses is the other witness.[61] Apart from the fact that the miracles attributed to the two witnesses in Revelation 11:5–6 are reminiscent of those performed by Moses and Elijah in the OT, there are other obvious connections between the two men that are commonly observed. For example, they appeared together on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt 17:3–4). Also, they are both mentioned in the concluding verses of the OT in anticipation of the Messiah's coming (Mal 4:4–6).[62]

In addition to these common observations, the account of Elijah's translation offers a further connection between the prophet and Moses: their earthly ministries both came to an end in a similar manner. Moses was last seen ascending (עָלָה) Mount Nebo, after which he died and was buried at an unknown and undisclosed location (Dt 34:1–7). Similarly, Elijah was last seen ascending (עָלָה) in a whirlwind, and subsequently he apparently died and was buried at an unknown location.[63]

Finally, apart from the theological ramifications, there are hermeneutical lessons to be learned. A key rule of Bible interpretation is that "when the plain sense makes sense, seek no other sense."

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[60] Additionally, Enoch was not an Israelite like Elijah, so he would seem somewhat out of place ministering at the Jewish temple.

[61] Craig A. Evans and Craig A. Bubeck, eds., *John's Gospel, Hebrews–Revelation*, The Bible Knowledge Background Commentary, 1st ed. (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2005), 376; Nelson Price, "Elijah," *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 480; MacArthur, Note on Rev 11:5; McCune, 341, 377; Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 88. Some scholars do not believe that the literal prophets are in view, but that nonetheless the two witnesses are symbolically represented by Moses and Elijah. John D. Barry, et al., Note on Rev 11:5–6, in *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2012, 2016); W. A. Criswell, Note on Rev 11:3-10, in *The Criswell Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979), 1492; Note on Rev 11:4, in *Evangelical Heritage Version Study Bible*; A. Boyd Luter, "Revelation," in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 2031; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: Verse by Verse*, ONTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016), 186; Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, NAC 39 (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2012), 245; J Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 617. Scofield, 1362, n. 4. D. C. Allison Jr., who also believes that Moses and Elijah are in view in this passage, observes that there was a "Jewish expectation of the eschatological return of Moses himself—an expectation attested in *Lives of the Prophets: Jeremiah* 14; *Fragmentary Targum* on Ex. 12:42; and *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 3:17." "Moses," *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 779.

[62] For an extensive list of parallels between the ministry of Elijah and that of Moses, see Jerome T. Walsh, "Elijah (Person)," *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 464–465.

[63] Ancient Jewish tradition also makes this connection between Moses and Elijah. For example, in *Antiquities of the Jews* Josephus says that Elijah "vanished" in the whirlwind (IX.2.2§28), and similarly he says that Moses "vanished" in a cloud (IV.8.48§323,326). (Here Josephus uses the Greek word ἀφανίζω to represent the Hebrew word עָלָה. Though the Hebrew term usually means "to ascend, to go up," it can also mean simply "to go away, to disappear from view.") Likewise, the *Talmud* says, "Moses and Elijah never actually ascended to heaven on high, as it is stated: 'The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, and the earth He gave to the children of man'" (ולא עלו משה ואליהו למרום שנאמר השמים שמים לה' והארץ נתן לבני אדם), Sukkah 5a, *William Davidson Talmud*.

Modern scholars also perceive this as a legitimate connection. Walsh says, "Elijah's mysterious disappearance in Transjordan and the disciples' inability to recover his body parallel the death and divinely-hidden burial of Moses (Deut 34:1–6)" (465). Likewise, B. L. Smith states, "Not only has the death of Moses an air of mystery attaching to it (Dt. 34:6) but his successor secured the allegiance of Israel by participating in the same spirit as Moses and demonstrated his fitness for office by a miraculous river crossing (Dt. 34:9; Jos. 4:14). The translation narrative (2 Ki. 2) reproduces this pattern fairly precisely. . . . Little wonder that in Jewish Haggadic thought Elijah was viewed as the counterpart to Moses" (313). See also Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 443.

Yet, in the case of Elijah's translation and subsequent letter it appears that Bible scholars often do reach a conclusion other than the most simple and straightforward one. One wonders if this is because they read the narrative through the lens of a beloved Sunday School version of the story. Similarly, artwork commonly portrays Elijah ascending to heaven in a fiery chariot, and scholars often affirm this portrayal to be accurate, even though the only role assigned by the text to the chariot is that of separating Elijah and Elisha (2 Kgs 2:11).[64] That even the most educated and seasoned Bible scholars can be influenced by tradition and approach the text with *a priori* conclusions should serve as a cautionary tale to all Bible interpreters.

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[64] For example, Gleason Archer affirms, "Elijah was taken up into heaven by the celestial chariot of fire" (227). In fairness, however, one might observe that occasionally OT theophanies portray God as riding the storm in his chariot (Ps 18:7-14, 104:3; Is 66:15), so these scholars merge the storm and chariot into a single image of divine transportation. For more on this and the significance of the chariot in the narrative, see Randall Bailey, "Elijah and Elisha: The Chariots and Horses of Israel in the Context of ANE Chariot Warfare," *ΠΝΕΥΜΑΤΙΚΑ: Spiritually Appraising Matters of the Spirit* 2/1 (2014), 18–39.

Bringing Many Sons to Glory: The Theological Intersection of Sonship and Resurrection in Redemption and Christology—Part 3

Andrew T. Minnick[1]

The first two parts of this journal article found in Paul's writings that Christ's resurrection was a literal begetting into ontological Adamic sonship in fulfilment of the OT messianic expectation. This reclamation of Adam's filial status and the material part of its nature was prototypical of the restoration of the material part of our filial nature by conformity to the body of Christ by resurrection. Paul encapsulates this prototypical relationship in the literal meaning ("first to be born") of the προτότοκος title (Rom 8:29; Col 1:15, 18). Although Paul dedicates no single passage to the expounding of this ontological-sonship-by-resurrection Christology (Rom 8 is the closest that he comes), it is evidently the Christological framework within which his mind operated when discussing related matters of Christology. And Paul formulated his anthropology within a framework of a two-stage, new-creation experience of sonship—regeneration pertaining to the inner man presently, and resurrection pertaining to the body in the future. In other words, it has become evident that Paul had a full-orbed theological system of the intersection of sonship and resurrection, both for us and prototypically for Christ, even though he never devoted a passage of Scripture to systematically laying out that theology.

The second part of this article called for an improved methodology in the study of the theological intersection of sonship and resurrection. Employing a biblical-theological strategy, it traces this intersection from the OT through the NT. In tandem with the progressive revelation of Scripture, it then progressively synthesizes a Scripture-wide systematic theology of that intersection. In employing this methodology, we have discovered that there is actually a necessary middle step between the biblical theology—examining the explicit teachings of each human author—and the systematic theology—synthesizing those explicit teachings into a system that attempts to map the thinking of the divine Author. This middle step could be called the "small-a author systematic theology": in the absence of a passage dedicated to explicit teaching on a theological topic, we attempt to synthesize the human author's scattered teachings on that topic and map his system of theology that underlies what he did write. To this point this study has synthesized Paul's "small-a author systematic theology" of the intersection of sonship and resurrection. The final step of our methodology (in this third part of the article) is to do the same with the other NT authors, (1) asking if anything they write calls into

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question our understanding/synthesis of Paul's theological system and (2) searching for their contributions to our progressive understanding/synthesis of the divine Author's theological system of the intersection of sonship and resurrection.

John's Writings

Far from having disparate models of sonship, Paul and John are actually tracing the single sonship motif from the OT. Consequently, their filial framework is the same two-stage, new-creation experience of sonship—regeneration of the inner man now, and resurrection of the body in the future. And they develop the same Adamic-sonship-by-resurrection Christology.

The Christology of Revelation 1:5

John opens the revelation of the eschaton (1:1) in 1:5 with a statement almost identical to Colossians 1:18, ὁ πρωτότοκος τῶν νεκρῶν ("firstborn of [from] the dead ones"), and last-Adam Christology permeates this phrase and its surrounding context. First, the context presents Jesus as the resurrected Christ (1:7, 18). Second, this resurrected Christ consequently reclaims Adamic rule in fulfilment of the OT messianic expectation ("throne," 1:4; "ruler," 1:5; "dominion," v. 6; and v. 7 quoting Dn 7:13–14 and the everlasting rule given to the messianic Son of Man; cf. "son of man," Rv 1:13).[2]

Third, this resurrected messianic ruler is the Son of God. Of the three titles in Revelation 1:5—"witness," "firstborn," and "ruler"—καί joins only the last two, indicating a close connection: it is the πρωτότοκος who is the ruler. The phrase "the firstborn of the dead" (v. 5) is basically identical to Colossians 1:18 and so indicates here also that the filial status and Adamic reign came by resurrection.[3] Per the Granville Sharp rule, "Father" (v. 6) is superfluous and so is integral to John's message.[4] The Daniel 7:13 allusion (Rv 1:7) was Christ's response at his trial to the command, "Tell us whether You are the Christ [Messiah], the Son of God" (Mt 26:63–64). In short, John is using πρωτότοκος in the same technical sense as Paul—encapsulating the Christology of begetting into Adamic sonship by resurrection and subsequent dominion, all as the realization of the OT messianic expectation.

Fourth, this resurrection, rule, and sonship of Christ are prototypical. Both the πρωτο- prefix of πρωτότοκος and the substantive genitive plural "of the dead ones" (cf. Acts 13:30; Rom 1:4; 8:11; 1 Cor 15:12, 20; Col 1:18) promise additional future begettings by resurrection. Beyond being made alive himself, the πρωτότοκος has "the keys" to release others from "death and Hades" (v. 18; cf.

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[2] OT verse numbering in this article will follow that of the English Bible rather than that of the LXX. Unless otherwise noted, all English Scripture is taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. www.Lockman.org

[3] The only element in Colossians 1:18 missing here is the preposition ἐκ, the ablative sense of which is still captured here by the genitive of separation.

[4] See Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 271.

20:13; Jn 5:21–29), and the πρωτότοκος "has made us to be a kingdom" (v. 6), which 5:10 makes clear is our earthly rule (cf. 2:26–27; 3:21; 20:4–6; 22:5).

<p style="text-align:center">The OT Background of Revelation 1:5—Psalm 2, Psalm 89, and Isaiah 55</p>

This Christology in Revelation 1:5 and its context is drawn from Psalm 89 because ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστός ("the faithful witness") is taken from Psalm 89:37 in the LXX, and both πρωτότοκος and "ruler of the kings of the earth" are found in Psalm 89:27. Evald Lövestam sees "the faithful witness" as also being the realization of the expectation of a "witness" (also note "leader and commander") in Isaiah 55:4. Noting that both Psalm 89:27 and Isaiah 55:4 are promises made to David, he concludes, "The fulfillment of the promise to David is connected to the resurrection of Christ."[5] Accordingly, the role of the witness in Isaiah 55:4 is part of the "faithful mercies" of the Davidic Covenant (v. 3) that Paul considered in Acts 13 to include resurrection life (see the discussion of Acts 13 in the first part of this article). Lövestam goes on to observe that "firstborn" (Rv 1:5) corresponds with the sonship of Psalm 2:7, and "ruler of the kings of the earth" (Rv 1:5) is the realization of Psalm 2:8, another psalm that is a meditation on the Davidic Covenant.[6] It is evident that Revelation 1:5 is the realization of the OT messianic expectation, concentrated in the Davidic royal line and covenant in Psalm 2, Psalm 89, and Isaiah 55, all of which look back to 2 Samuel 7.[7]

Previous tracing of the trajectories of these Christological motifs in Revelation 1 found that they travel back through the Davidic Covenant to their origin in Adam's creation and fall. In the first place, because Psalm 89 is a meditation on the Davidic Covenant, the sonship of verse 26 and of πρωτότοκος in verse 27 is the sonship of 2 Samuel 7:14, which is the expected Son from David's line who would reclaim Adam's filial status. Further, because πρωτότοκος (בְּכוֹר) is the object of τίθημι (נָתַן), verse 27 is speaking of the Father's act to impart that filial status.[8] And both Paul and John look back on the πρωτότοκος title and see in it a prediction of the Messiah's begetting into Adamic sonship by resurrection. In the second place, Psalm 89 also speaks of the πρωτότοκος exercising dominion, most evidently in the parallelism in verse 27. Again, of the three titles in Revelation 1:5, καί joins only the second (πρωτότοκος) and third ("ruler of the kings of the earth"), mimicking the Hebrew parallelism in Psalm 89:27 that establishes the close connection between the lines. The primary

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[5] *Son and Saviour: A Study of Acts 13, 32–37. With an Appendix: "Son of God" in the Synoptic Gospels*, trans. Michael J. Petry, Coniectanea Neotestamentica (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1961), 46–47.

[6] Ibid., 48. He further observes that in D syʰᵐᵍ, Acts 13:33 extends the quotation of Psalm 2:7 to also include verse 8. G. K. Beale points out that in Revelation "kings of the earth" designates not God's people but rather the enemies of God, both human and super-human, whom Christ defeats (6:15; 17:2; 18:3, 9; 19:19; cf. 16:14), though some do turn to Christ (21:24). *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 336. Accordingly, Psalm 2:9–12 reveals that those ruled in verse 8 are enemies of God's Son.

[7] Beale concludes that because of the resurrection, "John views Jesus as the ideal Davidic king on an escalated eschatological level, whose death and resurrection have resulted in his eternal kingship and in the kingship of his 'beloved' children (cf. 1:5b), which is developed in 1:6" (336).

[8] The LXX also contains the same emphatic ἐγώ (here κἀγώ by crasis; אָנִי in the Hebrew) as found in Psalm 2:7, which is the Father emphasizing his role in the second half of the verse ("I myself was the one who begot you") in producing the filial status in the first half of the verse ("You are My Son").

function of the πρωτότοκος is therefore dominion, fulfilling the Davidic Covenant's expectation of a forever-reigning Adamic Son.[9] It is evident that the Davidic dynasty's attempt to reclaim Adam as captured in Psalm 89 is the background of Paul and John's use of the πρωτότοκος title.[10] The Christology of Adamic sonship and dominion that they capture in the title (Rom 8:29; Col 1:15, 18; Rv 1:5) is the fulfillment of the messianic expectation of sonship and dominion captured in the title by Ethan in Psalm 89:27 hundreds of years earlier.

The Christology of Revelation 3:14

Each of the designations for Christ in the introductions to the letters to the seven churches (Rv 2–3) expands on something Christ says or on one of his depictions in Revelation 1. And because ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστὸς ("the faithful witness") from 1:5 is repeated in 3:14 (identically, except for the addition of καὶ ἀληθινός ["and true"] in 3:14), Beale concludes that "ἡ ἀρχὴ ['the Beginning'] of the creation of God" (3:14) is expanding the meaning of "πρωτότοκος of the dead, and ὁ ἄρχων ['the ruler'] of the kings of the earth" (1:5).[11]

Beale's observation is corroborated by Paul's use of ἀρχή and πρωτότοκος synonymously (in apposition) in Colossians 1:18 to speak of Christ's role as πρωτότοκος of the new creation by resurrection (v. 15; see the discussion of Col 1 in the second part of this article). For John as for Paul, ἀρχή communicates both temporal primacy (evident in the parallel with πρῶτος in Rv 22:13) and dominion (evident in the cognate relationship of ἀρχή in 3:14 to ἀρχῶν in 1:5).[12] Evidently, ἀρχή in 3:14 is expanding the Adamic themes of πρωτότοκος (both temporal primacy and dominion, as drawn from Ps 89:27) and ἀρχῶν (dominion) from 1:5. Beale summarizes the expansion of 1:5 in 3:14: "Christ as 'firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth' in 1:5 is interpreted in 3:14 as the sovereign inaugurator of the new creation."[13]

The OT Background of Revelation 3:14—Exodus 4:22, Isaiah 43, and Isaiah 65

John's expansion of 1:5 in 3:14 deepens our understanding of the OT background of the πρωτότοκος title because in 3:14 he draws upon additional OT passages (beyond Psalm 89) that anticipated the new creation to come in the πρωτότοκος. Specifically, Isaiah 43 and 65 are the OT

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[9] Lövestam comments, "The expression 'the firstborn' (בכור, LXX: πρωτότοκος) in Ps. 89:28 contains the idea of the king's unique position of power from the attribute of being God's son" (13).

[10] See James Scott for a helpful discussion of the connection of Romans 8:29 to Psalm 89:27, centering on the πρωτότοκος title, and noting the allusion to Psalm 110 in Romans 8:34. *Adoption as Sons of God: An Exegetical Investigation into the Background of ΥΙΟΘΕΣΙΑ in the Pauline Corpus*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 2 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1992), 252–56.

[11] *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 336–38. Beale includes a helpful history of the interpretation of Revelation 3:14.

[12] Louw and Nida list ἄρχων and ἀρχή in the same lexical entry. Johannes Louw and Eugene Nida, eds., "Ἄρχων, Ἀρχή," *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 478.

[13] *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 339. Regrettably, Beale is aware of only two commentators who see "creation of God" as a reference to the new creation and one who sees it as referring both to the first and the new creations (338n60).

backdrop of the three titles 3:14 applies to Christ—"the Amen," "the faithful and true Witness," and "the ἀρχή of the creation of God."

Regarding the first title, "the Amen," Beale gives seven lines of evidence that John draws it from Isaiah 65:16, and thus the "creation of God" (Rv 3:14) is the new creation of Isaiah 65:17–25.[14] Note that in verse 9 God's new-creation plans include filial status ("I will bring forth offspring from Jacob") as the basis for inheriting the new creation, both for the Messiah ("an heir of My mountains from Judah") and, through him, for all of God's people as his servants ("even My chosen ones shall inherit it, and My servants will dwell there").

The second title, "the faithful and true Witness," also has a rich OT background, not only in Psalm 89:37 as noted above, but as Beale recognizes also in Isaiah 65:16 and significantly in 43:10–13 and the Isaianic theme of Israel as God's servants/witnesses (v. 10). They were to witness first to God's deliverance and forming of the nation in the exodus (vv. 1–3, 12–13, 16–18; cf. 44:6–8), which Isaiah repeatedly calls the ἀρχή (41:4; 43:9, 13; 48:8, 16; 51:9; 63:16, 19), thus establishing God's existence as the sole deity ἀπ᾽ ἀρχῆς ("from the beginning," 43:13; 44:8, LXX). But second, the exodus is portrayed as a new creation, and so the original creation (from Gn 1–2) is also therefore called the ἀρχή (Is 40:21; 42:9; 44:8; 45:21; 48:16; cf. "Creator of Israel" in 43:7, 15, 21, who "makes a way through the sea" in v. 16, an allusion to the exodus).[15] Third, the things announced ἀπ᾽ ἀρχῆς (44:8) to which Israel was to witness included future things (44:6–8). The nearer future event was restoration from exile, which was a new exodus (43:4–7, 14–17) and thus a new creation (vv. 18–21; note the parallel language with 65:17).[16] But ultimately Isaiah 65 expects a new exodus and new creation yet to come (v. 17; parallel language with 43:18–19) with the eschatological promise of the gift of the Spirit who brings the water of life (44:3; cf. 43:18–21; Rv 22:1, 17).

Here is the background to John's (and Paul's in Col 1:18) application of the third title, the ἀρχή, to Christ in Revelation 3:14—though Israel as the servants/witnesses failed (Rom 2:24), Christ succeeded as Isaiah's expected capital-S Servant (42:1; 49:3, 5–7; 53:11) and "the Amen, the faithful and true Witness" to himself as the ἀρχή, the one from whose resurrection the ultimate new exodus-new creation flows. In Revelation 3:14, "ἡ ἀρχὴ of the creation of God" is expanding the filial title "πρωτότοκος of the dead" (1:5) because the expectation of the return from exile also includes filial language (Is 43:6; 44:2), only this time God will bring Israel out of exile *because* the nation was *already* made God's child in the original exodus (Ex 4:22; Dt 32:18; Is 44:24; 63:16; Hos 11:1). The nation was an attempt (the epitome of which was the Davidic kings) to reclaim the sonship and dominion

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[14] Ibid., 340–42. These lines of evidence include the observation that these two are the only passages in Scripture that use "Amen" as a name.

[15] Ibid., 336–37, 342. Seyoon Kim demonstrates that Judaism thought of the exodus and Sinai as being a second creation. *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 189, 236, 261.

[16] See Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises,* The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 202–05. Hahn notes portrayal of the return from exile as a new exodus throughout the prophets (Is 11:11–16; 43:16–20; 51:10–11; Jer 16:14–15; Ez 20:34–37; Mi 7:12, 15; Zec 10:8–9). Specifically, he notes the repeated juxtaposition of the new exodus motif with the restoration of David in Jeremiah 23:5–8 and with the restoration to Zion throughout the OT (Is 35:8–10; 51:9–11; 52:8–12; Jer 23:5–8; Ez 20:33–40; 34:23–28).

given to Adam at his creation, and it is in that sense that her original exodus, her new creation and ἀρχὴ, was her begetting into sonship (Ex 4:22; Dt 32:18; Is 44:24; 63:16; Hos 11:1; cf. Jer 31:7–9), making her God's πρωτότοκος (Ex 4:22).[17] Exodus 4:11 (in conjunction with Is 43–44 and 65) is yet another layer of the OT background of the πρωτότοκος title applied by John to the last Adam here in Revelation 1:5 (and by Paul in Rom 8:29; Col 1:15, 18) and expanded in 3:14—the Messiah's success as the πρωτότοκος and ἀρχὴ of the ultimate new creation grows not only out of the typological failure of Israel's Davidic kings to reclaim Adamic sonship and dominion (Ps 89:27) but also out of the collective typological failure of the nation (Ex 4:22) of whom the kings were merely the federal head.

Revelation 21–22

These final chapters of Scripture envision the realization of the new creation of the new heavens and the new earth, centered in the new Jerusalem. In Revelation 21, the presence of God descends (21:3), reminiscent of Eden (Gn 3:8). Death is abolished and the "first things have passed away" (21:4; cf. Is 43:18) as God "makes all things new" (21:5; cf. Is 43:19; 65:17). The water of life without cost is given (21:6; cf. Is 43:18–21; 44:3–4; Col 3:1–4; Rv 22:17), which in these passages is connected to the inauguration of the age of the Spirit flowing from Christ's resurrection. Also, in Isaiah 55:1–5, the water given without cost is part of the "faithful mercies shown to David," which includes Christ's resurrection life (Acts 13:34). Accordingly, the sonship of the Davidic Covenant is given to the overcomer (21:7, quoting 2 Sm 7:14), who on that basis "will inherit these things," a reference in context to the new Jerusalem (cf. Is 65:9). Revelation 2:26–27 quotes Psalm 2:8–9 (cf. Rv 3:21) to show that the overcomer's reigning inheritance is sharing in the Messiah's Davidic filial reign. This reign is Christ's because of his Davidic/Adamic sonship imparted by resurrection's begetting (Ps 2:7; cf. Acts 13:33). Thus will be realized God's purpose to "make all things new" (Rv 21:5, quoting Is 43:18–19) in the new creation.

In Revelation 22, the water of life comes from the throne of God and of the Lamb (22:1), and the invitation to drink is universal (22:17). From this water grows the tree of life (22:2) from which Adam was banned (Gn 3:22–24). The curse is removed (22:3; cf. Gn 3:17–19), fellowship with God is restored (22:3–5a), and God's people will reign unendingly (22:5b). In short, God's race of reigning sons will be re-created.

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[17] The parallel use in Exodus 4:22 of "firstborn" for Israel and for Pharaoh's first son indicates a filial meaning of the term when used for Israel. The Midrash on Psalm 2 sees one passage from the Law, one from the Prophets, and one from the Writings as being the "decree of the LORD" in Psalm 2:7. From the law, Exodus 4:22 is cited. William Braude, trans*., The Midrash on Psalms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 1:40. See also Scott, 189–49; Brendan Byrne, *Sons of God—Seed of Abraham: A Study of the Idea of the Sonship of God of All Christians in Paul Against the Jewish Background*, Analecta Biblica: Investigations Scientificae in Res Biblicas (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1979), 84; Allen Mawhinney, "Υἱοθεσία in the Pauline Epistles: Its Background, Use and Implications" (PhD diss., Baylor University, 1982), 62–65, 138; Trevor Burke, *The Message of Sonship: At Home in God's Household*, The Bible Speaks Today: Bible Themes Series, ed. Alec Motyer, John Stott, and Derek Tidball (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011), 38–39, 47, 104–05; Beale, 447, footnotes 30–31; Matthew Vellanickal, *The Divine Sonship of Christians in the Johannine Writings*, Analecta Biblica: Investigationes Scientificae in Res Biblicas (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1977), 10; and John Schmitt, "Israel as Son of God in Torah," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 24 (2004): 73.

1 John 3:1–2

Though an overt or full-orbed theology of sonship is not John's agenda here, three considerations demonstrate that John was thinking in the same framework of present (v. 1) and future (v. 2) sonship as did Paul. First, the tension of νῦν . . . οὔπω ("now . . . not yet," v. 2) does introduce the same two-stage filial process found in Paul. John taught that present sonship is by birth/regeneration (Jn 1:12–13), and accordingly he is speaking here to those who have been "born" (1 Jn 3:9). But for John, like Paul, the present stage of sonship is a harbinger that guarantees the future stage, for his argument in verses 1–10 is that those now begotten by God should purify themselves in expectation. Although John does not speak of this future stage as filial in so many words, the parallel of the forms of εἰμί through both sides of the tension indicates that they are two stages of a single filial framework, and the omission of filial terminology on the future side of the tension is merely ellipsis. In the present (νῦν), we are not only called children, but actually "ἐσμέν [children]" (v. 1) and "now ἐσμέν children" (v. 2). In the future (οὔπω), "ἐσόμεθα [elliptical predicate: 'children']" (v. 2). The visible property of this sonship also straddles the tension (present: "see," v. 1; future: "not appeared as yet what we will be," v. 2), further indicating two stages of a single framework. There is, however, not only continuity between the two sides of the contrast but also discontinuity between the "now" and the "not yet," indicating that present sonship is in some sense incomplete, for it is held distinct from a full, consummate form that is yet to come. John's exhortation in verses 1–10, that those who are begotten of God should purify themselves in expectation, is evidently riding on the same filial argument as Paul's exhortation of encouragement in Romans 8: the harbinger of current sonship by birth guarantees future, consummate sonship.

Second, John shares Paul's view that sonship is ontological. Present sonship goes beyond mere declaration ("we would be called," v. 1) and is what "we are . . . now we are" (vv. 1–2).[18] In the context, John is speaking of those born of God and therefore God's seed is in them (v. 9).[19] Further, being born of God produces a nature different from the nature of the Devil's children (v. 10; cf. Jn 8:39–47). Although in the context moral transformation is immediately the filial ontology in view, terminology here confirms what was found in Revelation—that John regards physical ontology by the new creation of resurrection to also be a part of the nature of sons of God.[20] Here conformity to Christ ("like him," v. 2b) caused by "see[ing] Him" "when He appears" suggests the bodily conformity to Christ that is explicit in Philippians 3:21 and 1 Corinthians 15. Further, the dual use of φανερόω ("appear," or reflecting the passive voice "be revealed," v. 2) for both Christ's bodily return and our

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[18] See Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John,* PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 115.

[19] Also note in John 1 the same progression from declaration ("the right to become children of God," v. 12) to its basis of ontological birth ("who were born . . . of God," v. 13). Further, John parallels begetting by God with begetting by human parents by way of the "not . . . but" construction: "born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (v. 13). Our sonship is in John's mind no mere legal declaration but rather the result of ontological birth.

[20] D. Edmond Hiebert connects this passage with Romans 8:29 and Philippians 3:21 to show that John is speaking about conformity to the image of Christ, which includes both moral and physical likeness. *The Epistles of John: An Expositional Commentary* (Greenville: BJU Press, 1991), 138.

resurrection highlights the parallel between Christ's body (which "we will see") and our future filial ontology by resurrection.

Third, this dual use of φανερόω for Christ's return and our resurrection also suggests the causal relationship between Christ's appearing and our future filial ontology. This causal relationship is cemented in verse 2 by ἐάν ("if") plus the subjunctive φανερωθῇ (literally translated "he should appear"): future ontological filial status is completely dependent upon Christ's appearing as our prototype.[21] In conclusion, John was thinking in the same filial framework as Paul: the two-stage process of restoration of sonship—regeneration and resurrection—and its accompanying physical ontology, all by conformity to Christ.

Hebrews

The Book of Hebrews self-identifies as an exhortation (13:22) to be faithful to Christ who finished our faith (2:1; 3:12; 4:1, 11, 14; 6:1, 9–12; 10:22–23; 12:1–3). To that end, the Christology of the book demonstrates that the faith Christ finished is superior to the old Mosaic Covenant because Christ is a superior High Priest to Aaron and his descendants.

Hebrews 7

Hebrews 7:28 is the summary conclusion of the chapter's argument for the superiority of Christ's priesthood: the Mosaic Covenant appointed men, but the oath of God appoints a Son. It has been found that sonship of God qualifies man for dominion, and now Hebrews 7 adds another role for which sonship of God is a qualification—priesthood. It was found that the image of God in a living body enabled Adam to rule and thus man's death is his ultimate failure to rule (Gn 3:17–19), the epitome of which was the Davidic kings' failure to live forever. In the same vein, the Levitical priests also failed because they too were "weak" (Heb 7:28; cf. v. 18) in that they died (vv. 8, 23), and this failure necessitated the coming of a Priest who will live forever (vv. 16, 24–25). God's answer to the mortality of the Levitical priests was to appoint "a Son" who was "made perfect forever" (v. 28).[22] Evidently, the author of Hebrews, like Paul, regarded everlasting life to be a corollary of sonship, and it is for that reason that sonship is a prerequisite to successful priesthood (v. 28). Within that framework, the perfection mentioned in v. 28 would appear to be resurrection's imparting to Christ life in an undying body.[23]

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[21] Note the emphasis on Christ's material humanity elsewhere in 1 John (1:1–3; 4:2, 13).

[22] Just as the failure of Israel's Davidic kings and thus the expectation of Israel's coming ruler could be summed up in the one word *Son*, so the contrast of Hebrews 7:28 shows that "Son" sums up what the Levitical priests lacked for successful priesthood. This comprehensive use of *Son* is evident in 3:5–6, where it sums up Christ's superiority over Moses, a "servant" (cf. Gal 4:1–7). Similarly, in Hebrews 4:14 "Son" encapsulates the greatness of our High Priest, the entire OT priestly messianic expectation, everything that Moses and Israel could not be, but that Christ can be and is. Hahn observes that the intersection of priesthood and sonship runs through Hebrews (4:14; 5:5, 8, 10; 7:3, 28) (302).

[23] The question in v. 11 (why replace Levi?) is answered succinctly in v. 11 (Levi could not bring "perfection" to anyone; cf. v. 19) but then answered more fully in verses 12–28 by the extended contrast between the dying Levitical priests and the ever-living Son-made-Priest who was himself first "made perfect forever" (v. 28). The need is not only for a priest who is perfect but for one who can bring perfection to others. The author of Hebrews repeatedly emphasizes not

The sole OT passage cited here to prove this superiority of Christ over Levi is Psalm 110:4 (quoted in Heb 7:17, 21), which teaches that Christ's priesthood is perpetual ("forever") because it is after the order of Melchizedek. Actually, it is with this Christology that Hebrews 7 opens in verses 1–3. There Melchizedek "remains a priest perpetually" (v. 3; cf. "lives on," v. 8) because he was "made like the Son of God" (ἀφωμοιωμένος is a divine-passive, antecedent-perfect-tense participle of cause), which sonship the rest of the chapter then argues to be the prerequisite for successful priesthood. Specifically, Melchizedek was made like the Son of God in the biblical record: though lineage of other characters is clearly established in order to trace who was of the promise (e.g., Isaac and not Ishmael, Jacob and not Esau), incredibly a prominent character, Melchizedek, appears suddenly and vanishes without any record of lineage or posterity! Although Melchizedek was a man and thus not timeless in actual existence, God breathed out the book of Genesis such that Melchizedek was made timeless in his literary portrayal (no record of lineage or posterity), making him a type of Christ's unending life.[24] Melchizedek's being *portrayed* to be timeless as a *literary* reality made him "like the Son of God" because it was an imitation of Christ being *made* timeless as an *ontological* reality (v. 16), which Hebrews 7 is presenting as a corollary of sonship.[25]

These concepts of eternal life as a corollary of sonship and consequently sonship as a prerequisite to priesthood are not novel in Hebrews 7. Working backwards through Hebrews uncovers an argument of which these concepts in Hebrews 7 are merely the culmination.[26]

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what Christ had before the incarnation, but what he did not have before the incarnation and claimed in his humanity (indeed, often *re*-claimed things Adam lost). Tracing the use of γίνομαι ("became") through Hebrews reveals a string of acquisitions in his humanity (1:4–6; 2:17; 5:5, 9; 6:20; 7:15–16; 7:22). In this vein the "made perfect" terminology speaks of the acquisition of perfection of certain elements of his human nature, specifically life in a glorified body. David Moffitt also sees in "arises" (7:15) a reference to Christ's resurrection. *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol. 141 of *Supplements to Novum Testamentum*, ed. M. M. Mitchell and D. P. Moessner (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 201–02. William Milligan comments, "Only one text in that Epistle makes direct mention of the Resurrection of our Lord [here a footnote points to Heb 13:20], and even there it is incidentally introduced; but the whole epistle presupposes His Resurrection. It is the Risen and Ascended Lord who is its great theme throughout, the High Priest after the order of Melchizedec, both Priest and King 'forever.'" *The Resurrection of Our Lord* (London: Macmillan, 1913), 128.

[24] Although v. 3 speaks of the absence of both "beginning of days" and "end of life," it is the latter that the author develops throughout Hebrews 7 as typological of Christ (vv. 3, 8, 16–17, 24–25). See Kevin Oberlin, "Jesus Christ: Our High Priest Forever" (Sermon, BJU Chapel, Greenville, SC, March 11, 2015); Mark Minnick, "Messianic Precedents of Melchizedek's Priesthood" (Sermon, Mount Calvary Baptist Church, Greenville, SC, February 7, 2016); and Francis Durrwell, *The Resurrection: A Biblical Study*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960), 139. If Melchizedek was timeless in actual existence, then contrary to the message of Hebrews, he did not die, and there are two immortal High Priests.

[25] Note the choice of ἀφομοιόω ("to make like") for Melchizedek (v. 3) in distinction from γίνομαι ("to become") for Christ (v. 16).

[26] G. B. Caird overviews how the argument of Hebrews progressively builds toward Hebrews 7, particularly as pertaining to Christ's appointment to sonship. He observes that the author of Hebrews often makes assertions, leaves them temporarily hanging while he addresses other topics, and then return to expand or prove them later. For example, 2:17 and 3:1 assert that Christ is High Priest, which is expounded much later (4:14–16; 5:1–10; 7:1–28). "Son by Appointment," *The New Testament Age: Essays in Honor of Bo Reicke*, 1, ed. William C. Weinrich (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 73–81.

Hebrews 5:1–10

Hebrews 7's assertion of Christ's appointment to Melchizedekian priesthood continues the discussion of 5:1–10.[27] The thesis of 5:1–5a is that Christ's priesthood was by God's, not Christ's, appointment.[28] Verse 5a gives two potential accusations of Christ acting by his own appointment— Christ's glorifying himself and Christ's becoming High Priest (by implication, by his own initiative). And verses 5b–6 individually answer each accusation with an OT text showing that it was God, not Christ, who did that specific action. Because Psalm 110:4 directly proves that it was God, not Christ, appointing Christ to be High Priest, the begetting in Psalm 2:7 was God, not Christ, glorifying Christ by resurrection.

Several considerations confirm this observation. First, in Acts 13:33 Paul says that the begetting of Psalm 2:7 was fulfilled in Christ's resurrection, and previous study of the term "glory" (Heb 5:5) found it often speaks of resurrection's transformation of the material part of the ontological image of God. But second, the Christology of this observation is the basis on which the argument of Hebrews 7 is built: sonship of which everlasting resurrection life is a corollary is the qualification of successful priesthood (v. 28). And here in 5:5, the purpose infinitive γενηθῆναι ("to become") separates the glorification from becoming priest as two distinct events, the first qualifying Christ for the second.[29]

In summary, in 5:1–10 the author is supporting the argument of Hebrews 1–7 by teaching from Psalm 2:7 that resurrection (glorification, Heb 5:5a) begot Christ into sonship (v. 5b) and corollary eternal life, thereby qualifying him for eternal priesthood.[30] This understanding of Psalm 2:7 and this Christology is assumed in Hebrews 5 and 7 because it was established in Hebrews 1–2.

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[27] Hebrews 5:12–6:20 is an applicational parenthesis in the argument of the book, challenging the readers about their dullness of hearing that precludes explanation of deeper truths about Melchizedek (5:11–12).

[28] The reflexive pronoun ἑαυτὸν ("Himself," v. 5a) makes the two potential actors—the Father and Christ—to be the two major options juxtaposed in this passage.

[29] This is contra Beale (318–19) and Lövestam (34), who hold that Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 110:4 are quoted of the same event (i.e., Christ was appointed as High Priest at his resurrection). However, "passed through the heavens" (4:14) and "exalted above the heavens" (7:26) together with the description of Christ's priestly service in the heavenly temple in chapter 8 (cf. 1:3) indicate that although the glorification of resurrection qualified Christ for priesthood, he was not installed in the priestly office until his ascension. For many additional Scriptural confirmations of this point, see Andrew Minnick, 291n57. Speaking of 5:4–6, Caird (75, cf. 73–81) oversteps and makes priesthood a necessary corollary of sonship, as does James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews,* ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 64. Γενηθῆναι, however, is a purpose infinitive (i.e., sonship is a prerequisite to priesthood), not a result infinitive (i.e., priesthood is a corollary of sonship). Although they overstate the teaching of the passage, Caird and Moffatt's position does support the position being advocated here.

[30] What moved Christ from a state of suffering and death (vv. 7–8) to become the "source of *eternal* salvation" (v. 9b, emphasis added) as Melchizedekian Priest (v. 10) is the divine passive aorist participle, "having been made perfect" (v. 9a), for it gives the means of the main verb "He became" (v. 9b). On pages 194–208, Moffitt persuasively corroborates the position being advocated here that the *perfect* terminology when applied to Christ in Hebrews is "a life that endures," which is "the distinguishing feature that qualifies him for that priestly office" and thus was obtained at the resurrection *before* becoming priest (194–97).

Hebrews 1–2

Tracing the sonship of Christ through Hebrews uncovers the role of Hebrews 1–2 in the argument of the book: these chapters argue that in his humanity Christ became superior to the angels because by resurrection the Father begot him as a Son, and he therefore not only has eternal life and dominion for himself but also can give it to his followers.[31]

Obtaining Sonship (Hebrews 1:1–6)

Hebrews 1:2 gives the summary thesis of Hebrews 1–2: in his humanity, Christ is better than the angels (1) because he is a Son and (2) because the Son inherits rule over creation.[32] In 1:3b–4, the author locates chronologically his obtaining the name *Son* between his making purification for our sins (the cross) and his exaltation to the Father's right hand (the ascension).[33] Evidently the author of Hebrews concurs with Paul and John that the name *Son* was imparted at least in some sense by resurrection. Verse 5 then quotes Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14 to demonstrate that the name obtained by resurrection was "Son." The author of Hebrews recognizes in these passages the same thing as Paul and John—OT anticipation of one from David's line who as the pinnacle of Israel would succeed in Israel's role of restoring Adamic sonship and rule in a new creation.

Since Hebrews 1 contains all these elements of the Adamic-sonship-by-resurrection Christology discovered elsewhere in Scripture, it is unsurprising that verse 6 goes on to use the title πρωτότοκος to encapsulate that Christology, just as did Paul and John.[34] "When He again brings the firstborn into the world" refers to the resurrection as the event of his becoming πρωτότοκος.[35]

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[31] Because the term *priest* does not occur until 2:17, the argument for Christ's superiority over angels in Hebrews 1–2 seems like an unrelated prelude to the argument in 3:1–10:18 for the superiority of Christ's priesthood over that of Levi. Explanation of the relevance of the first two chapters to a Hebrew audience often goes little beyond minor observations, such as angels being involved in the giving of the Mosaic law (2:2).

[32] Although it is typical to see verses 1–3a as speaking of the pre-incarnate Christ, for an extensive argument that these verses are speaking of Christ's incarnate state, see Andrew Minnick, 295n60. Beale observes, "This is classic Adamic language in verses 1–4" (317–18), and Caird concurs (74).

[33] The aorist tense locates the participle γενόμενος ("having become," v. 4) antecedent to "He sat down." This temporal sequence is corroborated by the sequence in the subsequent argument of Hebrews noted above: sonship came by resurrection (5:5), but installation as Priest came at the ascension to sit at the Father's right hand (8:1; cf. 4:14; 7:26; 9:24).

[34] Lövestam writes, "It is impossible to resist the conclusion that the proclamation of Jesus as God's Son with quotations from Ps. 2:7 and 2 Sam. 7:14, and the conception πρωτότοκος, stand in an immediate exegetical connection with one another" (14). He also points out that πρωτότοκος is not followed by a determining phrase such as "from the dead" or "of all creation" as it is elsewhere (Rom 8:29; Col 1:15, 18; Rv 1:5) (14). Instead, πρωτότοκος is to be understood here in light of the quotations of sonship in verse 5. Further, the sonship of verse 5 is what sets him above the angels (v. 4), and the πρωτότοκος status of verse 6a is the ground of the command of their worship (v. 6b). See Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews,* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 104.

[35] Some argue that this phrase refers to the eschatological Parousia because verse 6 quotes Psalm 97:7, the context of which allegedly speaks of Yahweh's eschatological judgment of the world. This objection, however, is actually a false dichotomy. The OT's expectation of a Messiah who would reclaim Adam was an eschatological expectation, but it has broken into the present age in the inaugural event of the resurrection of Christ. For additional arguments that this phrase refers to the resurrection, see Andrew Minnick, 298–301.

Implications of Sonship (Hebrews 1:7–14)

Starting in v. 7, the author quotes a catena of OT passages that unfold two implications of the sonship imparted in vv. 3–6: dominion and immortality. They tell of a Messiah who will rule unendingly. It was this unending Adamic rule that the Davidic dynasty attempted and yet failed to produce in the OT era. But in Christ it has come, inaugurated at his resurrection and culminating at his Parousia.

That some of the titles and qualities in these OT quotations are those of deity in no way contravenes recognition of Adamic sonship in verses 3–6. First Corinthians 15:21, Colossians 1:15, and Romans 1:3–4 were found to set Christ's Adamic sonship squarely in the realm of his human nature (including his material part) and ancestry as received in the incarnation and as anticipated in the OT. But that OT filial messianic expectation included both humanity and deity, all in one Son, (see the discussion of Lk 1 and Is 9 below). In short, the interrelationship of the pre-incarnate sonship and Adamic sonship of Christ evident in Hebrews 1 is another aspect of the mystery of the hypostatic union.[36]

The argument of Hebrews 1–2, however, focuses primarily on Christ in his humanity, specifically on his reclamation of Adamic sonship and dominion. In other words, these chapters do not emphasize that Christ is superior to the angels in that he rules over them as deity, for that role never ceased during the incarnation. Rather, Hebrews 2 will argue that Christ is superior to them in that in his humanity he gets to do something (Adamic rule over the new creation) that they never will do (2:5) because he has a human relationship to the Father ("Son") that they never will have (1:4–6). His superiority to the angels did not come by reclamation of something that he had before the incarnation but was willing to forego for a time in the incarnation. Rather, superiority to the angels consists in his coming to possess in the incarnation something that he never possessed before, something human that Adam lost. Accordingly, a heavy emphasis in Hebrews 2 is the necessity of the incarnation (e.g., v. 14).[37]

Sonship Through Incarnation (Hebrews 2)

After one of the author's typical parenthetical admonitions (2:1–4), 2:5 carries on the theme of dominion over the world about which the author has been speaking in Hebrews 1. The need for incarnation is drawn from Psalm 8:4–6 (Heb 2:6–8a), which speaks of dominion over the creation being given to Adam, not to angels (cf. v. 5). However, throughout Hebrews 2 as in Genesis 3, death

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[36] The two senses of Christ's sonship held in tension in the mystery of the hypostatic union coalesce in κληρονομέω ("inherited," v. 4), which implies previous sonship as the basis for receiving the name "Son": the pre-incarnate Son of God inherits the name "Son" in the Adamic sense. D. A. Carson observes both senses of Christ's sonship in Hebrews 1. *Jesus the Son of God: A Christological Title Often Overlooked, Sometimes Misunderstood, and Currently Disputed* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 61–62.

[37] Amy Peeler notes that the exaltation of Hebrews 1 was gained by Christ's being willing to take on humanity in Hebrews 2. *You Are My Son: The Family of God in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Library of New Testament Studies (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 103. In reality the entire argument of Hebrews 1–7 focuses on Christ's role as incarnate priest (cf. 1 Tm 2:5 and the superfluous-unless-significant designation of Christ in his mediatorial priestly role: "the *man* Christ Jesus," emphasis added).

is the main enemy and threat to this dominion.[38] Instead of ruling (v. 9), man is ruled by death (v. 15). Creation's rebellion triumphs over man, ending his rule and reclaiming the body given to enable his rule over creation. The thesis of the chapter is that Christ gained his Adamic dominion that makes him better than the angels by means of incarnation into humanity for the purpose of death (vv. 9, 10, 14) and the subsequent victorious resurrection that qualified him for dominion.

His death is explicitly spoken of in verses 9, 10, 14, and several designations of his resurrection are evident. Τελειόω ("to perfect," v. 10) was found in 5:9 and 7:28 to refer to his being given by resurrection the "indestructible life" (7:16) that is the prerequisite for successful priesthood.[39] Because both the perfection (2:9) and the crowning (v. 10) are juxtaposed with the "suffering of death" (v. 9), the two are referring to the same thing. The "glory" and "honor" with which he was crowned are taken directly from the Psalm 8 quotation in the preceding verses and refer to both Adam's filial status and ontological glory—the image of God, the pinnacle of which is possession of life in the body—and his consequent functional glory—dominion over the creation.[40] Christ's being "crowned with glory" is the same event as his being "glorif[ied]" in 5:5—resurrection imparting unending filial life as the prerequisite for successful priesthood.[41] As found in 1:3–6, the result was Adamic sonship for

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[38] "Embedded in this passage are three reasons man fails as viceregent: death, Satan, and sin (vv. 9, 14–15, 17)." Jared Ramler, "Social Justice and the Mediary Role of Christians as Viceregents in the Kingdom of God" (PhD diss., Bob Jones University, 2014), 96. The devil has from the beginning sought to subvert God's plan for filial viceregents over his creation by tempting them to sin, which leads to death. Death is the actual failing in viceregency, Satan is the cause, and sin is his means.

[39] Again, Moffitt observes from 2:9–11 that the timing of "to perfect" is that of the resurrection (i.e., between the cross and the ascension): "That the Son's being perfected through suffering is necessary for the salvation of the many suggests that the perfection of the Son stands between his own endurance of suffering and his becoming the high priest whose service sanctifies his siblings" (196). William Lane notes that τελειόω and its cognates are used in the LXX "to signify the act of consecrating [setting apart] a priest to his office (Ex 29:9, 29, 33, 35; Lev 4:5; 8:33; 16:32; 21:10; Nm 3:3)." *Hebrews 1–8,* vol. 47 of WBC, ed. David Hubbard and Glenn Barker (Dallas: Word, 1991), 57. Accordingly, the resurrection not only gave Christ the filial everlasting life that was a necessary prerequisite for priesthood (Hebrews 7), but it also set him apart for that office (cf. "appointed," 5:1; "designated," 5:10; "appoints," 7:28). These two motifs coalesce in chapter 7 in the discussion of Melchizedek and Psalm 110. Note that ἀρχηγός ("author") is also paired with a cognate noun of τελειόω (τελειωτής, "perfecter") in 12:2 in what two considerations show to be a reference to the resurrection. First, the phrase is distinguished from Christ's suffering on the cross, since at the time of that suffering his work was not yet complete (i.e., salvation was not yet "perfected") since he "endured" it. And second, it is also distinguished from his sitting down at the right hand of God as High Priest (8:1), this latter action being temporally subsequent to his being perfected (see 7:28 where τελειόω is in the perfect tense and thus antecedent to his appointment to priesthood, discovered above to have taken place at his ascension to sit at the Father's right hand).

[40] Brandon Crowe points out that the title *son of man* from Psalm 8:4 (quoted in Heb 2:6) is connected to the "Son of Man" in Daniel 7 and points back to Adam: "The son of man in Daniel 7, from a canonical perspective, builds upon the royal imagery for humanity originally given to Adam; the son of man in Daniel is the fulfiller of the Adamic task of ruling in God's image." *The Last Adam: A Theology of the Obedient Life of Jesus in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 39.

[41] Walter Brooks confirms that the moment of crowning was the moment when Christ became "Son" (1:5), which was the resurrection, which was the time of Christ's perfecting. "Perpetuity of Christ's Sacrifice in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89/2 (June 1970): 207–8.

Christ: he is from the same Father as the children, and so he is their brother (2:11–13).[42] And the result was restoration of the material part of the filial nature of Adamic sonship: Christ had to take on that material part in the incarnation (v. 14a) in order to free men from the power of death (vv. 14b–15).[43]

Christ's reclamation of Adam was prototypical. The otherwise superfluous appositive *Jesus* (v. 9) is an overt switch-reference, indicating that v. 8 is speaking about man's flawed dominion after the fall (v. 8; cf. v. 15). "Not yet" (v. 8), however, points to the day of Christ's purpose to "lead [αγω, which is prototypical] many sons to glory" (v. 10), the glory that he possesses by resurrection (v. 9). Again, this "glory" subsumes both Adam's lost eternal filial ontology (the image of God) and his forfeited rule (vv. 5–9), which will be restored by resurrection (vv. 14–15). We will share in Christ's filial status (v. 11). We will be "made perfect" (7:19; 9:9; 10:1, 14; 11:40; 12:23) after the likeness of the ἀρχηγός ("author") and τελειωτής ("perfecter") of our faith (12:2).[44] God's original intent of a race of forever-reigning glorious sons will one day be a reality (2:10), with Christ as its literal πρωτότοκος-by-resurrection (1:6)!

1 Peter 1:3–5

Peter calls for blessing the Father of Jesus for providing a new birth that we currently possess (v. 3). This new birth is, however, only the first stage of our new-creation eschatological salvation that fills verses 3–9. The prepositional phrase *to a living hope,* the purpose infinitive *to obtain,* and the designation *inheritance* all indicate that, as in Romans 8, our current filial status by new birth is a present inbreaking of this eschatological salvation that guarantees its future dimension (vv. 3–4).[45]

That this future stage comes "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" together with the participial modifier *living* in "living hope" indicate that Peter is talking about our resurrection.[46] And as discovered above in numerous passages, the prototypical nature of Christ's resurrection is evident in the plural ἐκ νεκρῶν ("from the dead ones"; cf. νεκρῶν in Acts 13:30; Rom 1:4; 8:11; 1 Cor 15:12,

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[42] The broader concept of Adamic children who exercise Adamic dominion is derived from Psalm 8:2 (see discussion of Psalm 8 in the first part of this article). Note the familial concepts all through Hebrews 2: God as Father (2:10, 11), inheritance (2:8), sons (2:10), brothers (2:11, 12, 17), and children (2:13, 14).

[43] Kim emphasizes that the solidarity of Christ with the other sons in the chapter is in terms of his incarnation (139–40). And even Donald Macleod, responding to the positions of A. T. Robinson and James Dunn that Hebrews contains "adoptionist" language, argues that this filial language should be interpreted "in the light of the doctrine of the incarnation." *The Person of Christ*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 83.

[44] Peeler notes, ἀρχηγός carries the prototypical idea of leading the way for others who will follow (82). See also Gary O'Neal, *Bringing Many Sons to Glory: The Ἀρχηγος Motif in the Letter to the Hebrews* (PhD diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013).

[45] The aorist participle ἀναγεννήσας points back to new birth at the time of conversion. Beale recognizes in this mention of the new birth the idea of new creation discovered to be a facet of the new birth theology elsewhere in the NT, both at the time of regeneration and resurrection (324).

[46] This observation is confirmed by the context of corporeal trials, specifically bodily persecution that often resulted in death, the same topic as Romans 8. The terminology of v. 4—"imperishable" and "undefiled"—suggests that eternal life by resurrection is in view as the heart of that salvation. This terminology mirrors similar concepts found above in Colossians 3:1–4 ("be revealed," "life is hidden with Christ," etc.) and regeneration and resurrection as the two stages of life in the Spirit in Romans 8, the former guaranteeing the latter. Note also "glory" at the appearing of Christ in 1 Peter 1:7.

20; Col 1:18; Rv 1:5).[47] It is evident that Peter was thinking within the same framework of a two-stage eschatological filial salvation as was Paul, John, and the author of Hebrews.

Luke 1

When Mary asked about the biological impossibility of a virgin conceiving a child, the angel responded that the Spirit would effect the miracle, and διό ("for that reason," v. 35b), the child would be called the Son of God. On the surface διό communicates that the deity of the conception's agent would ensure that the produced child would be divine. Although this surface meaning is true, the angel did not bring up the Spirit's role to explain why the child would be divine, for that was not Mary's question. Rather, the Spirit is the explanation for her coming conception being virginal. Against the Isaianic background to which the angel alludes, there are two levels of significance to the Spirit's making her conception virginal, and thus two levels of the significance of διό beyond the surface explanation that divine agency produced a divine child.[48]

The OT Background of the Angel's Message

In the first place, that Mary would conceive as a virgin points back to Isaiah's prophecy (7:14) when the invasion of Rezin and Pekah threatened the end of David's dynasty (vv. 1–2, 6). The contemporary "near fulfilment" was to be a sign that the invasion would fail, and David's line would still rule. In Luke 1 the Spirit would make Mary's conception virginal as a "far fulfilment" sign to the world that God's promise to David was sure for all time.[49] Accordingly, the angel's message to Mary is that her son would be the son of David ("His father David") and would sit perpetually on the Davidic throne ("He will reign . . . forever, and His kingdom will have no end").

Second, the Spirit's making Mary's conception virginal would ensure that the child to be born and reign forever on David's throne (vv. 32b–33) would be the "Son of the Most High" (v. 32a). It is very tempting to see the deity of the "Son of God" as the qualification for his everlasting rule on David's throne, and thus διό is communicating that because the agent of the virginal conception was divine (the Spirit), the produced child would also be divine (the "Son of God"). It is true that the Spirit's role ensured that the produced child would have a divine nature, and it is true that a property of that divine nature is eternality.

But against the backdrop of Isaiah 7:14 there is a deeper role of the virginal conception as communicated in the word διό: the Spirit's activity would ensure that the Son born of Mary would be

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[47] There is a sense in which both the past new birth and the future living hope are dependent upon Christ's resurrection. Beale argues that both "through the resurrection" and "to a living hope" modify "born again" (324, footnote 24). For a discussion of our past resurrection with Christ (cf. Rom 6:3–4; Eph 2:6; Col 3:1), see Richard Gaffin, Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1987), 127–34.

[48] It is of little surprise that Luke's Christology would incorporate the elements of Adamic sonship so integral to Paul's Christology, given the amount of time Luke spent traveling with Paul and listening to him reason with the Jews from the OT.

[49] Note the plural *you* all through Isaiah 7:13–14 and the plural verb *listen* in v. 13. The sign was given to the entire "house of David" (v. 13), which included Mary.

the Son of Isaiah 9:6–7, who would fulfil the OT messianic expectation of a Son from David's line who would reclaim Adamic sonship.[50] Elsewhere the NT stresses that the Adamic Son of David's line must be a man (Rom 1:3–4; 1 Cor 15:21; Col 1:15; Heb 2:5–15). And accordingly, Isaiah 9:6–7 expects a "Son" who will be a man from the Davidic dynasty ("the government will rest on His shoulders . . . on the throne of David") having an eternal reign ("no end to the increase of His government . . . from then on and forevermore"). Isaiah, however, also amazingly designates the coming Son as "Mighty God"![51] The Spirit's role in Mary's conception (i.e., rendering it a virginal conception) and the human ancestry of Mary through David came together in synergy to produce the Son of God, who had been predicted to be a God-Man. Διό therefore communicates an amazing role of the virginal conception— it would be not only God's *sign* that the Davidic dynasty would rule forever but also the *mechanism* that actually produces the God-Man who could fulfill that role of David's expected forever-reigning Son of God and reclaim Adam's lost eternal filial rule.

The one who was Son of God from all eternity and thus divine had to become human and thus also become Adamic Son of God in order to reclaim what Adam lost, for his divine nature could never include a material body, part of the filial nature of human sons of God. Thus, although the divinity of the Son was the result of the virginal conception, the good news in the angel's words in Luke 1 was not that the perpetuity of the Son's rule would derive from his being *deity*. Rather, the Adamic/Davidic rule of which the angel spoke is a *human* rule, based upon his perpetuity of life in his *human* body pertaining to his *human* nature, and the angel's good news was that all this would be made possible by his taking on *humanity* in the mystery of the incarnation by virginal conception effected by the Spirit. To be sure, divinity was necessary for the Son to carry out his redemptive mission successfully. But in terms of qualification and enablement to reclaim Adam, the genius of incarnation by virginal conception was not so much that the produced child would be divine, for Adam was not divine and also there had already been a divine Son from eternity past without any incarnation (Rom 8:3; Gal 4:4; 1 Jn 4:10, 14). Rather, the genius of the incarnation was that divinity would take on humanity, thus enabling the Son to reclaim the human things that Adam had lost, specifically here

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[50] Several considerations demonstrate that the Son in Isaiah 7:14 is the Son of 9:6. "The second line ['a son will be given to us'] emphasizes that this is a work of God's gracious giving, not just a coincidence. No date of birth in the future is hinted at, and the only comparable son promised by God in earlier oracles was Immanuel in 7:14–15. An identification marker that links these two sons is that they both will be righteous Davidic rulers." Gary Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, vol. 15A of NAC, ed. E. Ray Clendenen and Kenneth A. Mathews (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007), 240. The divine passives *will be born* and *will be given* in 9:6 also point to the agency of God in the conception of the "Son." Further, "son" is the same term in 7:14 and 9:16, and "child" in 9:6 is the noun form of the verb "bear" in 7:14. And finally, the angel's words in Luke 1:30–35 draw together the prophecies of a virgin-born son as a sign to the house of David of its perpetuity (7:13–14), who will be the Son of God and rule on David's throne forever (9:6–7). See also comments on 9:6–7 by Mark Minnick. "His Governing Will Bring Great Joy" (Sermon, Mount Calvary Baptist Church, Greenville, SC, December 30, 2018).

[51] In 7:14 the name of the child will be "Immanuel." The only other two occurrences of this phrase translated "Immanuel" are in Isaiah 8:8 and 8:10, where the invasion of Judah by the king of Assyria would fail (vv. 9–10a) because "God is with us," a literal translation of "Immanuel" (v. 10b). This sequence establishes the meaning of the name in 7:14 as "God with us," which is a prophecy of the incarnation—the joining together of deity ("God") and humanity ("with us").

perpetual rule on David's throne. Διό (Lk 1:35) is communicating that the sonship in the last line of v. 35 was possessed as a result of his taking on humanity in the incarnation.[52]

The Surrounding Context

That this Adamic sonship resulted from the Spirit's work of incarnation suggests that Christ possessed it from his incarnation (i.e., before his resurrection), a suggestion confirmed in the remainder of Luke 1–4. Accordingly, Luke's genealogy (3:23–38) traces Christ's lineage from Adam, whom Luke calls "the son of God" (Lk 3:38), and it passes through Mary's line (in contrast to Matthew's genealogy through Joseph's line), including David's generation (v. 31). Essentially, this genealogy is an expanded expression of Gabriel's statement of Christ's Adamic sonship by descent from David's line through Mary (1:33, 35). Luke's apparently haphazard placement of the genealogy in his third chapter is upon closer examination very intentional—the genealogy supports multiple surrounding pericopes that set forth Jesus as the Son of God and the last Adam.[53] These include ascription of sonship to Christ at his baptism (Lk 3:22) and Christ's triumph in three temptations that recapitulate Adam's temptation in Eden and that center on the question of Christ's Adamic sonship (4:1–13).[54] They also include the juxtaposition of his supposed sonship of Joseph (4:22) with his role as the messianic Anointed One (4:18); the demon's ascription of sonship (4:41a; cf. "the Holy One of God" in v. 34), which is tantamount to messiahship ("the Christ," v. 41b); and Jesus' words at age twelve in the temple, "My Father" (Lk 2:49). In conclusion, Luke's genealogy is certifying Christ's Adamic sonship, and the associated surrounding pericopes demonstrate that this Adamic sonship was possessed at the time they occurred (i.e., prior to Jesus' resurrection).

The key to the harmonization of pre-resurrection Adamic sonship in Luke 1–4 with the Adamic-sonship-by-resurrection Christology discovered previously in this study is the recognition that Adamic sonship was owing to Christ's human descent from David (albeit as utilized by the Spirit in the mystery of the virginal conception) and thus pertained to his human nature. Davidic lineage included only the limited sense of Adamic sonship of God enjoyed by Israel's kings: i.e., it did not include restoration of the material part of the image of God, which was therefore possessed by Christ

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[52] Geerhardus Vos concludes from the Davidic language of verses 32–33 that Jesus did by incarnation receive sonship that pertained to his human nature. *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus: The Modern Debate About the Messianic Consciousness,* ed. Johannes G. Vos, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1953), 183. However, Vos distinguishes between "messianic sonship" which derives from the line of David and "nativistic sonship" which is "the origin of the Messiah's human nature as ascribed to the direct, supernatural paternity of God . . . in Luke 1" (141–42). This distinction cannot be maintained in Luke 1, however, for here the work of the Spirit makes him the Son of God (v. 35) who will on that basis inherit David's throne (v. 32).

[53] Leon Morris comments, "Luke adds the son of God, for we must see Jesus ultimately in his relationship to the Father. In this the genealogy harmonizes with the preceding and the following narratives, both of which are concerned with Jesus as the Son of God." *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary,* vol. 3 of TNTC, ed. Leon Morris (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 120.

[54] The Devil and Jesus both knew full well that Jesus was the second Person of the Trinity and the eternal Son of God. The first and last temptations concern the preservation of life, and the middle temptation concerns Jesus' messianic rule, both human realities for Christ and both corollaries of Adamic sonship. See David Garner, *Sons in the Son: The Riches and Reach of Adoption in Christ* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2016), 199–200; and Lövestam, 100–01.

in its un-restored form from incarnation.[55] And accordingly, if Christ had not risen, *pertaining to his humanity* he would have been yet another OT Davidic king failing to *fully* reclaim Adamic sonship and rule (i.e., he would never have realized the eternal Davidic rule of Lk 1:32b–33), for he would not have become the "life-giving Spirit" (1 Cor 15:45), the "Son of God with power" (Rom 1:4), the "Son, made perfect forever" (Heb 7:28), or "ἀρχή of the [new] creation of God" (Rv 3:14). In short, he would not have become the πρωτότοκος.

Conclusion

Our improved methodology has enabled us to incorporate the image of God into this study and thus recover recognition of the ontological nature of sonship. We have been thereby able to trace the theological intersection of resurrection with Scripture's single sonship motif through all the relevant authors, not just Paul, and thus synthesize a full-orbed theology of the intersection that explains the birth terminology.

It has been found that the "small-a author systematic theologies" of the various NT authors all synthesize with and expand upon what was discovered in Paul. First, they all draw a single sonship motif from the OT. Second, they formulate their filial anthropology within the same two-stage, new-creation experience of sonship—regeneration pertaining to the inner man presently, and resurrection pertaining to the body in the future. And third, they advance the same sonship-by-resurrection Christology. In their eyes, Christ's being "begotten" by resurrection (Acts 13:33; Heb 1:5; and 5:5, quoting Psalm 2:7) was no mere adoption or entrance into "functional sonship" (as contrasted with his pre-incarnate "ontological sonship"). It was a literal begetting into ontological Adamic sonship, imparting the filial nature of human sons of God, specifically its material part. They speak of Adamic sonship, therefore, as pertaining to Christ's human nature. Further, they see his begetting by resurrection as prototypical of our begetting, for by union with him in resurrection we come to share in his reclaimed Adamic filial ontology. Thus, every Christological NT occurrence of the πρωτότοκος title (Rom 8:29; Col 1:15, 18; Heb 1:6; and Rv 1:5) encapsulates this prototypical-first-to-be-begotten Christology in its literal meaning.

On the one hand, Arius of old and James Dunn of late have denied that Christ was the divine Son of God from before his incarnation and was ontologically fully God.[56] Unfortunately, however,

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[55] It is important to realize that certain aspects of Christ's messianic role as the last Adam were perfect before resurrection, such as the moral perfection of the Adamic image of God pertaining to his immaterial part. Christ did possess the fallen image of God pertaining to his material part (i.e., a mortal body), however, until resurrection fully imparted to him the wholeness of the Adamic image of God. We know that his material part was mortal because he died on Calvary. Accordingly, although he was the Messiah before his resurrection, Peter could say that "God has made Him both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36) by resurrection and ascension (vv. 24–35).

[56] This orthodox position of the church through the centuries has been argued convincingly elsewhere and is assumed in this study: Macleod, 90–91; Byrne, 199–200; Gordon Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007); and Robert Reymond, *Jesus, Divine Messiah: The New Testament Witness* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1990), 242–43. See Chapter 2 of James Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) for Dunn's conception of the development of the Son of God Christology in the early church. For an evaluation of Dunn pertaining to Christ's sonship, see Garner, chapter 7; and Macleod, 89–90.

many orthodox believers have made the mistake of Dunn, only in the other direction, effectively throwing the truth of sonship-by-resurrection overboard.[57] Though Garner warns against the danger of throwing out one sense of Christ's sonship in defense of the other, he has nevertheless erased the tension of two *ontological* senses of Christ's sonship by positing that Adamic sonship is merely functional.[58] Garner's position effectively relegates Adamic sonship to being a facet of Christ's work, not of his person. The tension between ontological Adamic sonship and ontological pre-incarnate sonship can be preserved, however, by recognizing that the person of Christ comprises two complete natures in the hypostatic union. It was discovered (from Rom 1:3–4; 1 Cor 15:21; Col 1:15; Heb 2:5–15) that Christ's role as the last Adam, reclaiming Adam's lost reign and filial nature, including its material part, all pertain to the human nature of Christ.[59] Although Adamic sonship and the filial nature of the human image of God was taken on in the incarnation, its material part was mortal as evidenced on Calvary and so was perfected by resurrection: it was restored into the "spiritual body," thereby reclaiming the material part of the unfallen image as imparted to Adam by creation.

The study of Luke 1–4 against the Isaiah 7–9 background confirmed this understanding of the two filial natures of Christ, for Isaiah 9 expected a Son who was both God and man. Instead of saying that there are two senses of Christ's sonship, each pertaining to one of Christ's natures, we could just as well say that because of the incarnation there is now one Son with two natures, and *each* nature is filial. That the divine nature is filial is part of the mystery of the intra-Trinity relationships. That the human nature is filial is explained within the framework of the Adam-Fall-Israel-Last Adam redemptive plan of God.

Among the benefits that spring from this study is a demarcation between the elements of Christ's sonship and ontology that believers come to experience (those pertaining to his human nature) and those filial elements that we will never experience (those pertaining to his divine nature). The passages investigated in this study speak of the Adamic image of God as the original line of demarcation between what elements of God's nature he did and did not impart to his first human son, Adam. Further, these passages speak of Christ's taking on flesh in order to reclaim a restored Adamic image of God as the prototype of our restoration into that image by union with him. The original Adamic image comprised the communicable attributes of God's nature, specially re-packaged as human filial nature. In the incarnation Christ's taking on of humanity was his being made in the human image of God.[60] Then by resurrection the material part of that holistic image was restored to Christ.

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[57] For example, Trevor Burke, *Adopted into God's Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor*, NSBT, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 106–07; *The Message of Sonship*, 114–18.

[58] He eloquently calls for preservation of the tension of two senses of Christ's sonship (190–93, 202–05).

[59] Several theological considerations corroborate this point. First, Christ's divine nature was immutable and complete (Nm 23:19; 1 Sm 15:29; Ps 102:26–27; Mal 3:6; 2 Tm 2:13; Heb 6:17–18; Jas 1:17). Second, divine ontology/nature is incorporeal (Jn 4:24). Therefore, his filial material acquisition in the incarnation and filial material transformation by resurrection must pertain to his human nature. "'Image' or 'image of God' when used of Christ always presents him as human." Robert Peterson, *Adopted By God: From Wayward Sinners to Cherished Children* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 477.

[60] The image of God is the essence of humanity. "The creation account makes it clear that the image and likeness of God is what makes man unique, distinct from all other created entities. It is what makes man *human* and constitutes him

Our restoration into the image of God by means of conformity to the Image of God, therefore, is not our coming to possess God's divine nature directly, else we would be divinized.[61] Rather, it is our coming to possess the communicable attributes of God's nature that he chose to impart to Adam as his image.[62]

We are restored into the image of God by conformity to Christ, who is the Image of God. Although we do not come to share in Christ's divine sonship and become conformed to his divine ontology/nature directly, we do come to share in his Adamic/human sonship and become conformed to the ontology/nature imparted to Adamic/human sons.[63] For Christ the ontology of that Adamic sonship is his divine nature selectively communicated to his human nature through the mystery of his acquisition of the human image of God by incarnation. His human nature was derivative from his divine nature, but it was derivative *through his possession of the image of God*, just as any other man's possession of the image of God is that man's sharing of the communicable attributes of God's nature.[64] This role of the image of God as a demarcation between the two natures of Christ supports the Chalcedon statement of "two natures, *inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably;* the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved."[65] While the inner workings of the theanthropic God-Man are a mystery, we can point to some individual elements and say they pertain to one nature or the other.[66] For example, omniscience is an attribute of Christ's divine nature, not his human nature. And it has been found that the NT

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as a *person*." Layton Talbert, "Lecture 4: Towards a Biblical Theology of Soteriology—The Genesis of Soteriology: Man & Sin" (unpublished class notes from Soteriology, BJU Seminary, Greenville, SC, Spring 2015, emphasis original).

[61] "If Jesus possesses no other than the trinitarian sonship, and sinners are made His 'brethren' in any true and real sense, then, being made partakers of this unique sonship of Christ, they are introduced into the circle of the Trinity, and so made to change the metaphysical constitution of the Godhead by their advent into it as members of the Second Person." Robert Webb, *The Reformed Doctrine of Adoption* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947), 94 (cf. 103–04).

[62] David Garner recognizes that the image of God is the demarcation between becoming *like* God and *becoming* God. "Adoption in Christ" (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2002), 175.

[63] This understanding is parallel to John Calvin's understanding that our righteousness in Christ pertains to his human, not his divine, nature. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 3.11.12.

[64] Meredith Kline observes that in human experience, possession of the image of God is possession of elements of the divine nature: "In the vocabulary of Peter, 'partakers of the divine nature' expresses renewal in the image of God (2 Pt 1:4)." "Creation in the Image of the Glory-Spirit," *Westminster Theological Journal* 39/2 (1977): 266.

[65] Philip Schaff, "SYMBOLUM CHALCEDONENSE," in *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper Longmans, 1919), 3:62 (original emphasis). Recognizing this role of the image of God protects against the mistake of Luther, who defended consubstantiation by holding that Christ's divine nature communicated some of its attributes to the human nature. Specifically, omnipresence was communicated to the body of Christ. And thus Luther truncated the true humanity of Christ.

[66] "Christ's person is theanthropic, but not his nature; for that would make the finite infinite, and the infinite finite. Christ would be neither God nor man; but the Scriptures constantly declare Him to be both God and man. In all Christian creeds therefore, it is declared that the two natures in Christ retain each its own properties and attributes." Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: C. Scribner, 1887), 2:389. Hodge goes on to differentiate between two kinds of passages. There are "passages in which the person is the subject, but the predicate is true only of the divine nature, or of the Logos. As when our Lord said, 'Before Abraham was I am'" (392). And there are "passages in which the person is the subject, but the predicate is true only of the human nature. As when Christ said, 'I thirst.'" (393).

authors speak of Christ's body as a part of the Adamic image of God and thus as a part of his human nature, for it is something taken on in the incarnation. His body does in some ways reflect the divine nature, but derivatively through the filter of the image of God, just as the human body of any other man does (though imperfectly before resurrection). In the resurrection the effects of the fall on that body were removed, thus restoring the original Adamic ideal in order to be the prototype for our restoration.

This study therefore concludes that the relationship of the two ontological senses of Christ's sonship is yet another facet of the mystery of the hypostatic union. His pre-incarnate sonship pertains to his divine nature/ontology, and his Adamic sonship pertains to his human nature/ontology, including its material part. This conclusion is actually no explanation of their relationship at all but rather a willingness to embrace the mystery of the hypostatic union and to preserve one more facet of that tension that the church has been preserving since Chalcedon.

Because it is Adamic sonship that Christ entered into fully by resurrection, and because this article set out to examine resurrection's intersection with sonship, the study has *de facto* focused on passages that are most clearly speaking of Adamic sonship. Because the incarnate Jesus was the theanthropic God-Man, however, many references to his sonship in the Gospels particularly (but also in other NT books and even in the OT messianic prophecies) are not any more easily parsed into divine nature and human nature than are other aspects of the person of Christ (knowledge, power, emotions, etc.).[67] References to the sonship of Christ are a spectrum—in some passages sonship is clearly Adamic, in some it is clearly pre-incarnate, and in some it is an inseparable perichoresis of the two.[68] Passages in the latter two categories are outside the scope of this study. So may the reader not go out and attempt to parse every mention of Christ's sonship as clearly and dogmatically as this study has parsed passages that speak of Christ's receiving sonship by resurrection. Instead, may we be ever prepared to bow in humble reverence before the mystery that God, in the fullness of time, sent his divine Son through Mary to be begotten as his human Son by resurrection, that we through him might have sonship.

> Thine be the glory, risen, conqu'ring Son;
> Endless is the vict'ry Thou o'er death hast won.[69]

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[67] This study has recognized that mystery in certain passages that were examined: Isaiah 9 and Hebrews 1.

[68] D. A. Carson recognizes that the communication of the "Son of God" title in some passages is broader than the sense in which it was understood in the Christological councils of the third and fourth centuries. As Garner does with the first Council of Nicea (*Sons in the Son*, 182), Carson urges fidelity to the orthodoxy set forth in the statements of Chalcedon, while recognizing that this orthodoxy and a messianic sense of Christ's sonship are a "both-and" matter, not an "either-or" matter. He therefore urges understanding of the "Son of God" title in each passage according to context (73–74).

[69] Edmond Budry, "Thine Be the Glory," trans. Richard Hoyle.

The Epistemological Problem of Common Ground between Believer and Unbeliever in the Search for a Biblical Method of Apologetics

Renton Rathbun[1]

There exists an internal battle within the Reformed scholarly community that may prove useful to scholars both within and outside of Reformed scholarship. The battle concerns apologetics and specifically the believer's ability to effectually communicate with unbelievers. One of the assumptions integral to Reformed theology that must be considered is man's total depravity as it relates to the intellect. Dutch Reformed apologist Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987) indicated that this depravity not only includes the intellect but also has culminated in an absolute, epistemological antithesis between believer and unbeliever.

For Van Til, we must hold two positions in tension. On the one hand, "We are well aware of the fact that non-Christians have a great deal of knowledge about this world which is true as far as it goes. That is, there is a sense in which we can and must allow for the value of knowledge of non-Christians." Yet, on the other hand, Van Til states,

> In order to hem in our question [can believer and unbeliever engage in argument] we are persuaded that we must begin by emphasizing the *absolute ethical antithesis* in which the 'natural man' stands to God. This implies that he knows nothing truly as he ought to know it. It means, therefore, that the 'natural man' is not only basically mistaken in his notions about religion and God but is as basically mistaken in his notions about the atoms and the laws of gravitation. From this ultimate point of view the 'natural man' knows nothing truly. He has chains about his neck and sees shadows only.[2]

Metaphysically, believers and unbelievers have all things in common. Epistemologically, believers and unbelievers have no common ground. Because the epistemological act is an ethical one and because the epistemological act begins already pitted against God and pitted against the truth conveyed by common notions, the unbeliever and believer are left with no true common knowledge between them.

Professor of systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary (Jackson, MS), J. V. Fesko, however, believes there exists at least some common knowledge between believers and unbelievers despite the noetic effects of sin:

> In a fallen world, humans still reason, albeit corrupted by sin, to access and interpret the world around them. Corrupted by sin, people are unable and unwilling to submit to the authority of general revelation. Instead, they use and twist it to their own ends. Because of the noetic effects of sin,

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[2] Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1974), 64.

humanity's divinely given, naturally acquired, but sin-infected knowledge is inadequate for salvation. But this does not mean, contrary to the claims of Van Til, that testimony of the Holy Spirit is therefore necessary even for general human knowledge."[3]

On the Van Til side, common knowledge is not possible between believer and unbeliever. On the Fesko side, some common knowledge is possible between believer and unbeliever. This paper will defend Van Til's position by demonstrating how it is that Van Til justifies the existence of this kind of epistemological antithesis and detail how Van Til's approach allows for the possibility of true communication between believer and unbeliever despite this absolute epistemological antithesis.

We want to be extremely clear when we speak about overcoming this epistemological antithesis. When we discuss a believer and unbeliever engaging in debate utilizing a method of debate, one important criterion for true communication is agreement in terminology and word usage. We, therefore, find it necessary to narrow our focus to what we mean by "agreement." We want to know if true agreement between two parties is reached when two parties merely *assent* to the truth of a fact or if more is needed for agreement. Put simply, we are asking if agreement requires mere assent, common between both parties, or if agreement must entail formal *knowledge*, common between both parties. The requirement of the latter would demand that both parties not only assent to the truth of a fact but also *account* for that fact correspondingly. We hope, then, to ultimately answer the question: from a Reformed perspective, can a method of debate be used properly if agreement between the believer and unbeliever exists only in the *assent* to natural truths, while disagreement remains back of that assent due to the disjunctive accounting of those natural truths?

Reformed Orthodoxy and Natural Theology

So far, we have not challenged the proposition that God's general revelation is infallible. Nor have we challenged the proposition that God's general revelation speaks with equal clarity to believers and unbelievers alike.

Van Til, in fact, depends on those two propositions as the basis of his entire program. What remains at task is how the unbeliever reacts to this clear, infallible general revelation. Typically, when an unbeliever is confronted with God's general revelation in his own experience or by way of a believer's defense of the faith, this confrontation involves what is called *natural theology*. Natural theology is a field of study that seeks to understand God and his attributes through creation, specifically through reason and observing nature rather than by referring to special revelation.

Whatever one's view of it, the use of natural theology introduces what appears to be a legitimate concern within a Reformed, post-Fall anthropology. This concern emerges from the central issue of whether epistemological common ground exists between believers and unbelievers.

Michael Sudduth directed an unusually helpful focus on the tension between natural theology and Reformed theology. He clearly addresses the true point of tension when he defines natural theology in light of a post-Fall context as that which "refers to what can be known or rationally

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[3] J. V. Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics: Retrieving the Classic Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 207.

believed about the existence and nature of God on the basis of human reason or our natural cognitive faculties."[4]

Sudduth's interest in natural theology relates to the question we are concerned with here. Is it the case that epistemological common ground exists between believers and unbelievers? After all, Romans 1–2 appears to indicate that all men are able to have a natural understanding of God in a post-Fall world. But Sudduth acknowledges that despite Romans 1–2, "some Protestant historians and theologians have argued that the endorsement of natural theology in the Reformed tradition represents a departure from Reformed theology."[5] The main thrust of his work is to dispel the idea that natural theology must be understood as a "rational, pre-dogmatic foundation for revealed theology."[6] Thus, he maintains that natural theology, particularly within Reformed orthodoxy, is not meant to be a pre-theological, rational grounding on which theological orthodoxy is then built.

After giving a cursory history of the use and development of natural theology in Reformation and post-Reformation theology, Sudduth helpfully bifurcates natural theology into two aspects. First, natural theology is concerned with the natural knowledge of God (what he refers to as *knowledge* α). Second, natural theology is concerned with theistic arguments (what he refers to as *knowledge* β).[7] He explains that the Reformed tradition understands the natural knowledge of God (knowledge α) to be implanted knowledge. This kind of knowledge is "non-inferential or spontaneously inferred from principles internal to the mind."[8] The second (knowledge β) refers to knowledge that is acquired by way of "reflection and argumentation" or "spontaneous inference."

In maintaining a distinction between these two senses of knowledge, Sudduth demonstrates that Reformed objections to natural theology do not concern knowledge α but rather knowledge β. Put simply, within a Reformed context, it is indisputable that the implanted knowledge of God is in every man and that every man is able to know that God exists and to know his nature from his creation. The question at hand is how *acquired* knowledge is possible for unbelievers in a post-Fall world.[9] Although Sudduth makes a strong case that knowledge α is common to believers and unbelievers, in the Reformed view, it does not follow from logical necessity that knowledge β (acquired knowledge) is also common.

Sudduth rightly concludes that no legitimate Reformed objection to knowledge α exists. He points out that even Calvin in his *Institutes* understood all believers *and* unbelievers as having a natural knowledge of God—that this natural knowledge is "'naturally implanted' (1.3.3), 'by nature engraven' (1.4.4), 'taught by nature' (1.5.12), and 'sown in [men's] minds out of the wonderful workmanship of nature' (1.5.15)."[10]

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[4] Michael Sudduth, *Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* (Burlington, VA: Ashgate, 2009), 1.

[5] Ibid., 3.

[6] Ibid., 49.

[7] Ibid., 50.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., 112–15.

[10] Calvin, quoted in Sudduth, 114.

But what about knowledge β? Does it follow from common knowledge α (implanted knowledge) that knowledge β (acquired knowledge) is also common? Put another way, in the cognitive process of coming to an understanding of an idea or concept, is it true that the believer and unbeliever really share *common* (acquired) *knowledge* for the sake of achieving true communication? Common knowledge is not mere common assent to natural truths but also includes common accounting of those natural truths.

Van Til indicates that a problem does indeed exist in knowledge β between believers and unbelievers. This problem is exhibited in the unbeliever's cognitive *modus operandi,* i.e., suppression (Rom 1:18). For Van Til particularly, the unbeliever's mode of cognition entails hostility toward God and, therefore, hostility toward truth. The differing cognitive modalities of the believer and the unbeliever could cause major epistemological discontinuities regarding knowledge β (acquired knowledge).

Sudduth also discusses Calvin's language in the *Institutes* regarding knowledge β in relation to the noetic effects of the Fall. Although the implantation of the knowledge of God appears to be identical in believers and unbelievers, once the modality of acquired knowledge begins, Calvin maintains epistemological differences. Sudduth reviews Calvin's postlapsarian view of noetic effects: "God's revelation of Himself in nature is said to 'flow away without profiting us' (1.5.11) and 'in no way lead[s] us into the right path' (1.5.14). '[Men] ought, then, to break forth in praises of him but are actually puffed up and swollen with all the more pride' (1.5.4). He concludes: 'we lack the natural ability to mount up unto the pure and clear knowledge of God' (1.5.15). In these passages, Calvin contrasts the pre-lapsarian ethical and religious efficacy of the knowledge of God with its post-lapsarian failure in this regard."[11]

Although Calvin appears to be making a distinction in epistemological modality (knowledge β) between believers and unbelievers, we have yet to address what practical effect this difference in cognitive modality has as a believer attempts to communicate with an unbeliever. If the difference is too great, it becomes unclear how believers and unbelievers can agree on terms and assumptions in order to truly communicate.

The model we have presented already we might call the *common-assent model*. In this model, two parties have assented to the truth of natural phenomena. This assent appears to be satisfactory enough to move a debate forward. However, back of the assent of the truth of a natural phenomenon is a radically different accounting for the possibility of that truth.

Using this model, the believer engages the unbeliever in knowledge β, assuming there is agreement on meaning of terms and propositions for the possibility of advancing the argument. This "agreement" on terms and propositions, however, is merely the assent to the truth of those terms and propositions, not agreement on the common knowledge of those terms and propositions. In this model, descriptions of natural truths might be agreed on, while the explanation of how those descriptions are possible remains (even if temporarily) outside the discussion. In essence, the two

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[11] Sudduth, 115.

parties are moving a debate forward based on agreement of assent *that* something is true, but both parties remain without common knowledge of terms they are using for engagement.

For instance, Steven Hawking and a Christian physicist might have agreed that light acts like a particle and a wave and travels at 186,282 miles per second. Although their descriptions might "agree," their explanation of how those things are possible would be vastly different. The common-assent model holds that genuine agreement is obtained when both parties assent to the truth of light acting like a particle and a wave and traveling at 186,282 miles per second even though no accounting has been established for the possibility of those facts.

Our question finds its place here. Where the common-assent model allows distance between the descriptions of natural truths and their explanation (accounting), a *common-knowledge model* would require description and explanation to be in reliance on each other always. We return, therefore, to our original question: from a Reformed perspective, can a method of debate be used properly if agreement between the believer and the unbeliever exists only in the *assent* to natural truths, while disagreement remains back of that assent due to the disjunctive justifications of those natural truths?

The Necessary Union of Description and Explanation

Our question has in view the common ground necessary for a believer to engage with an unbeliever. As we have discussed earlier, this communication appears problematic because of the supposed epistemological antithesis between believer and unbeliever.

If an epistemological antithesis does exist between believer and unbeliever, we will have to show, using Van Til, how common ground is possible so that communication between them can be meaningful. Informal ways to do this exist, but our interest is in a formal method of engagement, in which common ground has a higher expectation of precision. The engagement with the scholastic method, for instance, is possible if and only if common ground exists between the interlocutors as to what words mean, what distinctions are acceptable, and how to define differences once distinctions are made. If believers and unbelievers are to have true communication via a formal method, is it enough for the parties to give common *assent* to the truth of particular facts, or does true communication demand common *knowledge* of particular facts?

As stated above, J. V. Fesko believes there exists at least some common knowledge between believers and unbelievers despite the noetic effects we have already discussed:

> In a fallen world, humans still reason, albeit corrupted by sin, to access and interpret the world around them. Corrupted by sin, people are unable and unwilling to submit to the authority of general revelation. Instead, they use and twist it to their own ends. Because of the noetic effects of sin, humanity's divinely given, naturally acquired, but sin-infected knowledge is inadequate for salvation. But this does not mean, contrary to the claims of Van Til, that testimony of the Holy Spirit is therefore necessary even for general human knowledge.[12]

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[12] *Reforming Apologetics*, 207.

Fesko rightly understands general revelation to be insufficient for salvation due to man's depravity. Yet for Fesko, just because this general revelation is twisted by the unbeliever's "sin-infected knowledge," that does not mean that Scripture is necessary for something as common as what Fesko terms "general human knowledge." There appears to be, in Fesko's estimation, a neutral set of knowledge that is common to believers and unbelievers—knowledge in which Scripture does not need to correct the unbeliever's final reference point. This knowledge, because it is general, would still need to meet the criteria for knowledge we have already covered.

Fesko's view of knowledge appears to be untenable in light of what we have discussed so far. He appears to be saying that knowledge is possible based on assent alone since unbelievers will not account for the truth as finding its final reference point in God, as a believer would.

Nonetheless, let us take a more generous view of Fesko's comments. Perhaps Fesko is aware of the traditional criteria for knowledge in the history of epistemological research. Maybe Fesko is really saying that there is no reason to hold that a believer and an unbeliever cannot both assent to natural truths, but since their accountings are contradictory, those accountings can be *bracketed* until (later in the debate) the opposing accountings come into question.

What about the common assent to truth? Perhaps the fact that the believer and the unbeliever can both assent to the truth of a fact is sufficient for them to have true communication even though they do not share common knowledge. The problem is that we cannot make this bracketing work. A cursory overview of basic epistemology will show that assent is not knowledge, and that knowledge *requires* truth, belief, *and* accounting of that belief.

Since Plato, genuine knowledge has been understood to obtain by an individual if all three aspects of a fact are present: First, a fact must be true. Second, the fact must be believed by the individual. Third, and most importantly, the individual must have a justification for that fact being a true belief. This basic understanding of knowledge has become known as "justified true beliefs."[13] Knowledge, then, requires a fact to be true, believed, and justified (or accounted for). Little, if any, difference can be detected between Van Til and this epistemological tradition of justified true beliefs.

Defining knowledge as a justified true belief is not a problematic project for Christian thinkers because the justification is nondual, terminating in the God of the Bible. For unbelievers, however, the project of justifying true beliefs is quite problematic. As an illustration, in 1997 Donald Davidson, scholar, professor, and giant in the field of epistemology, was interviewed by Professor Michael Martin of University College London. After being asked about the project of defining knowledge in terms of justified true beliefs, Davidson helpfully demonstrated why justification is so problematic for philosophers (and from the Christian's point of view, unbelievers in particular). He explained,

> It seemed to me that there's a sense in which this project can't be carried out. The problem concerns the last feature, of course [justification]. As Plato discovered in the *Theaetetus* the hard thing is to account for the conditions in which a belief is justified or justified in just the right way to make it knowledge if it's true. And I guess I became convinced that it's not just that nobody has ever gotten it

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[13] For a helpful primmer on justified true beliefs see, Richard Foley, "Justified Belief As Responsible Belief," in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, ed. Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 313–326.

right but that there are reasons in principle why there isn't any one right answer. It's not that we don't know a lot about justification in particular cases, but that there should be one account which is *the* satisfactory one, seems to me then, and seems to me now, very unlikely.[14]

The unbeliever is perplexed at the very point that knowledge becomes knowledge: at *justification* (what we have been calling accounting until this point). For Davidson this perplexity should not come as a surprise. To advocate for a justification in which all facts terminate in a final reference point would make knowledge monolithic. There would have to be some objective, eternal final reference point of all facts that could penetrate the appearance of duality in the world and convince the individual of that one justification for all facts.

This illustration allows us to see the important distinction between mere common assent and the more robust concept of common knowledge. Although two parties might have common assent of the truth of a natural phenomenon, they cannot share common knowledge of that phenomenon if their justification of that true belief is not also shared. Without common knowledge, the parties cannot have true communication. This dilemma is particularly poignant if two parties wish to engage in a kind of communication characterized by a method of debate. It is unclear how any effective method of debate would succeed without common knowledge. Mere common assent would produce only an appearance of common ground, not an actual common ground between them.

Many have missed this important distinction. It is this distinction between common assent and common knowledge that has characterized Van Til's construal of the epistemological antithesis between believer and unbeliever (knowledge=the spiritual reality of natural truths).

In the next few sections, we will discover Van Til's defense of this traditional epistemological model (justified true beliefs). We will see that the *complaint* brought against Van Til's epistemology appears to be a neglect of this model. We will then see that Van Til's epistemological model (justified true beliefs) becomes particularly necessary in regard to his post-Humean *context*. Given Van Til's epistemological framework, lastly, we will explicate Van Til's *conditions* for true communication between parties who wish to debate each other.

The Complaint

An important aspect of Van Til's conception of the epistemological antithesis between believers and unbelievers is that a mere description of facts entails such an antithesis. Although some might concede that there is antithesis between believers and unbelievers in their justification of a fact, they may not agree that there is antithesis within the unbeliever's mere description of that fact.

William Dennison has observed that some of Van Til's critics have accused him of rejecting a distinction between the scientific *description* of phenomena and the *explanation* of those phenomena. Dennison explains,

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[14] Donald Davidson and Michael Martin, "Davidson on Knowledge & Perception—Martin Discussion (Epistemology)," Philosophy Overdose; accessed October 5, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jrxn451Br68 (quotation begins at 4:00).

Van Til set forth two ideas which became a point of contention on the part of his critics: 1) 'the believer and the non-believer differ at the outset of every self-conscious investigation' and 2) the believer and non-believer have everything metaphysically in common, but nothing epistemologically in common. Van Til's critics respond by saying that he cannot be serious; these two points seem to destroy any conception of common grace and a common point of contact while accenting the notion of total depravity. With respect to the first point, his critics may concede that a basic difference between a self-conscious investigation on the part of a believer and an unbeliever exists concerning *an explanation* of the facts, but there is no such difference in the mere *description* of the facts.[15]

For instance, the way Stephen Hawking *describes* the behavior of photons should not be epistemologically different from a believer's description of the behavior of photons. It is only when the question of how one *explains* that phenomenon that Hawking moves to human autonomy and the Christian turns to God. In other words, for the critics with whom Van Til was interacting, there should be no epistemological antithesis between the believer and the unbeliever when both parties are giving a description of the facts, but one *would* expect such an antithesis when they are explaining (or accounting for) those same facts.

Van Til, however, disagrees. He contends that there is epistemological antithesis between believers and unbelievers in *both* their descriptions *and* their explanations. Dennison writes that, for Van Til,

> from the very outset of every self-conscious investigation into the facts, the Christian and the non-Christian differ. Specifically, Van Til maintained that every description is an explanation of a fact—the description of a fact is not a neutral category that exists irrespective of God. As Van Til wrote: 'According to any consistently Christian position, God, and God only, has ultimate definitory power. God's description or plan of the fact makes the fact what it is.' Since God describes and interprets (explains) the facts, no fact is neutral. Every *self-conscious* investigation into the facts does not separate the description from the explanation.[16]

For Van Til, every instance of thought occurs in the context of a pre-interpreted world. This interpretation is God's interpretation. Therefore, any engagement of the world, any engagement of facts, is engagement with God. All facts are subject to God's pre-interpretation. Engaging facts cannot be done knowledgeably if God is excluded from the engagement. This even includes mere description of facts.

Given that the fallen intellect is naturally hostile to God, engaging facts becomes a delusional interaction. When an unbeliever attempts to describe what he observes, he does so not as a neutral observer using neutral descriptors, but rather he does so as the primary interpreter. His very descriptions of facts are constructed to assimilate the unbeliever's God-absent interpretation. Van Til explains:

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[15] William D. Dennison, *In Defense of the Eschaton*, ed. James Douglas Baird (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 45.

[16] Ibid., 46.

The scientist, even when he claims to be merely describing facts, assumes that at least some aspects of Reality are non-structural in nature. His assumption is broader than that. He really assumes that all Reality is non-structural in nature. To make a batch of ice-cubes Mother needs only a small quantity of water. But to hold the ice-cubes intact till it is time to serve refreshments, Mother must control the whole situation. She must be certain that Johnny does not meanwhile handle them for purposes of his own. So the scientist, if his description of even a small area, or of an aspect or a dimension, of Reality is to stand, must assume that Reality as a whole is non-structural in nature until it is structured by the scientist. The idea of brute, that is utterly uninterpreted, "fact" is the presupposition to the finding of any fact of scientific standing. A "fact" does not become a fact, according to the modern scientist's assumptions, till it has been made a fact by the ultimate definitory power of the mind of man. The modern scientist, pretending to be merely a describer of facts, is in reality a maker of facts. He makes facts as he describes. His description is itself the manufacturing of facts.[17]

Van Til is saying that the delusion of neutral thought and of neutral observation by the modern scientist is rooted in the presupposition that the world lies before him uninterpreted. Man is the one who brings meaning to the observation and even brings meaning to the facts. His description must be constructed in such a way that once reverse-engineered, it inevitably leads to an explanation in which God is either not present or not necessary. As Hawking phrased it, "Because there is a law like gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing. . . . Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist. It is not necessary to invoke God to light the blue touch paper and set the universe going."[18]

Van Til did not overlook a distinction between description and explanation. Rather, he was acknowledging the conditions necessary for knowledge. Those conditions included not merely assenting to a true belief as is done in description, but also, these true beliefs, as described, must be directly related to that which gives these beliefs the quality called "true." Put another way, assent to a true belief requires that the truth of that belief have representation even within the description. Therefore, descriptions are not neutral observations but are rather *interpretations* requiring presuppositions that make those interpretations possible. Those presuppositions contain no neutrality whatsoever. A description, as interpretation, is fully reliant on its presupposed explanation for it to have any coherence. Not only that, but the explanation that gives it coherence is also the essential element that defines this coherence as either *knowledge* or a false belief.

The Context

To understand Van Til's position, it is important to remember his context. Van Til was responding within a post-Humean world. If we think of description as an effect and explanation as a cause, we begin to see how some philosophers deconstructed this relation. David Hume took the distinction between description and explanation to its logical conclusion by questioning cause and effect *per se*.

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[17] Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), 4.

[18] Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York, NY: Bantam, 2012), 180.

For Hume, the perception of the mind's ability to predict and infer is only possible based on experience—what Hume calls impressions. Experience is useful only insofar as it allows us to predict what we have not experienced. This prediction is possible only if we take for granted that the unobserved will resemble the observed. Hume views this assumption as unprovable, and it has no basis in knowable fact other than our own subjective biases (or assumptions). The reflection upon our experiences or impressions become ideas. Ideas are less trustworthy than impressions because they are more easily open to error.[19] For Hume, we must imply our own perspectives of meaning into our ideas to make sense to us, but those perspectives or meaning-making assumptions may not have anything to do with reality.

Hume applies these meaning-making assumptions to cause and effect. The mind believes there is a connection between the cause and the effect, what he calls "necessary connection."[20] Hume concludes that this necessary connection is a subjective feeling that is projected onto the world. In reality, a connection may not exist at all—no *actual* cause and effect. For Hume there is no way to know this for certain.[21]

It is important to mention here that Hume is not saying that, ontologically, events do not arise without a cause. He was speaking epistemologically.[22] How can we know the connection we are assuming is actual? Part of what Hume was reacting to was whether a description of the world could be held in isolation from its explanation. In other words, Hume was questioning the reliability of descriptions of the world that are justified epistemologically by our ideas. If our ideas (reflection upon the world) are in question, what can it mean to say we know anything, regardless of our assent to its truth? When a description of a fact is considered in isolation from its explanation, the fact can be considered "true" but groundless. If truth is the cause of coming to know a fact, the knowledge of the fact is an *effect* of the cause (truth). If a fact is isolated, even temporarily, it must be held (even for a moment) that a fact is a fact absent from a grounding causal truth. This isolating of the description from the explanation proved to lead to an absurdity because a description was to be considered true without a grounding that was the *cause* of its truth.

If we were to think about descriptions as facts, when a fact is isolated from its explanation, the fact becomes incoherent. Considering an unexplained, ungrounded fact leaves one with two options. Either the one considering the isolated fact eases the tension by merely inserting his own subjective explanation to maintain coherence or the one considering the isolated fact has to accept the possibility of a "true" but incoherent fact.[23] Both options are absurdities if two parties are attempting to "know" the same fact.

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[19] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, I.1.2.1, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1888).

[20] Ibid., I.3.2.2.

[21] Ibid., I.4.7.8.

[22] Wright refers to Hume's letter to John Stewart on February 1754 in which Hume states that he "never asserted so absurd a Proposition as that any thing might arise without a Cause." John P. Wright, *Hume's 'A Treatise of Human Nature': An Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 93.

[23] A true but incoherent fact is not referring to a fact that is difficult to understand. For instance, the Trinity might *seem* to be an incoherent fact. However, although the Trinity is impossible to understand fully, it is grounded in

This separation of a fact's description from its explanation led to a radical skepticism. If description can logically be separated from explanation, then description is merely undefined perception. In such a case, perceiving a fact is possible absent the fact's defined identity in its explanation. There is no grounding of the description for its coherence. When description is incoherent, description is meaningless. For this reason, Hume relegated description to what he viewed as mere representation. Detached from an objective explanation, perception became subjective in the most dubious way.

For Van Til, Immanuel Kant's response to Hume was unacceptably autonomous,[24] but Kant did understand that at the center of the debate was the question of how knowledge is possible.[25] Thus, Kant and the rest of the world were forced to ask the next question: What are the conditions necessary for knowledge to be obtained? The post-Humean world began to recognize that separating the description of a fact from its explanation was a death sentence to the possibility of knowing. Knowing would need criteria, and that criteria would have to include the explanation (or justification) of the fact's description.

More recently, scientific communities came to understand the problem of dividing true beliefs from their justification as well. The entire point of Hawking's book *The Grand Design* was to demonstrate that the theory of everything (explanation) was inextricably tied to how the appearance of design is described.[26]

For Hawking, the problem of scientific knowledge is the human element of interpretating data (description of observations). Hawking explains the problem is that "There is no way to remove the observer—us—from our perception of the world, which is created through our sensory processing and through the way we think and reason. Our perception—and hence the observations upon which our theories are based—is not direct, but rather shaped by a kind of lens, the interpretive structure of our human brains."[27] The solution to this problem was to develop a theory that accounted for all facts, a theory of everything. This kind of theory allows a more objective way of describing observations. Put simply, our minds require an interpretive structure; therefore, we need an explanation that informs and "shapes" our descriptions of the world.

Long before Hawking's book on design, Thomas Kuhn had already developed the idea that scientific observations (description) are heavily influenced by shared, delimiting paradigms across scientific communities. Different communities share different paradigms. For a paradigm to be shared,

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Scripture. In this case, a true but incoherent fact would have to be something that one assumes to be true without any grounding whatsoever.

[24] Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Idealism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 109, 133–134.

[25] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Marcus Weigelt and F. Max Müller (London: Penguin, 2007), A56/B80–81.

[26] Hawking's conclusion was that M-theory is the key explanation that is needed for proper descriptions of the phenomena in the universe. *The Grand Design*, 179–181.

[27] Ibid., 46.

particular common commitments must be formed regarding the use of the paradigm by a particular community. Kuhn called these commitments *rules*, which are derived from the paradigm.[28]

Although rules are extremely difficult to determine in a particular community whose members share a paradigm, the presence of these common commitments or rules is evidence that the community sharing the paradigm must obtain epistemological common ground as a basis for regulating the paradigm.[29] Without this epistemological common ground within the community, the paradigm becomes useless since it requires rules to operate and maintain coherence within the community. Kuhn determined that descriptions are common only among those who share the paradigm. For Kuhn, the paradigm is the explanation. The rules from the explanation inform the way in which descriptions of observations are to be rendered. Description has no universal common ground that transcends specific paradigms within scientific communities. Description and explanation are inextricably linked.

Van Til was right to insist that description and explanation are epistemologically linked, inseparable constructs that are mutually reliant on each other for their meaning and coherence. Even the philosophical and scientific communities understand that description is the exercise of interpretation, and that interpretation has no coherence without its relation to the *conditions* that make interpretation possible. A true belief requires its justification for knowledge to exist as coherent. For Van Til, the conditions are always the presupposition of the reality of the one true God and his pre-interpretation of the world. To be coherent, the description must always be in relation to those conditions.[30]

The relevance of Van Til's insistence that the very description of a fact is included in the epistemological antithesis is this: From a Reformed perspective a formal method of communication between a believer and an unbeliever cannot include the assumption of common knowledge. More specifically, mere common assent is insufficient for true communication within a formal method of debate since believers and unbelievers cannot bracket justification. Even their descriptions are informed by and related to their explanations. Considering this description/explanation relation, common assent alone does not allow for true common ground.

For Van Til, true communication between believers and unbelievers, then, must involve, not a bracketing of justification but rather a focus on justification as it differs between the two parties. Nonetheless, Van Til rightly maintained the mutual reliance of description and explanation. We find ourselves confronted with Van Til's seemingly sweeping statement, "Metaphysically, both parties have all things in common, while epistemologically they have nothing in common."[31] Such an antithesis appears to disallow any true communication between believers and unbelievers. With the antithesis in mind, we will need to flesh out the conditions necessary for the possibility of true communication

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[28] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 42.

[29] Ibid., 44.

[30] *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 5.

[31] Ibid.

because if the believer and the unbeliever have no epistemological common ground, how is it possible for them to have true communication?

The Conditions for True Communication

We have already seen the extent of the epistemological antithesis, for Van Til, between believers and unbelievers. The unbeliever's act of epistemological interpretation (description) is warped because it is inseparable from his accounting (explanation) for that interpretation. This is the case since interpretation has no coherence without the framework of the explanation. Put simply, the explanation supplies the truth aspect of the true belief.

How then can there be true communication between believer and unbeliever with this kind of antithesis between them? Van Til delineates three conditions that must obtain between parties for such communication: (1) reliable common notions, (2) a common context, and (3) the common ability to become self-consciously aware of their own epistemic principles. These three conditions are made possible by the psychological aspect of personality.

First, Van Til defended the *reliability of common notions*. In Van Til's statement, "Metaphysically, both parties have all things in common, while epistemologically they have nothing in common,"[32] we see two aspects of human personality: the metaphysical and the epistemological. For Van Til, it is within the metaphysical aspect of personality that common notions are possible between believers and unbelievers. These common notions are what Van Til calls the "point of contact," a commonality between the two parties that is genuine, clear, and universal:

> [The truly biblical view] is assured of a point of contact in the fact that every man is made in the image of God and has impressed upon him the law of God. In that fact alone he may rest secure with respect to the point of contact problem. For that fact makes men always accessible to God. That fact assures us that every man, to be a man at all, must already be in contact with the truth. He is so much in contact with the truth that much of his energy is spent in the vain effort to hide this fact from himself. His efforts to hide this fact from himself are bound to be self-frustrative.
>
> Only by thus finding the point of contact in man's sense of deity that lies underneath his own conception of self-consciousness as ultimate can we be both true to Scripture and effective in reasoning with the natural man.[33]

In these paragraphs we see some vital elements in Van Til's metaphysical common notions shared by believers and unbelievers. First, truth is present in and known to all men by way of common notions. All men begin already in contact with the truth, rightly interpreted, and revealed by God to them (Rom 1:18-21). This truth is not merely one particular aspect of the world but rather is the *sensus divinitatis* that is the key to reality itself. That is to say, man is positioned directly within the spiritual reality that makes all particular truths meaningful and coherent.

Van Til was presenting man not as ignorant in the sense of lacking genuine knowledge. But Van Til did not minimize the seeming problem this genuine knowledge of the truth causes for the

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[32] Ibid.

[33] Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008) 117.

doctrine of total depravity. In light of the depraved mind, Van Til points out the dilemma: "If a man is wholly ignorant of the truth, he cannot be interested in the truth. On the other hand, if he is really interested in the truth, it must be that he already possesses the main elements of the truth."[34] Van Til satisfied the dilemma by viewing common notions as the conduit to truth in the unbeliever.

Within his category of psychological common notions, Van Til understood man as already knowing the truth, having been made in the image of the Author of truth and inhabiting a universe that cannot be understood without the spiritual reality of truth-knowing and image-bearing. Van Til views man's mind as *habitually* rebelling and suppressing the truth epistemologically. Psychologically, it is through common notions that truth—properly interpreted—has been revealed to man. Epistemologically, man suppresses that truth.

Next, Van Til defended a *common context* between believer and unbeliever. Through psychological common notions, every person (even though fallen) is positioned within a *context* where all the conditions are present to direct him to know truth. He is made in the image of God and dwells within God's pre-interpreted universe. This universe is his immediate environment but not his ultimate environment. As Van Til confirms, "God is man's ultimate environment, and this environment is completely interpretative of man who is to know himself."[35] The spiritual reality of God is both within man and all around him, making every natural truth possible. Man begins already living, already defined, and already dependent on a world that exists as interpreted by God. His context directs a way of knowing that begins with revealed, interpreted truth so that he may have all the conditions necessary for thought itself.

Man is not able to think beyond his environment but is able only to rely on its already God-constructed, God-interpreted existence to think at all. Van Til states, "God is man's ultimate environment, and this ultimate environment controls the whole of man's immediate environment as well as man himself. The whole of man's own immediate environment as well as man himself is already interpreted by God. Even the denotation of the whole universe exists by virtue of the connotation or plan of God."[36]

But can man "step back" and objectively distance himself from his own God-interpreted context and become his own interpreter? The concept that man is able to distance himself from his context in order to metaphorically turn around and interpret the world objectively has often been referred to in philosophy as the *Archimedean point*. This was a reference to Archimedes, who was thought to have said that if he could distance himself far enough from the earth and had a lever long enough, he could move the world. This distancing was applied epistemologically in philosophy as a metaphorical way of achieving an objective vantage point from which to make judgments regarding the world. For Van Til, the Archimedean point has two fatal flaws: (1) it cannot deliver what it promises and therefore is a delusion, and (2) it assumes man is capable of interpreting himself rightly.

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[34] *The Defense of the Faith,* 109.

[35] Ibid., 65.

[36] Ibid., 66.

One must begin his epistemic distancing already finding himself within a world which has already been interpreted. The parameters of his observations, the biological sensations that make his observations possible, the rational laws that organize those observations, the cultural construct that allow for contextualization of those observations are all what we might call *meaning-structures*.

These meaning-structures are in themselves pre-interpreted facts that are not assessed but used to assess. Put simply, man cannot distance himself epistemologically from his own context because the tools he would use to do so cannot allow distance to be obtained. Archimedes' lever cannot leave the earth. Man finds himself unable to interpret originally because he cannot get behind his pre-interpreted context. Van Til writes, "In the last analysis the 'facts of experience' must be interpreted either in terms of man taken as autonomous, or they must be interpreted in terms of God. There is no third 'possibility.' The interpretation which takes the autonomous man as self-interpretive is an 'impossible possibility.'"[37]

In light of Van Til's position, a better metaphor than the Archimedean point might be an image of a man on a raft stranded in the middle of the ocean. He wishes to distance himself from the ocean in order to get a better vantage point of his position in the ocean. He therefore rows a quarter mile from his previous position, thinking he can now look back with a better perspective of the ocean and his position in it. This is the delusion of the Archimedean point when applied to epistemology. This delusion is what Van Til had in mind when he insisted that the apologist must "point out to [the unbeliever] that he has to presuppose the truth of the Christian position even to oppose it. I saw a little girl one day on a train sitting on the lap of her 'daddy' slapping him in the face. If the 'daddy' had not held her on his lap she would not have been able to slap him."[38] For Van Til, even the act of rejecting the spiritual reality of one's pre-interpreted context must be done by means of utilizing its structure, laws, and framework to do it.

We will now address the Archimedean point as assuming man's capability of interpreting himself rightly. The Archimedean point presupposes that the interpreter has accurately interpreted himself. In other words, the usefulness of distancing oneself to engage the broader picture is for the purpose of achieving an objective perspective. The interpreter, then, must be capable of that kind of achievement. The interpreter must, therefore, self-interpret. Van Til recognizes that there exists no unbeliever who, "does not actually seek to interpret himself and the universe without God."[39]

The assumption that man is a suitable interpreter remains unproven. Even in a field like scientific study one would think this assumption would be challenged or at least examined. Instead, science is often used as the distancing agent, believed to produce some kind of objectivity. Van Til contends, "When the modern man says: 'Science has proved,' or 'We now know,' the evangelical Christian knows that such statements are made on the assumption that man, and especially modern man, understands himself. Yet modern man cannot offer an intelligible interpretation of himself."[40]

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[37] Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 45.

[38] E.R Geehan, *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 98.

[39] *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 43.

[40] *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 336.

Without God, man's attempt to interpret himself is an absurdity. The mere possibility of self-interpretation leads to a number of questions: How can man get behind his own being to interpret it? How can he set himself prior to himself or step behind his own epistemological framework without the assistance of his own epistemological framework? From what standard would he draw in order to determine any objective truth regarding himself? Where could man stand that would locate himself properly distanced from himself to begin his interpretation? From the perspective of the unbeliever, this is the irrational expectation of the Archimedean point. Man is forced to accept the monumental absurdity: the uninterpreted interpreter is appropriately suited to accurately interpret the world.

We have been discussing Van Til's conditions for communication between believer and unbeliever. First, we analyzed the reliability of common notions. Second, we detailed man's common context, and now we will explain man's *common ability to become self-aware* of his own system and principles of thought.

Although the unbeliever suppresses the truth, the truth remains in his mind and even in his consciousness. Van Til maintains, "The non-regenerate man seeks by all means to 'keep under' this remnant of a true theistic interpretation that lingers in his mind. His real interpretative principle, now that he is a covenant-breaker, is that of himself as ultimate and of impersonal laws as ultimate." In this suppression of the theistic interpretation that still lingers, the unbeliever views the one true God as impossible. Something of truth, however, remains in fallen man's consciousness. Van Til explains that in suppressing the knowledge of God, "he sins against that which is hidden deep down in his own consciousness. And it is well that we should appeal to this fact."[41]

We are able to appeal to that conscious knowledge of God that is habitually suppressed. Van Til speaks of the sense of the divine within the fallen consciousness that remains accessible. It is not readily accessible, however. Truth remains deep within the consciousness: "The Reformed apologist must seek his point of contact with the natural man in that which is beneath the threshold of his working consciousness, in the sense of deity which he seeks to suppress. And to do this the Reformed apologist must also seek a point of contact with the systems constructed by the natural man."[42] In other words, the believer is able to bring the unbeliever to a point at which the unbeliever is self-aware of his condition as a suppressor and self-aware of his epistemological system as a system of suppression. The unbeliever's awareness of his own suppression is a truth that is accounted for with God as a final reference point. This is the seed of our answer to our question of the possibility of true communication between believer and unbeliever. *Bringing an unbeliever to a self-awareness of his own suppression of the truth is central to true communication between believer and unbeliever.*

We have established Van Til's criteria for the possibility of communication between believer and unbeliever is common notions, common context, and a common ability to recognize one's own system of thought. It is through these criteria that Van Til's approach to apologetics is realized. For proper engagement of the unbeliever, he did not require that God be proven but rather that God be assumed at the outset as the God of Scripture. The goal of this engagement was to demonstrate that

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[41] Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 83.

[42] *The Defense of the Faith*, 121.

the unbeliever's own position requires God as the grounding assumption. Based on these conditions as transcendent truths, Van Til's apologetical approach was termed *the transcendental method*. It is through this approach that, despite the epistemological antithesis, Van Til lays out the grounding for the possibility of true communication between believers and unbelievers.

An Answer to the Question of True Communication

Therefore, our question as to how true communication is possible between believer and unbeliever despite the epistemological antithesis between them can be answered with Van Til's transcendental approach. To see this clearly, it is important to remember that Van Til's approach can be boiled down to understanding his view of the unbeliever's *principle* and *system*. The unbeliever begins his thought with the principle of autonomy—that he himself is the final reference point of his interpretation of the world, not God.[43] The unbeliever's system is the complex explanation of facts designed to bolster that principle.[44] Van Til's approach presupposes that the principle of autonomy is a lie, and that a biblical apologist does not believe it appropriate to imagine that the unbeliever is able to have faith in God upon the grounding of the unbeliever's principle of autonomy.[45] Van Til's approach, then, is designed to lead the interlocutor to become self-consciously aware that his system, when consistently followed, leads to absurdity.[46] Not only this, but this breakdown of the system allows for the unbelieving interlocutor to be self-consciously aware of his own principle of autonomy.

Bringing the unbeliever to the recognition of the impossibility of the contrary creates a moment in which the unbeliever is fully, self-consciously aware of his own principle of autonomy. For Van Til, the apologist "shall show that all explanations without God are futile. Only when we do this do we appeal to that knowledge of God within men which they seek to suppress."[47] When successful, a moment is created in which the unbeliever is consciously aware of their suppression. This moment cannot be overstated in Van Til's approach. It is at this moment that believer and unbeliever are able to participate in true communication. This is the case because as Van Til has already established above, the unbeliever *knows* that God is the final reference point of all facts.[48] This knowledge is suppressed within the unbeliever.[49] Van Til's approach forces the unbeliever to recognize the very principle the unbeliever is utilizing to suppress the truth. His principle of autonomy is what he uses to suppress the truth.[50] When the unbeliever recognizes both the truth of his common notion that God is the final reference point for all facts and that he is suppressing the truth with his principle of autonomy, there

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[43] *The Defense of the Faith*, 191–192.

[44] *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 151.

[45] Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003) 120–121.

[46] Ibid., 152–153.

[47] *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 294.

[48] *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 122.

[49] *Christian Apologetics*, 194–195.

[50] *The Defense of the Faith*, 196.

is a *sense* of common knowledge between believer and unbeliever at that moment. Van Til refers to the Reformed apologist as one who knows that the unbeliever

> who is dead in trespasses and sins is none the less responsible for his deadness. He knows also that the sinner in the depth of his heart knows that what is thus held before him is true. He knows he is a creature of God; he has been simply seeking to cover up this fact to himself. He knows that he has broken the law of God; he has again covered up this fact to himself. He knows that he is therefore guilty and is subject to punishment forever: this fact too he will not look in the face.[51]

Epistemologically, the unbeliever remains outside of common ground from the believer because of the continued rebellion of the unbeliever remains despite what the unbeliever knows. But this does not change the fact that he does indeed *know*.[52] Common knowledge is obtained even if the structure of the unbeliever's epistemological activity remains radically different from the believer's epistemological activity. Van Til states, "It is thus in the mixed situation that results because of the factors mentioned, (1) that every man knows God naturally (2) that every sinner is in principle anxiously striving to suppress that knowledge of God and (3) that every sinner is in this world still the object of the striving of the Spirit calling him back to God, that cooperation between believers and unbelievers is possible."[53]

The unbeliever remains unsubmitted to the truth that God has implanted in him by way of his common notions. But that does not change the fact that (at the moment of self-conscious awareness) he knows God as the final reference point *and* that his suppression is now recognized *and* even the principle of autonomy that he is using to do this suppressing is known.

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[51] *Christian Apologetics*, 196.

[52] *The Defense of the Faith*, 177.

[53] Ibid., 194.

The Life of Christ As the Center of History in Jonathan Edwards's
History of the Work of Redemption

Mark Sidwell[1]

When a journal states by its title a devotion to biblical theology and worldview, it raises questions about what falls within its purview.[2] Because there is an assumed commitment to the Bible as the source for both theology and constructing a Christian view of the issues of human life, a natural assumption would be that the journal would use Scripture as the source for all discussions of worldview. However, there is another useful—although subordinate—method of forming a Christian worldview, that of studying how theologians of the past have attempted to frame answers to the questions that confront us. An example would be the Christian view of history. Christianity is a historical religion, based in God's revelation of himself and his work of redemption within time. As a result, Christian writers of all stripes have wrestled with how a Christian should understand history.[3]

Perhaps no one has undertaken a more ambitious effort to construct a Christ-centered view of history than Jonathan Edwards. Although he died before revising his work on this subject, Edwards laid out intriguing concepts worth weighing for Christians who are considering their own view of history. Edwards was perhaps America's most important philosopher prior to the twentieth century,[4] America's first significant theologian, and a wellspring of American evangelicalism and revivalism. Although his interests were wide ranging, all had a theological center. George Marsden aptly observes, "The key to Edwards' thought is that everything is related because everything is related to God."[5] Edwards's contemplation of the works of God led him to wrestle with history as the intersection of God's actions and man's needs. In his *History of the Work of Redemption* Edwards laid out a Christian view of history that placed the person and work of Jesus Christ at the center of history, a work comparable in comprehensive scope to Augustine's *City of God*. With this in mind, we come to a key question: Does Edwards's *History* provide a framework for a Christian approach to history?

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[2] I would like to thank Michael Hamilton and John Matzko for reading this article and providing helpful comments and suggestions.

[3] A good sampling of modern views may be found in C. T. McIntire, ed., *God, History, and Historians: Modern Christian Views of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

[4] See the comments, e.g., in Avihu Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of History: The Reenchantment of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 29–30. Zakai's book is likely the best comprehensive discussion of Edwards's philosophy of history.

[5] George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 460. Marsden's magisterial work is the best starting point for studying the life of Jonathan Edwards. Another good study, more devotionally oriented, is Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987).

Jonathan Edwards As Historian

Consideration of Edwards as a historian is divisible into four parts: his historical writings, a comparison of his perspective of history to that of contemporary Enlightenment, his views on eschatology, and his *History of the Work of Redemption.*

The Histories of Edwards

Few of Edwards's works were really histories, despite the implications of some of the titles. Four works from his massive corpus stand out: *The History of the Work of Redemption,* the autobiographical *Personal Narrative* (c. 1740), *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* (1737), and *The Life and Diary of David Brainerd* (1749), the last of which he only edited. The *Personal Narrative,* although revealing of Edwards's character, was only marginally a historical work.[6] The last two works offer better material for historiographical consideration.

Edwards wrote *A Faithful Narrative* in 1736 as a lengthy letter to a fellow New England pastor.[7] The work is an example what Hegel calls "original history," the detailing of events contemporary to the writer.[8] This narrative of the early Northampton revivals of 1735 was the first authentic history of the Great Awakening. Although Edwards's most popular work in his lifetime, the book was not a model of history. He did little historical research, mostly retold first-hand experience, and made no attempt to examine secondary causation. Only in the central section on the psychology of conversion did Edwards delve into the scientific method, conduct original research on the nature of conversion, and include two "case studies." The *Narrative* suggests that Edwards likely had the ability but not the inclination to write "scientific history."[9]

That Edwards only edited *The Life and Diary of David Brainerd* diminishes its importance as a window into his work as a historian. Still the introduction reveals something of Edwards's view of the purpose of history: "There are two ways of representing and recommending true religion and virtue to the world, which God hath made use of: the one is by doctrine and precept; the other by instance and example."[10] Christian biography specifically teaches by example "so that the world has had opportunity to see a confirmation of the truth, efficacy, and amiableness of the religion taught, in the

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[6] Jonathan Edwards, "Personal Narrative," in *Letters and Personal Writings,* ed. George S. Claghorn, vol. 16 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 790-804. The "Personal Narrative" was first published posthumously in 1765.

[7] Jonathan Edwards, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God,* in *The Great Awakening,* ed. C. C. Goen, vol. 4 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 99–211.

[8] G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History,* trans. J. Sibree (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1901), 43–46.

[9] As John F. Wilson notes, "On the basis of the earlier revival Writings, especially the *A Faithful Narrative … of the Surprising Work of God,* it has been argued that Edwards' demonstrated powers of observation and analysis with respect to psychological and sociological materials could have sustained a thoroughly critical narrative, a kind of achievement which, if extrapolated to a larger scale, would have resembled in some ways the new Enlightenment interest in history." "Jonathan Edwards as Historian," *Church History* 46 (March 1977): 11. Wilson himself is cautious concerning this idea.

[10] Jonathan Edwards, "Author's Preface" to *The Life of David Brainerd,* ed. Norman Pettit, vol. 7 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 89.

practice of the same persons who most clearly and forceably [sic] taught it."[11] Also revealing (and appalling to modern historians) is Edwards's treatment of Brainerd's diary. He suppressed some sections (at Brainerd's request, one must note) and then destroyed most of the manuscript once the book had been published.[12]

<center>An Enlightenment Comparison</center>

This small body of work, even when supplemented by *The History of the Work of Redemption,* does not qualify Edwards as a significant historian. In his historical work, however, he continued to engage the Enlightenment worldview that he strongly criticized throughout his career. As Zakai notes, Edwards understood the new approach to history emerging from the Age of Reason[13] but insisted that history should spring from a divine perspective and not draw its meaning from human acts. Edwards asserted Scripture's primacy against the Enlightenment's rejection of the authority of revelation.[14]

One may better understand the context of Edwards's reply to the Enlightenment by comparing him to a leading historian of the era. Edward Gibbon (1737-94) is justly remembered for his classic *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88). Although published after Edwards's death (meaning of course that Edwards never read it), the work provides a useful contrast to Edwards's approach to history.

Presbyterian Bible commentator Albert Barnes, after acknowledging the practical agnosticism of Gibbon's work, nonetheless considers the *Decline and Fall* "probably … the most candid and impartial history of the time that succeeded the introduction of Christianity that the world possesses" and concludes that Gibbon's "work contains the best ecclesiastical history that is to be found."[15] Even

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[11] Edwards, "Author's Preface," 90. In the context of the Enlightenment it is interesting to compare this comment to that of Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke, "that history is philosophy teaching by examples how to conduct ourselves in all the situation of public and private life." *Letters on the Study and Use of History,* (Basil: J. J. Tourneisen, 1788), Letter III, 36. The work was originally published in 1735. See Zakai, 227.

[12] Some portions of the original manuscript survived, allowing modern historians to partially reconstruct how Edwards edited the diaries. For discussion of how Edwards revised and shaped the manuscript, see Pettit, "Editor's Introduction," to *The Life of David Brainerd,* 80–83.

[13] See Zakai, 8–12, for a discussion of the works of history from "Enlightened" historians that Edwards read. The importance of Zakai's observation is realizing that Edwards was not simply writing a traditional approach to history but actively engaging a contradictory worldview.

[14] For some writers, Edwards's rejection of Enlightenment historiography is a blot on his reputation. Most famously, Peter Gay wrote that Edwards's "mind was the opposite of reactionary or fundamentalist. Yet his history was both. Such apparent contradictions are a sign of something extraordinary; with Jonathan Edwards, they are the mark of tragedy." Peter Gay, *A Loss of Mastery: Puritan Historians in Colonial America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 104. He contrasted Edwards with David Hume and Voltaire with their embrace of Enlightenment philosophy and research in primary sources. "To grasp the temper of Edwards' history," Gay said, "one must read the Church Fathers and the Scriptures." The *Work of Redemption* in particular "is a thoroughly traditional book, and the tradition is the tradition of Augustine" (94).

[15] Albert Barnes, *Revelation.* Notes on the New Testament, Explanatory and Practical (1851; reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1949), vii. For an excellent overview and evaluation of Gibbon as a historian of early Christianity, see W.H.C. Frend, "Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) and Early Christianity," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 45 (1994): 661–72.

to a modern reader, Gibbon compares favorably in scope and relative objectivity to historians of his and succeeding generations. There is, however, a sharp philosophical difference that sets Gibbon apart from Edwards.

One reason that Gibbon's work is a milestone in historical writing in that he symbolizes the secularizing of history during the Enlightenment. In particular he advances a natural explanation for the rise and success of Christianity. In a famous passage, Gibbon writes, "The theologian may indulge the pleasing task of describing Religion as she descended from Heaven, arrayed in her native purity. A more melancholy duty is imposed on the historian. He must discover the inevitable mixture of error and corruption which she contracted in long residence upon earth, among a weak and degenerate race of beings."[16] In contrast to earlier writers who saw divine Providence behind the events they described, Gibbon offers a naturalistic explanation. Sometimes Gibbon disguises his more secular approach. In listing his four causes for the growth of Christianity, he includes "the doctrine of a future life" and "the miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church."[17] Nevertheless it becomes clear on a closer reading that Gibbon refers to the *belief* in such matters that helped popularize the cause of Christianity.

One objection that Edwards would likely raise is that he could not so readily separate the theologian from the historian, but there is also a deeper philosophical issue. In contrast to Gibbon's naturalistic explanation, Edwards offers a "supernaturalistic" approach based on his view of the immanence of God in nature that carried over into God's immanence in history. Edwards traced the intervention of God to the atomic level in nature, that is, at the most basic level of material reality God caused the universe to cohere by his providential power. Indeed, each moment is a new act of creation *ex nihilo*. From moment to moment the universe exists only because of God's constant power, an aspect of Edwards's doctrine of preservation, of what is sometimes called in his theology the doctrine of "continuous creation."[18] With such a view of reality, Edwards saw history as a description of phenomena that bore the constant marks of divine superintendence.[19] As a result, God can be known in time and not removed, as in Gibbon's approach, to a distance from his creation.

In fact, Edwards's focus on a Christ-centered view of history contrasts even with the larger worldview of Enlightenment thinkers. Zakai notes, for example, how Isaac Newton, the father of Enlightenment thought and method, held to an Arian view of Christ's nature that made even Christ subject to the great scheme of God for creation. The trinitarian Edwards by contrast made Christ central to the very being of the universe and the great controlling factor in all of life.[20] In contrast to

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[16] Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* Chapter 15.

[17] Ibid.

[18] For discussion of Edwards's view of continuous creation, in the overall context of his views on creation, see John H. Gerstner, *The Rational Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Powhatan, VA: Berea, 1992), 2:189–202. For a brief description of Edwards's views of atoms and their ramifications for his theology and cosmology, see Zakai, 96–101.

[19] "Edwards strove to reconstitute God's absolute sovereignty and redemptive activity in the physical world by arguing that he controls the smallest particles of atoms, and hence all natural phenomena." Zakai, 14.

[20] See Zakai, 109–10.

Newton's view, Jesus Christ is sovereign in Edwards's thought, an idea that carries through to his view of history.[21]

The Eschatology of Edwards

How one views eschatology, the "last things" in general and prophecy in particular, naturally affects how one views the course of history and its patterns. Prior to Edwards's day, there were two dominant approaches to eschatology: the premillennialism that characterized the early church and the amillennialism that dominated the medieval and Reformation eras. Edwards was in the vanguard of a new scheme: postmillennialism. Due in part to the influence of Edwards, postmillennialism achieved a hegemony in American theology until the early twentieth century.

In outline, Edwards held the following scheme. After the early growth of the church and its triumph under Constantine, humanity fell under the reign of Antichrist, the papacy. With the Reformation, humans began once again to find liberty in Christ and to shatter the kingdom of Antichrist. Eventually God's Spirit will so work in human affairs that the pope will be cast down, Satan bound, and Christ will rule on earth in the hearts of his people. Like leaven in bread dough (cf. Mt 13:33), the kingdom of Christ will gradually spread and bring to earth a peace unknown since the Fall. Then, after a millennial reign of righteousness, Satan will once again rise and lead many into rebellion. Christ himself will descend from heaven, defeat his enemies, render the final judgment, and initiate eternity.[22]

As Goen notes, Edwards's postmillennialism was in its day a novel position.[23] His view clearly contrasted with the Reformed tradition of amillennialism found in John Calvin and later affirmed in the Westminster Confession. But as Goen also points out, there had been foreshadowings of the postmillennial position. The roots of the concept, he suggests, may lie with the medieval Spiritual Franciscans and their concept of a future "Age of the Spirit," as well as the desire during the Reformation to speed the arrival of Christ's kingdom. Closer to Edwards's own day and tradition was the shift in the Savoy Declaration of 1648, Congregationalism's revision of the Westminster Confession.[24] But if these were contributors, Edwards undoubtedly became the system's influential voice. A keynote of this position was its optimism. As Goen points out, in Edwards's postmillen-nialism, *"the worst of our troubles is already past."*[25] Edwards's teaching was not without somber notes of

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[21] Zakai compares Edwards to other noted Christian writers who engaged the cultural situation of the church in their historical writings. Eusebius dealt with the end of Roman persecution and the Constantinian settlement. Augustine wrestled with the collapse of the Roman Empire under barbarian pressure. John Foxe sought "to forge a new Protestant vision of England" in the Reformation. In the same way Edwards represented Christian engagement with the Enlightenment. Zakai, 279.

[22] On Edwards's eschatological views, see Jonathan Edwards, *Apocalyptic Writings,* ed. Stephen J. Stein, vol. 5 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). See also the helpful summary and discussion in C. C. Goen, "Jonathan Edwards: A New Departure in Eschatology," *Church History* 28 (1959): 25–40.

[23] Goen, "Jonathan Edwards: A New Departure in Eschatology," 26.

[24] Ibid., 33–36. He also notes the influence of early postmillennial commentaries by Daniel Whitby, Charles Daubuz, and especially Moses Lowman on Edwards, 36.

[25] Ibid. 30, italics in original.

warning and judgment, but its overall cast was positive concerning the future of the present age, more so than the earlier systems of premillennialism and amillennialism.

As his notebooks show, Edwards studied prophecy avidly. His scheme of interpretation was not only postmillennial but also historical/historicist; that is, he viewed the prophecies of the book of Revelation as symbols of events in history since the time of the apostles. He held that "the bigger part of the book of Revelation is taken up in foretelling the events" of the period between Constantine and the fall of the Antichrist.[26] In his view, for example, both the four angels holding back the wind (Rv 7) and the half-hour of quiet (Rv 12) represent the rest arising from Constantine's toleration.[27] In Edwards's scheme only a few things are left to be accomplished before the final consummation, leading him to observe, for example, that only two of the seven vials in Revelation 16 remain to be poured out.[28] Edwards saw the present age as the fulfillment of prophecy. Current history was full of meaning, because it was revelation unfolding before the eyes of contemporary believers.

Edwards's *History of the Work of Redemption*

The genesis of *The History of the Work of Redemption* was a series of sermons Edwards delivered in 1739 to his church at Northampton, Massachusetts. Using a single text, Isaiah 51:8, "For the moth shall eat them up like a garment, and the worm shall eat them like wool: but my righteousness shall be for ever, and my salvation from generation to generation," Edwards preached thirty sermons detailing the plan of God throughout history to redeem men and women through Jesus Christ. After Edwards's death his son, Jonathan Edwards Jr., prepared transcripts from his father's sermon manuscripts and sent them to John Erskine in Scotland, who published them in 1774. This Erskine edition was the only one known to the public until Yale University Press issued its critical edition in 1989.[29]

Even so, the present form of the *History* does not represent Edwards's ultimate plans for the work. In a letter to the trustees of the College of New Jersey, who had offered him the presidency of the school, Edwards said he hesitated to accept for several reasons. Among the obstacles were several writing projects he feared would be shunted aside. Chief among these was

> a great work, which I call a *History of the Work of Redemption,* a body of divinity in an entire new method, being thrown into the form of an history, considering the affair of Christian theology, as the whole of it, in each part, stands in reference to the great work of redemption by Jesus Christ; which I suppose is to be the grand design of all God's designs; … particularly considering all parts of the grand scheme in their historical order. The order of their existence, or their being brought forth to view, in the course of divine dispensations, or the wonderful series of successive acts and events; beginning from eternity and descending from thence to the great work and successive dispensations of the infinitely wise God

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[26] Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption,* ed. John F. Wilson, vol. 9 in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 404.

[27] Ibid., 373, 405.

[28] Ibid., 456–57. See also Edwards, *Apocalyptic Writings,* 298.

[29] Wilson, "Editor's Introduction," *Work of Redemption,* 20–28, details the history of the publication and editions of the work. Wilson notes that Erskine further edited the sermons for publication, primarily in omitting overtly sermonic material such as recapitulations (25). Marsden, 193–95, gives the background of the original delivery of the sermons.

in time, considering the chief events coming to pass in the church of God, and revolutions in the world of mankind, affecting the state of the church and the affair of redemption, which we have an account of in history or prophecy; till at last we come to the general resurrection, last judgment, and consummation of all things. . . . This history will be carried on with regard to all three worlds, heaven, earth, and hell: considering the connected, successive events and alterations, in each so far as the Scriptures give any light; introducing all parts of divinity in that order which is most scriptural and most natural; which is a method which appears to me the most beautiful and entertaining, wherein every divine doctrine will appear to the greatest advantage, in the brightest light, in the most striking manner, showing the admirable contexture and harmony of the whole.[30]

Edwards accepted the presidency in January 1758, but his death from a smallpox inoculation on March 22 prevented elaboration of his design. He did leave behind three notebooks related to his planned revision of the sermon series, and these fragmentary notebooks, as well as the sweeping comments Edwards made in his letter to the college trustees, have tempted historians to speculate about what form the revised work would have taken. Some imagine a work unlike anything else Edwards ever wrote.[31] But it is the completed portion that we must reckon with.

Jonathan Edwards on the Scope of History

The *Work of Redemption* was first a *history.* More specifically, Edwards's work was a *universal history,* a category whose roots reach back to the ancient Greeks. Essentially, this genre sought to encompass all eras, regions, and peoples, not so much factually but in comprehensive explanation. The Christian tradition produced several examples of universal history with a theological orientation such as Augustine's *City of God* and Bishop Bossuet's *Discourse on Universal History.* During the Renaissance authors also attempted the form from a more secular perspective, e.g., Jean Bodin's *Method for the Easy Knowledge of History.* Edwards fell squarely in the Christian tradition. He did not intend to offer a new presentation of the *facts* of history but of its *interpretation,* specifically the unity of history in the redemption by Jesus Christ.

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[30] Jonathan Edwards to the Trustees of the College of New Jersey, *Letters and Personal Writings,* 727–28. Marsden*,* 481–89, discusses Edwards's plans for the revision of *Work of Redemption.*

[31] A prime example of such speculation is Michael J. McClymond, "A Different Legacy? The Cultural Turn in Edwards's Later Notebooks and the Unwritten *History of the Work of Redemption,*" in David W. Kling and Douglas A. Sweeney, ed., *Jonathan Edwards at Home and Abroad* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 16–39. McClymond theorizes that Edwards would have demonstrated greater sensitivity to other cultures and a deeper understanding of non-Christian religions. Otherwise, he argues, it is hard to see how the proposed work could be revolutionary. In this approach McClymond draws heavily on Gerald McDermott's revision of Edwards found in McDermott's *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). By contrast, Stephen M. Clark, "Jonathan Edwards: The History of the Work of Redemption," *Westminster Theological Journal* 56 (1994): 45–58, sees the revolutionary character in what Edwards actually wrote, not in speculative reconstruction. Clark's interpretation shows how Edwards's approach would have impressed Calvinist theologians and intellectuals of his own day, even though it might seem less innovative to modern readers. John Wilson, editor of the Yale edition of *The Work of Redemption,* concludes that "the notebooks toward revision of the sermons which date from the very end of Edwards' career do not provide evidence that *The Work of Redemption* would have been basically recast." Wilson, "Jonathan Edwards as Historian," 9.

Edwards's division of history displayed his logical, methodical nature. He perceived three great periods in the work of redemption: from the Fall to the incarnation of Christ, from the incarnation to Christ's resurrection, and from the resurrection to the end of the world. The first and last periods he subdivided. He saw six eras before the coming of Christ: from the Fall to the Flood, from the Flood to call of Abraham, from Abraham to Moses, from Moses to David, from David to the Babylonian captivity, from the captivity to the incarnation.[32] Edwards divided history after Christ according to "four successive great events": from the conclusion of Christ's ministry to the destruction of Jerusalem, from that event to the time of Constantine and "the destruction of the heathen Roman empire," from Constantine to the destruction of Antichrist, and from the fall of Antichrist to the Second Coming.[33]

Driving history from epoch to epoch is the Holy Spirit. Edwards in essence saw history as a series of revivals, arguing "that from the fall of man to this day wherein we live the Work of Redemption in its effect has mainly been carried on by remarkable pourings out of the Spirit of God. Though there be a more constant influence of God's Spirit always in some degree attending his ordinances, yet the way in which the greatest things have been done toward carrying on this work always has been by remarkable pourings out of the Spirit at special seasons of mercy."[34] This theme leads William Scheick "to suggest … that Edwards thought of his study as innovative because in it he treats history as an allegory of the conversion experience. History, in his view, merely manifests in large the experiences of the individual soul undergoing the regenerative process."[35]

The focus of history was Jesus Christ. Edwards demonstrated this emphasis in his development of his first major era. In the period before the incarnation "God was doing those things that was a preparatory to Christ's coming and were forerunners of it."[36] God foretold the coming of Christ in two ways: "predictions" by prophets and "types and shadows of Christ whereby his coming and redemption were prefigured." These types fell into three categories: "instituted types" (e.g., the sacrificial system), "providential types" through events (e.g., deliverance from Egypt), and "personal types" (e.g., David).[37] Indeed, God stirred the whole world to prepare for the coming of his Son. Edwards called the preparations for Christ's comings "the greatest revolutions that any history whatsoever gives any account of" since the Flood. Preeminently Edwards stressed the "general overturnings" reflected in Daniel—Babylon, Persia, Greece (Alexander), and Rome—as witness to the coming incarnation.[38]

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[32] *Work of Redemption,* 128–29.

[33] Ibid., 351. For a detailed presentation of Edwards's view of post-resurrection history, see the chart in Edwards, *Apocalyptic Writings,* 14, which shows how he organized history according to the seals, trumpets, and vials of the book of Revelation.

[34] *Work of Redemption,* 143.

[35] William J. Scheick, "The Grand Design: Jonathan Edwards' *History of the Work of Redemption,*" in *Critical Essays on Jonathan Edwards,* ed. William Scheick (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), 178.

[36] *Work of Redemption,* 280.

[37] Ibid., 136, 204.

[38] Ibid., 244–45.

Jonathan Edwards on Redemption

More than simply a history, Edwards's work was a history of the *work of redemption*. Narrowly speaking, Christ's life ("humiliation") is the work of redemption; broadly stated, the work is all of God's activity in applying Christ's work.[39] History is inextricably, inseparably united to Christ's redemption. History began, for example, not with creation, but with the Fall. Likewise, Christ began his work as a mediator at the Fall. Even though it had been planned before that point, Christ did not actually fill the office of mediator until history had commenced.[40] In other words, the very purpose of history in God's economy was to enact the drama of redemption.

Edwards displayed this emphasis in his treatment of biblical history. He argued that God allocated space in the inspired histories of Scripture according to how the events related to the history of redemption. Therefore, the story of Abraham, the deliverance from Egypt, and the reigns of David and Solomon—all major milestones in redemptive history—received full treatment. By contrast accounts of the children of Israel's time in Egypt, the era of the judges, and the reigns of kings after Solomon were comparatively brief.[41] The theme of redemption united the three periods of Edwards's history:

> I. That [from] the fall of man till the incarnation of Christ God was doing those things that were preparatory to Christ's coming and working out redemption and were forerunners and earnests of it.
> II. That the time from Christ's incarnation till his resurrection was spent in procuring or purchasing redemption.
> III. That the space of time from the resurrection of Christ to the end of the world is all taken up in bringing about or accomplishing the great effect or success of that purchase.[42]

As Edwards stated, redemption is historical; its fruits, which are eternal, are not.[43]

As a Reformed theologian, Edwards viewed Scripture and history through the lens of covenant theology. Therefore, he expressly associated redemption with the covenant of grace and the covenant of redemption.[44] As Perry Miller famously notes, the covenant was the central concept in Reformed/Puritan theology.[45] No less, then, is the covenant central to a Reformed view of history. To Edwards the covenant leads to a historical understanding of theology and revelation, i.e., that God deals with humanity historically. Even though the covenants are eternal and unalterable, they unfold progressively in history. Clark demonstrates how in Edwards's treatment each renewal of the covenant

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[39] *Work of Redemption,* 117.

[40] Ibid., 129–30.

[41] Ibid., 289.

[42] Ibid., 128.

[43] Ibid., 116.

[44] Ibid., 114–18.

[45] Perry Miller, "The Marrow of Puritan Divinity," in *Errand into the Wilderness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), 48–98.

of grace reveals more details, citing for example how the renewal with Abraham unveiled the calling of the Gentiles—a previously unrevealed aspect.[46]

Jonathan Edwards on the Life of Christ

The central era of Edwards's scheme, both in order and importance, was the earthly life of Jesus Christ. "Though it was but between thirty and forty years, yet more was done in it than had been done from the beginning of the world to that time."[47] Noting the disparity among his periods, he said, "It may be some may be ready to think this is a very unequal division and it is so. Indeed in some respects it is so because the second period is so much the greatest. For though it be so much shorter than either of the other, being but between thirty and forty years whereas both the other contain thousands, yet in this affair that we are now upon it is indeed more than both the other."[48]

Unlike the first and third periods, Edwards did not subdivide this era. Although he noted the distinction between Christ's private life and public ministry, Edwards did not stress them as separate periods.[49] Instead, he emphasized the unity of purpose that characterized the period: "I would observe that both Christ's satisfaction for sin and also his meriting happiness by his righteousness were carried on through the whole time of his humiliation."[50] Christ's earthly life and work of redemption were coextensive: "As soon as Christ was incarnate, then the purchase began immediately without any delay. And the whole time of Christ's humiliation, from the morning that Christ began to be incarnate till the morning that he rose from the dead, was taken up in this purchase. And then the purchase was entirely and completely finished."[51]

In Edwards's mind, God's choice for the setting of the work of redemption was supremely appropriate. "God saw need that the same world that was the stage of man's fall and ruin should also be the stage of his redemption."[52] Christ's incarnation as a true human being was a necessary component of his redemption, for "the incarnation of Christ was necessary in order to Christ's being in a next capacity for to purchase of redemption."[53] Edwards followed the famous dictum of Gregory

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[46] Clark, 49–50. Edwards also used the concept of *dispensation,* although it is "a term that Edwards uses less technically than is the rule in later evangelicalism." Wilson, "Editor's Introduction," 39. Edwards wrote, e.g., "Till Christ rose from the dead the Old Testament dispensation remained; but now it ceases, all being fulfilled that was shadowed forth in the typical ordinances of that dispensation." *Work of Redemption,* 360; see also 362. To Edwards the term applied to a divine administration with chronological aspects, but in this case its clash with his threefold division of history suggests that he did not see the temporal aspect of a dispensation as its most significant feature.

[47] *Work of Redemption,* 294.

[48] Ibid., 127–28.

[49] Ibid., 313. He did note the provocative fact "that for about thirty years together he should live a private, obscure life among laboring men, and all this while to be overlooked, and not taken notice of in the world, as more than other common laborers. Christ's humiliation in some respects was greater in his private life than in the time of his public ministry," in which he displayed his glory and character publicly through miracles and other works. Ibid., 325.

[50] Ibid., 306.

[51] Ibid., 295.

[52] *Work of Redemption,* 296. "In order to man's recovery it was needful that he [Christ] should come to man, to the world that was his proper habitation, and that [he] should tabernacle with us."

[53] Ibid., 357.

of Nazianzus against the Apollinarians: "For that which He has not assumed He has not healed."[54] But Edwards went beyond Gregory in applying the redemptive ramifications of the incarnation. God must enter human history because "Christ merely as God was not capable either of that obedience or suffering that was needful," for divine nature cannot suffer nor can it obey any law given to humanity.[55]

Edwards presented the obedience that Christ practiced as threefold: those commands he obeyed as a human, those he obeyed as a Jew, and those he obeyed as mediator. All forms of obedience were necessary, but Edwards highlighted the third as especially relevant to redemption. The "mediatorial" commands "were the commands that the Father gave him to teach such doctrines, to preach the gospel, to work such miracles, to call such disciples, to appoint such ordinances, and finally to lay down his life." This mediatorial obedience is that which Christ practiced as the Second Adam, fulfilling that mediatorial role in which Adam failed.[56]

The reference to Christ's obedience opens a key aspect of Edwards's presentation of Christ's work of redemption: the nature of his obedience. Edwards followed the common distinction between Christ's passive obedience (his passion, the vicarious suffering as a sacrifice) and his active obedience (his complete obedience to the law in place of the obedience that fallen humanity could never render). "Christ's satisfaction was chiefly by his death," Edwards said.[57] But he also saw Christ's satisfaction and merit as multifaceted and included "his meritorious obedience" because "positively obeying is needful to satisfy the law." Edwards described this twofold work as "satisfaction … to free us from misery" and "merit … to purchase happiness for us."[58]

There are hints that Edwards viewed Christ's life as redemptive even beyond the categories of passive and active obedience, or perhaps more properly that he extended the reach of active obedience. "For Christ did [not] only make satisfaction by proper suffering, but by whatsoever had the same nature of humiliation and abasement of circumstances." An example is Christ's "lying buried in the grave," which is redemptive although it involved no suffering nor active obedience. Edwards contended that "all his sufferings, and all the humiliation that he was subject to, from the first moment of his incarnation to his resurrection, were propitiatory or satisfactory." Such humiliation included "the mean circumstances in which he was born" such as birth "of a poor virgin in a stable." The whole second period of Edwards's tripartite scheme, all the events of Christ's earthly life, relate to his work of redemption. "Thus his going about doing good, preaching the gospel, and teaching disciples, was part of righteousness and purchase of heaven as it was done in obedience to the Father."[59]

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[54] Gregory of Nazianzus, "First Letter to Cleonidas," in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church,* ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Series 2, (1890; reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 7:440.

[55] *Work of Redemption,* 295–96.

[56] Ibid., 309–10.

[57] Ibid., 306.

[58] Ibid., 304.

[59] Ibid., 305–7.

Analysis

The History of the Work of Redemption impresses the reader with the sweep of its scope and the remarkable unity of design. "The events of providence ben't so many distinct independent works of providence," Edwards said, "but they are rather so many different parts of one work of providence: 'tis all one work, one regular scheme."[60] Theoretically, any knowledgeable theologian could construct an account of redemptive history from the resources that Edwards used, but few—perhaps none— could have done it so well. Edwards mastered the content of his study, organized it in remarkable fashion, and presented the account in a compelling manner. The author unveiled the "one work of providence" with force and conviction.

This unity of design in Edwards's work has appealed even to observers lacking sympathy with his theology. Jonathan Edwards deeply impressed historian Perry Miller, an atheist of definitely non-Puritan tastes, who revived Edwardsean studies in the twentieth century by claiming Edwards as the first "modern" man in North America. Miller dismissed the "surface narrative" of Edwards's *Work of Redemption* as "a story book for fundamentalists" and called it "an absurd book, where it is not pathetic."[61] He nonetheless praised its comprehensive scope. Miller argued that "in whatever terms (for Edwards they were those of the Christian epic), the real thesis of the *History of Redemption* is the unity of history." He wrote, "History, Edwards says, is a grand conception, a design, a chain of events within a scheme of causation." Edwards appealed to Miller because Edwards recognized a principle that Miller professed: "Only that history which satisfies the mind by accounting for all things is worthy of the name."[62]

Miller could appreciate Edwards's work, however, only by dismissing the historicity of its content.[63] He therefore missed a key element in Edwards's approach, the unified nature of history in regard to its truth. Edwards concerned himself with what has traditionally been called *heilsgeschichte,* or "salvation history." His focus was entirely the activity of God in history to redeem his people. Edwards's history was a record of the acts of God.[64] Only incidentally did he delve into *weltgeschichte* ("world history"), the realm of human history as commonly understood.[65] Edwards undoubtedly

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[60] *Work of Redemption,* 519.

[61] Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* ([New York]: William Sloane Associates, 1949, 312.

[62] Ibid., 313.

[63] E.g., Miller wrote of Edwards's understanding, "There is no date within historical time for the Last Judgment. That is something incommensurate with time. It will come, but not in the sense in which the sun will rise tomorrow. As an event, it is eternal." Ibid., 329.

[64] Zakai observes that Eusebius, the "father" of church history, focused on the church in his work whereas Edwards focused on divine activity (18).

[65] One may debate what term to set against *heilsgeschichte* in such a context. The usage here follows Matthew L. Becker, *The Self-Giving God and Salvation History: The Trinitarian Theology of Johannes von Hofmann* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 220–32. Another approach is found in Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Redemptive Event and History," in *Basic Questions in Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 1:15–16, 21–22, where he prefers to contrast *heilsgeschichte* with the ideas of *historie* (research of past events, the work done by historians) and *geschichte* (roughly, the independent reality of past events). As far as *historie* is concerned, the distinction possesses some validity. There are aspects of *heilsgeschichte* beyond the grasp of historical research, but those are limitations of resources and methodology, not the intrinsic nature of the facts themselves.

thought salvation history the more important form of history, but there was no trace of the idea popularized in later theology that *heilsgeschichte* and *weltgeschichte* reflected different levels of reality. The events of redemptive history truly occurred in this present reality. There is no realm of "faith history" that differs metaphysically from other history, except that to Edwards salvation history is more certain. In fact, it is unlikely that such a distinction ever entered Edwards's mind, because he predated the debate by over a century. Nonetheless his view of history joins divine and human so inextricably that no such distinction is possible.[66]

Another contribution of Edwards was constructing a Christ/redemption-centered universal history. Writers have rightly likened Edwards's *History of the Work of Redemption* to Augustine's *City of God*. Yet there are differences in their respective approaches. For one, as Zakai notes, Augustine removed prophecy and eschatology from history, whereas Edwards wove both into the fabric of history.[67] Even more, Edwards focused on the person and work of Christ as the redemptive center of history. Augustine unquestionably saw a redemptive purpose in God building his city, but Edwards directly tied that redemption to the life of Christ. The theme of Christ and his redemption made *The Work of Redemption* a Protestant *City of God*.

One could easily overstate the revolutionary nature of Edwards's work. As critic Peter Gay says, *The History of the Work of Redemption* was in many ways "a thoroughly traditional book."[68] The research shows the limitations of the era and the author's situation, and some historical concepts reflect simply received Protestant tradition.[69] Yet the sweep of the narrative and the integration of the biblical/historical data into a coherent whole give the *History of the Work of Redemption* the status of a Christian classic.

We could even consider ramifications of Edwards's work in light of controversies that occurred after his death. We cannot really conceive the search for the historical Jesus that began in the nineteenth century in light of the central reality of Christ's life that Edwards insists on. History and redemption are so joined in Edwards's thought that such a challenge makes little sense. Edwards's acceptance of Scripture as a dependable authority would preclude any evaluation of Christ's life that

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[66] On the issue of faith and history in Edwards's work, John Piper suggests that Edwards held to the objective reality of history which is the basis of faith and which one can study. But Edwards also recognized the practical limitations of such an approach for the great body of believers. "First, he [Edwards] respects the validity of and encourages the pursuit of historical argument for the truth of the gospel. Second, he recognises that these arguments have a limited function not because they are inimical to the nature of faith (as modern existentialist theologians say), but because the great mass of ordinary people cannot carry through a detailed historical argument. Third, faith must nevertheless be reasonable if it is to be saving faith; that is, it must have a just ground for certainty. This ground, Edwards argues, is really there in the gospel record for all who have eyes to see." John Piper, "Jonathan Edwards on the Problem of Faith and History," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 31 (1978): 227–28. Piper thus seeks to deflect the charge made against writers such as Pannenberg that they allegedly make an understanding of the nature of history and historical research a prerequisite to faith.

[67] *Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of History,* 160–61.

[68] *Loss of Mastery,* 94.

[69] Edwards certainly showed the limits of his research, e.g., when he cited Peter the Great's Russia as demonstrating "the most considerable success of the gospel." *Work of Redemption,* 433. He also repeated now generally discredited interpretations such as numbering ten persecutions before Constantine (based on the "ten days" in Rv 2:10) (389) and advocating a generally successionist view of church history (419).

did not completely accept the testimony of the Bible. Likewise, the alleged tension between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history that has marked so much contemporary theology from classic theological liberalism to Neo-orthodoxy to contemporary debates does not even exist in Edwards's scheme. The Christ of faith *is* the Jesus of history to Edwards.

So to return to the original question: Does Edwards's *History of the Work of Redemption* provide a framework for a Christian approach to history? Unquestionably, Edwards wrestles with essential questions in considering a Christian philosophy of history. What is the purpose of history? Is there actually a design for history? What force or forces drive its development? How does the Bible form and inform a Christian's view of the subject? Is there a progressive movement or climax to history? Above all, for a *Christian* approach to history, what place do the person and work of Jesus Christ occupy? In Edwards there is certainly material useful in constructing a Christian philosophy of history, even should one object to the details or modify his approach.

However, for a proper perspective, one should remember Edwards's goal in this work. He did not seek to write a Christian guide to history. Instead, the *History* began as a series of sermons designed to glorify God and to edify the hearers. In no way was the work an academic study. Its status as a Christian philosophy of history must be read back into the work. To some extent. Edwards's interests lay elsewhere. In Sermon 17, right in the middle of the series, immediately after reviewing the life of Christ, Edwards interjects an overtly evangelistic message. He presses the claims of Christ on those who rejected him. Properly understanding history led one to Jesus Christ: "You slight that glorious person for whose coming God made such great preparation, in such a series of wonderful providences from the beginning of the world, and whom, after all things were ready, God sent into the world, bringing to pass a before unknown thing, viz. the union of the divine with the human nature in one person." He notes how Christ, "who, after he had spent three or four and thirty years in poverty and labor and contempt in purchasing redemption, at last finished the purchase by closing his life under such extreme sufferings as you have heard."[70] Salvation is not just the theme for a work of history. Salvation is the central concern of human existence and, even more, of divine design. And the life of Jesus Christ, Edwards declared, embodied that salvation. In his *History of the Work of Redemption* Edwards laid out ideas that make it possible to construct a Christian philosophy of history, but such a use of this work can be for him only a subordinate expression of the great theme of redemption.

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[70] *Work of Redemption,* 332–33.

"Greater Is He Than Man Can Know":
Divine Repentance and a Brief Inquiry into Anthropomorphism & Anthropopathism, Impassibility & Affectability

Layton Talbert[1]

The subtitle of this essay incorporates an acknowledged absurdity. That I am even endeavoring a "brief inquiry" into profoundly complex issues[2] that have been deliberated for centuries by the greatest minds of the Church may seem alarmingly arrogant, hopelessly simplistic, or even theologically dangerous. I hope it is none of these. It is intended to be an honest attempt to let the biblical data itself shape at least my own theological thought and speech.

The question of divine repentance frames the context in which this essay will explore the larger theological issues indicated. Does God "repent" or not? Our instinctive answer might be "no" on the basis of a brace of scriptural statements that seem to compel that conclusion. Many more passages, however, state that God *does* repent than that he does *not*. Out of 105 occurrences of the Hebrew verb in question (נחם), thirty-five (33%) refer to God. Of those, twenty-seven (77%) indicate that God does repent, while only eight (23%) imply or insist that he does not—only two of which state in direct propositional form that God does not repent as a point of principle or divine character.

Of all the texts that address divine repentance, none illustrates the problem more economically than 1 Samuel 15. This passage displays the difficulty in microcosm because it includes within a single context point-blank assertions that God both *does* and *does not* repent.[3]

> *I repent* that I have set up Saul to be king (v. 11).[4]

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[1] Dr. Layton Talbert is professor of theology at BJU Seminary and the author of *Not by Chance: Learning to Trust a Sovereign God* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2001), *Beyond Suffering: Discovering the Message of Job* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2007), and *The Trustworthiness of God's Words: Why the Reliability of Every Word from God Matters* (Ross-Shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2022). This article is based on a paper presented at BJU Seminary's Theological Research Symposium on November 12, 2018. The fore-title comes from a choral work titled "Who Can Show Forth All God's Praise" by Peter Davis.

[2] The complex issues identified in the title bleed into arguably even more complex issues such as divine aseity and simplicity. (Who would have thought that simplicity could be a complex issue?) For thoughtful analysis of these related issues see John Feinberg, *No One Like Him* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 325–37 and John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 225–30, 600–08.

[3] The critics' charge that such contradictions prove the Bible's human origin and fallibility betrays a fundamental ignorance of human nature (as though the writer himself would not have noticed and removed such an obvious contradiction) and overestimates the originality of their powers of observation.

[4] Unless otherwise noted, Scripture citations are taken from the *New King James Version*® (copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson; used by permission; all rights reserved). Emphasis has been added to the citations here. These citations represent my own translation to illustrate the consistency of the Hebrew term in the text, which is otherwise masked by various translations in these different verses (even within the same versions). For example, the NASB 1995 translates the same Hebrew word as "regret" (vv. 11, 35) and "change his mind" (v. 29).

> *The Strength of Israel will not . . . repent,* for he is *not* a man that he should r*epent* (v. 29).
> *The LORD repented* that he had made Saul king over Israel (v. 35).

How can Scripture sensibly affirm—within mere sentences from each other, no less—both that God does not, and yet does, repent? Moreover, if "repent" means to change (one's mind), how can God do that if he elsewhere affirms that he is changeless or immutable (Mal 3:6)? The following chart summarizes the most immediately relevant textual data regarding divine repentance.

Table 1. Biblical Data on Divine Repentance

Passages Asserting That God Does/Will Not Repent	Passages Asserting That God Did/Does Repent	Brief Contextual Description
Pentateuch		
	Gn 6:6,7	God repented that he had made man; parallel to "it grieved him into his heart" (lit.); v. 8=Ex 32:11–14
	Ex 32:12, 14*	God repents of judgment in answer to prayer
Nm 23:19		God is not a man who lies or repents
	Dt 32:36	God will repent himself on his servants
Historical Books		
	Jgs 2:18	God repented because of Israel's groanings
1 Sm 15:29 (2x)	1 Sm 15:11, 35	God repented regarding the kingship of Saul
	2 Sm 24:16	God repented of the angel's destruction
	1 Chr 21:15	Parallel to 2 Sm 24:16
Poetical Books		
	Ps 90:13	Prayer that God would be sorry for his servants
	Ps 106:45	God relented of his chastening on his people
Ps 110:4		Yahweh has sworn and will not repent
	Ps 135:14	Yahweh will judge his people and will repent himself concerning his servants
Prophetic Books		
Jer 4:28		I have purposed and will not repent
	Jer 15:6**	I am weary with repenting
	Jer 18:7–10**	God responds to human responses
Jer 20:16		Let that man be like the cities that Yahweh overthrew, and did not repent
	Jer 26:3, 12–13,18-19**	God responds to human responses (note unconditionality of Micah's prophecy, v. 18)
	Jer 42:10	I repent concerning the disaster that I have brought upon you
Ez 24:14		I, the LORD, have spoken *it*…I will do *it*; I will not hold back, nor will I spare, nor will I repent
	Jl 2:13,14**	God responds to human responses
	Am 7:1-6*	God repents in answer to prayer
	Jon 3:9, 10; 4:2**	God responds to human response
Zec 8:14		Just as I determined to punish you, and I would not repent, so I am determined to do you good

Note: Passages marked with * and ** will be referenced later in the essay.

So does God repent, or not? And if so, what does that mean? How does this impact our understanding and explanation of the nature and character of God? In order to get a feel for the larger theological context in which these questions need to be explored, it is necessary to traipse around the theological barn a time or two before returning to the original issue of divine repentance.

Common Explanations of Divine Repentance

Several attempts at resolving this conundrum surface in the literature. Some offer helpful insights. But all of them seem to me to fall short of a satisfactory solution.

An Emotional Nuance Not a Volitional Nuance

On this view, when God "repents" it means he regrets the way a situation has turned out (though, of course, it never surprises him).[5] By contrast, assertions that God does not "repent" imply a *volitional* orientation of the word, denying that God ever "changes" his mind, his purposes, or his emotions. Bruce Ware's excellent case against Open Theism incorporates this less-than-compelling argument, asserting that in 1 Samuel 15 the Hebrew word is to be understood in an alternately "weak sense" (in 15:11, 35) and "strong sense" (in 15:29).[6] This suggestion seems too arbitrary, too conveniently subjective a solution for obviating the dilemma of the same Hebrew word being used within a single context both to deny and to affirm that God does this. A more objective, exegetically anchored solution would be preferable.

A Change of Action Not a Change of Mind

In addressing the apparent discrepancy in 1 Samuel 15, Matthew Henry offered a theologically astute and arresting juxtaposition: God "does not alter His will, but wills an alteration." In other words, God does not change his mind, only his method or his ways. In a way, that's a helpful distinction. But what exactly does it mean? How does it adequately explain, for example, Exodus 32, where God announced his intention to destroy Israel and start over with Moses (32:9-10), and then "repented" by diametrically reversing his previously stated intention (32:14) in response to Moses' intercession (32:11-13)? Henry's turn of phrase sounds theologically snug but fails to reflect a meaningful reading of the Hebrew word for "repent."

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[5] For many theologians, as we shall see, even any statement of divine "regret" is fraught with theological impossibility and therefore purely anthropopathic.

[6] Bruce Ware, *Their God Is Too Small* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003)*,* 33–34. Scott Oliphint critiques a similar view when he cites "some confusion over the concept of *anthropomorphic*. It is thought that, for example, when Scripture speaks of God changing his mind, we are to read that anthropomorphically, but that when Scripture says that God [does not] change his mind, we are to read that literally." *God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 123.

Anthropomorphism, More Properly, Anthropopathism

In this view, references to God's repentance express God's response to situations from a strictly human point of view; if it were us responding to the situation, we would call it "repenting" or "changing our mind."[7] It is a purely human way of expressing God's posture toward a situation, but it does not represent any *actual* divine experience or action. Yet in what way is this helpful, or even meaningful? This is perhaps the classic explanation of choice among theologians, but it strikes some as unsatisfying, unnecessary, and *perhaps* even unauthorized. After all, we are dealing with expressions that go to the heart of God's very nature, character, and behavior. Moreover, the issue is not merely scriptural assertions that God does not do this but also repeated and apparently contradictory assertions to the contrary that God *does* do this (under certain circumstances). Nevertheless, the anthropomorphic explanation segues into a larger issue that warrants further exploration.

Anthropomorphism as a Category of Theological Explanation

On one level, anthropomorphism is a sound and necessary hermeneutic. After all, we know from Scripture itself that God, as spirit, is incorporeal. But the concept of anthropomorphism also raises some additional questions.

Do Anthropomorphisms Genuinely Advance Understandability?

Anthropomorphism is commonly explained as the language of accommodation.[8] That is, God speaks to us in ways that we can understand and relate to. As Vern Poythress frankly observes, however, anthropomorphisms are no more understandable than non-metaphors.

> Consider an example. Exodus 15:6 says, "Your right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy." The stock explanation using accommodation would say that this description of God is an accommodation to human capacity, through anthropomorphism. Yes, it is an anthropomorphism. But does this verse really have much to do with the concept of accommodation? . . .
> Similar truths could have been expressed in other ways, without the use of vivid metaphors. For example, as an alternative we could say, "The Lord exercises his power to defeat the enemy utterly." That way of saying it is not colorful, not poetic, not rhetorically engaging. But it says some of the same things that the poetic expression does. Thus, the Lord could have spoken in an alternative way without using vivid anthropomorphisms. But he did not. Why not? The doctrine of accommodation, by itself, says only that God addresses human beings according to their capacity. Both metaphorical and nonmetaphorical forms of expression meet this criterion. Indeed, anything that is intelligible human

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[7] Commenting on Genesis 6:6, for example, Calvin says, "The repentance which is here ascribed to God does not properly belong to him, but has reference to our understanding of him. For since we cannot comprehend him as he is, it is necessary that, for our sakes he should, in a certain sense, transform himself. . . . The same reasoning, and remark, applies to what follows, that God was affected with grief. . . . This figure, which represents God as transferring to himself what is peculiar to human nature, is called ἀνθρωποπάθεια"—i.e., anthropopathism. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. John King (1847; reissue, Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.), *loc cit.;* https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01/calcom01.xii.i.html.

[8] Oliphint, 123; Frame, 152, 367.

language meets the criterion! Accommodation says only that Scripture is intelligible. It does not explain why the Lord in one text chooses one particular kind of intelligible speech in contrast to many other alternatives. Thus, accommodation does not really explain anthropomorphism or any of the particulars.[9]

In other words, it's not as if we *need* anthropomorphic language in order to understand God better. Accommodation itself is a weak explanation for anthropomorphism.[10]

How Do We Even Know How to Define the Nature and Characteristics of a "Spirit"?

We are at a distinct disadvantage when we try to define dogmatically the qualities of a class of being that we cannot see or experience apart from such a being's self-disclosure. We cannot impose our own ignorant conceptions of what a "spirit" can or cannot be like.[11] We must instead rely on scriptural data to determine what a spirit is or is not. That includes Scripture's own descriptions of spirit beings, as well as its record of *what those who have seen such a being* have seen. So, what do we know for certain about spirits? As it turns out, very little.

The Problem of Limited Knowledge

We know that spirits are non-corporeal—that is, they do not inherently possess physical or material substance (though they can apparently assume physical form temporarily for the purpose of communication or self-revelation; e.g., Gn 18:1ff; 32:24ff.). A spirit clearly possesses the same *capacities* (sight, knowledge, memory, voice, movement) of which our material body parts—including the mind itself—are the physical extension and expression.[12] Yet because of our physical and epistemological limitations, how would we know whether a spirit does or does not have *spiritual* "form"?

Arguments for anthropomorphism correctly deny that God has *physical* or *material* body parts—though, again, as the Creator of matter he can incorporate materiality into his self-revelations when he so chooses (per some of the OT appearances of the Angel of Yahweh and, consummately and uniquely, the incarnation). It is specifically the issue of materiality that explanations of

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[9] Vern Poythress, "Rethinking Accommodation in Revelation," *WTJ* 76 (2014): 150.

[10] Nor do we want to be guilty of chronological snobbery—to say nothing of linguistic ignorance—by suggesting that ancient Hebrews needed concrete language because they were incapable of abstract thought.

[11] I do not mean "ignorant" in any pejorative sense here, but quite literally. We have no experience of spirits and therefore no direct knowledge of exactly what does or does not constitute a spirit, apart from incorporeality—and even that can be at least temporarily suspended.

[12] Many clarify that "the arm of God" is an anthropomorphism because, they explain, God obviously has no arms. Yet in my admittedly limited experience most Christians intuitively shy away from asserting with equal certainty that the "mouth of the Lord" or "the eyes of the Lord" or "the face of God" are pure anthropomorphisms; few, it seems, are comfortable insisting that God is utterly faceless. If such features demand physicality, then so should voice and speech (which, in our experience, demand lungs, lips, tongues, and vocal cords); but again, the voice and speech of God (or angels) are never explained as anthropomorphism. My point is simply that our intuitive inconsistency in this area underscores our ignorance and the appropriateness of a little less theological self-confidence and a little more epistemic humility.

anthropomorphism emphasize.[13] Beyond immateriality, however, *how do we know* what a spirit has or has not?

The Difference between Literal and Physical.

We correctly affirm that God is not a *physical* being (i.e., material); yet we insist with equal correctness that he is a *literal* being (i.e., real, actual, not figurative or metaphorical or imaginary). Angels, fallen and unfallen, are literal but not physical beings. Is it possible that while God as spirit certainly has no *physical* hand or arm or mouth or eyes, he may, nonetheless, actually have hands and arms and mouth and eyes—in short, the very "features" that he keeps saying throughout Scripture that he has? And if not, how would we know? God expressly denies his physicality but never denies his possession of form or features. A strict anthropomorphism rests on philosophical assumptions about what a spirit can and cannot be like; it does not emerge from explicit biblical theological data.

The Second Person of the Godhead is a different matter, and yet not entirely irrelevant to the discussion. The glorified and now eternally incarnate Christ is empirical proof that there is no inherent contradiction between even *physicality* and deity, eternality, omnipresence, immutability, aseity, or any other divine attribute. Christ retains every attribute of deity even in conjunction with his incarnate physicality. So, there is no theological or philosophical incongruity between *materiality* and deity. Nevertheless, the focus here is on God in his ontological essence, and we are compelled to affirm that he is immaterial—not because materiality contradicts some philosophically or theologically imagined conception of deity, but simply because he says he is immaterial. The issue of form, however, is another matter.

The Question of Form

Herman Bavinck argues on the basis of Deuteronomy 4:12, 15[14] that God has no form.[15] John Frame correctly counters, however, that the passage "does not say that God is without form; it only says that God did not display his form to Israel on Mount Sinai."[16] God revealed no form on that occasion for a very specific reason that he explains in 4:15–18[17]—namely, he did not want them

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[13] Explanations of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF) statement that God is "without body, parts" regularly conflate the two words (from "body, parts" to "bodily parts"), seemingly to underscore that the point is immateriality. E.g., A. A. Hodge explains, "God is a free personal Spirit, without bodily parts or passions," and "We deny that the properties of matter, such as bodily parts and passions, belong to him." *The Westminster Confession: A Commentary* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 2004), *loc. cit.*

[14] "And the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of the words, but saw no form; you only heard a voice. . . . Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire."

[15] Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1951), 175. This is the proof text cited in the WCF for the phrase "without body, parts," along with John 4:24 and Luke 24:39 (which is addressed below).

[16] *Doctrine of God,* 589.

[17] "Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, *lest you act corruptly* and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male

reducing his infinite glory to any limited, inadequate, and therefore inaccurate physical representation of any kind.[18] He exceeds and transcends all such representations. And yet Genesis confirms that *we ourselves* are living, breathing, physical "images" of the true God.

Moreover, God actually *does* reveal "form" on most other occasions.[19] For instance, why should Exodus 24:10 specify that when Moses and the elders "saw God," they saw a pavement of sapphire "under his *feet*"? Why not just "under him"? We need no reference to "feet" to accommodate our understanding of what is going on. We have no further description of exactly what they saw, except that they were seeing and worshiping him from a distance (24:1; cf. v. 12)—as if that is as high as their gaze ventured or was able to see; but the fact of his literal presence is undeniable.

Numbers 12:8 is even more explicit. Moses alone actually saw the *form* (תַּבְנִית)[20] of God—in what is certainly a reference to Exodus 34—where (as God himself describes it) God covered Moses *with his hand* while he passed by (Ex 33:22) so that Moses could see only *his back* (Ex 33:23), because (God explains) no living human could see *his face* and live (Ex 33:20). How can God's statement mean anything other than that, according to God himself, he has a face?

Ezekiel 1:26–27 states that the prophet's vision included "the likeness of a throne" and "on the likeness (דְּמוּת) of the throne was a likeness with the appearance (מַרְאֵה) of a man high above it"; the description includes "the appearance of his waist and upward" and "the appearance of his waist and downward." He concludes, "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (1:28). The term ("appearance") denotes what it *looked like*. Block explains, "What Ezekiel sees is not an actual representation but a reflection of deity."[21] Again, the question I wish to raise is, what exactly does that mean and how do we know?[22]

To affirm that God is spirit does not require denying that he possesses the form or features that he repeatedly attributes to himself. It necessitates denying the *corporeality* of these features; but to

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or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth or the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground or the likeness of any fish that is in the water beneath the earth" (emphasis added).

[18] Frame adds that God "intends to assert his exclusive right to make images of himself" (589).

[19] Compare "you saw no form" with the pre-incarnate Son "being in the form of God" (Phil 2:6). Owen says that God's only "form" is his essence; yet spirits clearly can have what we call recognizable "form"—they are never depicted in Scripture as merely nebulous, amorphous "presences." John Owen, "Sermon XI. The Humiliation and Condescension of Christ" (1681), in *The Sermons of John Owen* (n.d.; reissue, Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.), *loc cit.;* https://ccel.org/ccel/owen/sermons/sermons.vi.xiv.html.

[20] *Temunah* (תַּבְנִית) occurs about ten times (5x in Dt 4–5); the Israelites are commanded to make no *likeness/form* of God or anything else for worship (Ex 20:4); that command is justified by the assertion that at Sinai the Israelites heard God and saw physical manifestations of his presence but did not see any *similitude* or *form* on which to base any depiction or image of God for worship (Dt 4:12, 15, 16). In a probable reference to awaking from death, the psalmist exults in the notion that he will be satisfied, in the resurrection, with God's likeness/form (Ps 17:15). A NET Study Note says, "It is unlikely that the psalmist had such a highly developed personal eschatology," but Job clearly did (Jb 19:25–27). *The NET Bible, Version 1.0* (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies, 1996–2006), *loc cit.* Cf. my *Beyond Suffering,* 121–23.

[21] Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24,* NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 108.

[22] Cf. Ez 8:2, "he stretched forth the form [תַּבְנִית] of a hand and took me by a lock of my hair." The same term is used to signify a *blueprint* (Ex 25:9, 40), or a representative (Ez 8:10, of "every form of creeping thing"), or an appearance (Ez 10:8, of cherubim possessing "the form of a man's hand under their wings").

suggest that God has arms or eyes or mouth does not mean that he has *physical* arms or eyes or mouth; literal reality is not defined by physicality.

Some object that any sort of spiritual "form" or "features" necessarily entails limitations to deity. I would offer two counter-observations. (1) We could argue that point on a *philosophical* level, but part of my larger point is that we simply do not know enough about the metaphysics of spirit to opine with any epistemological certainty or authority. But more to the point, (2) the objection must explain how the now eternally incarnate Second Person of the Godhead can have *physical* form and features and body parts without any limitation to his possession and exercise of all the attributes of deity. If there is no inherent contradiction between even *physical* form and illimitable divine attributes, there can be no inherent contradiction between spiritual form and illimitable divine attributes.[23]

The Implications of Christ's Testimony regarding Spirits

When Christ appeared to the disciples after the resurrection, they thought he was a spirit (Lk 24:37)—even though he had arms and legs and eyes and a mouth. In other words, they saw no contradiction in a "spirit" having those features; they clearly expected a spirit to look like a "disembodied" person—a spirit person rather than a material person. Moreover, when Jesus corrected their misconception, he did not say, "How could I be a spirit? A spirit does not have arms or legs as you see I have." Rather, he said, "A spirit does not have *flesh and bones* as you see I have" (v. 39). Jesus' argument implies that what is specifically contradictory to "spirit" is materiality or physicality, not form.

Jesus' revelation about Lazarus and the plutocrat also opens a brief window onto the nature of afterlife. The rich man in hades requests that Lazarus—a spirit without a resurrected body—be permitted to "dip his *finger* in water" to ease the rich man's thirst (Lk 16:24). Angels, too, are defined as spirit beings, yet they are routinely described as having shape, form, and features, and not just when they interact directly with humans. Are these also anthropomorphisms? Or is it possible that angelic spirits have non-physical yet literal form?[24]

Tentative Observations

First, to be clear, *I am not arguing that God has "bodily parts."* God is spirit (Jn 4:24) and therefore not in any sense corporeal (though, again, the same cannot be said of the Second Person of the Godhead). Second, *I am also not insisting that God has "body parts,"* or that he *must* have the "features" regularly attributed to him in Scripture. I am suggesting that (1) there seems to be no biblical basis for asserting with such sublime self-assurance that God *cannot* have the literal yet non-physical form or features that he repeatedly represents himself as having and which he nowhere denies possessing, and

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[23] For a brief summary of the biblical arguments for the now-eternal incarnate existence of Christ, see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 542–43. Cf. also WCF, 8:2.

[24] This may suggest another objection: What about zoomorphisms? First, unlike anthropomorphisms, they are extremely rare; I am aware of three or possibly four references to God's "wings" (Ps 91:4; Jer 49:22; Mal 4:2; possibly Jer 48:20). Second, God consistently and overwhelmingly presents himself as a *person*, not an animal; and we are made in his image. Those factors justify, in my view, taking zoomorphisms as exclusively and purely metaphorical.

that (2) the presumed proof to the contrary, based on the affirmation that "God is spirit," is rooted in two fundamentally flawed assumptions: (a) that *literal* necessarily implies *physical*, and (b) that our philosophical understanding of what a spirit can and cannot possess is definitive for interpreting the biblical record. The only definitive ground we have for asserting what a spirit is or is not like is the scriptural record of God's self-disclosure and of human experiences with spirits.

Surely it is on some level presumptuous (despite the best of intentions) to categorically insist that we understand God better than he describes himself, and to devise philosophical explanations for insisting that he cannot really have what he keeps saying he has. The issue raises a question that reverses our anthropocentric perspective and allows us to peer for a moment through the opposite end of the telescope, so to speak: are all references to God's human-like form anthropomorphisms, or are *we* merely limited, humanized, physicalized theomorphisms? Vern Poythress observes that "God made man in the image of God. Man is *theomorphic* (in the "morph" or "form" of God). In a sense the word anthropomorphic has the order exactly backwards. God is the original and human beings are the derivative."[25] The hermeneutic of anthropomorphism argues that God describes himself like us. And yet the doctrine of creation teaches that God made us like himself.

Anthropopathism as a Category of Theological Explanation

Anthropomorphism finds fairly broad agreement among more traditional-thinking theologians. Once one steps into the realm of anthropopathism, however, the debate becomes not only more vocal but also more internecine. Scott Oliphint asserts that "the 'consistent view' of the Reformed has been that those passages which speak of God's affections do so 'metaphorically,' or 'improperly,' or 'anthropopathically.'"[26] There seems to be less consistency among the Reformed in this area than Oliphint implies, however.

Augustine said, "Thou lovest without passion; . . . Thou art angry without emotion."[27] Anselm similarly wrote, "Thou art compassionate in terms of our experience, and not compassionate in terms of Thy being. . . . we experience the effect of compassion, but Thou dost not experience the feeling."[28] Puritan theologian Stephen Charnock explained that "those expressions of joy, and grief, and repentance" attributed to God in the Scriptures "signify . . . that if God were capable of our passions, he would discover himself in such cases as we do."[29] Put more colloquially, the Bible's emotional depictions of God (on this view) amount to "what-God-would-feel-if-he-could-feel-but-he-can't-so-he-doesn't." As Poythress observes (above), it is unclear how such a view is deemed helpful in understanding God. Nevertheless, the anthropopathic explanation clearly has an extensive and significant history.

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[25] Vern Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 121–22. Poythress himself actually credits this observation to J. I. Packer. Frame, too, makes a similar remark (368).

[26] Oliphint, 211.

[27] *The Confessions of St. Augustine,* Book I, Ch. IV.

[28] Anselm, *Proslogium,* Ch. 8.

[29] Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God* (New York: R.T. Carter & Brother, 1874), 342.

No modern consensus appears, however, even among Reformed theologians on the issue of anthropopathism and, specifically, impassibility.[30] Some apply anthropopathism only to certain "problem" passions such as jealousy, repentance, or grief.[31] For others, however, that does not go far enough. Kevin DeYoung sided with Charnock's view, lamenting, "Some theologians, theologians we respect, theologians with the best of intentions, sometimes look for ways to tweak this classic understanding of immutability; and the impetus is to find a way to make God more relatable, to seem more involved, more engaged, more relational with his creatures."[32] Sometimes, however, the impetus has nothing to do with wanting a different kind of God but with simply wanting to bring one's theological description of God more in line with what God says about himself in his own self-revelation. DeYoung proceeds to quote Nicholas Wolterstorff: "Once you pull on the thread of impassibility, a lot of other threads come along with it. Aseity, for example. . . . One also has to give up on immutability and eternity. If God really responds, God is not metaphysically immutable and, if not metaphysically immutable, not eternal."[33] Wolterstorff argues—and DeYoung agrees—that the classic statement of impassibility cannot be abandoned without ultimately undermining aseity, immutability, and even eternality. And yet no less a Reformed thinker than John Frame argues to the contrary: "God's suffering love in Christ . . . does not cast doubt upon his aseity and unchangeability"[34]—let alone his eternality.

Who, then, are we to believe? Is anthropopathism the best explanation for *all* of God's emotional self-descriptions? Just *some* of them?[35] And if the latter, on what basis are we to distinguish between divine emotions that are purely metaphorical (anthropopathic) and which are genuinely experienced by God? Is anthropopathism even a legitimate theological/hermeneutical phenomenon? Or is it primarily a philosophical construct? Does God actually experience any of the emotions that he describes himself as having in Scripture? Or are such expressions purely metaphorical because an

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[30] The definition of impassibility depends on whom one asks. In Aristotelian thought, impassibility describes God as impervious to and unaffected by anything that happens in the world. In essence, it is emotional immutability; God is "unmoved" not only in absolute ontological terms (the unmoved Mover) but in emotional terms as well. Some theologians defend impassibility by clarifying it in one way or another. Cf. Oliphint, 86–87; J. I. Packer, "God," *New Dictionary of Theology,* ed. Sinclair Ferguson, David Wright, and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 277. Others disavow impassibility entirely (see references to Grudem, Reymond, and Feinberg below).

[31] In commenting on WCF 2.1, A. A. Hodge explains that when the Scriptures speak of God's "repenting, of his being grieved, or jealous, they use metaphorical language . . . teaching us that he acts toward us as man would when agitated by such passions." *Westminster Confession: A Commentary, loc. cit.* He takes the same position in *Outlines of Theology,* rev. ed. (1879; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1972), 132. Yet he speaks of God's wrath, or love, or compassion in quite a different category, not metaphorically but as literal realities to be taken at face value.

[32] Kevin DeYoung, "The God Who Is Not Like Us: Why We Need the Doctrine of Divine Immutability," Together for the Gospel 2018; http://t4g.org/media/2018/04/god-not-like-us-need-doctrine-divine-immutability/. DeYoung went on to cite Charnock as an example of the correct view of divine impassibility.

[33] Ibid.

[34] *Doctrine of God,* 616.

[35] "Not all expressions of emotion in God are anthropopathic, although some are." Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity, Volume I: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Scripture, God, and Angels* (Detroit: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary), 201. The complication that arises at this point is subjectivity. According to McCune, "genuine emotion in God" includes love, compassion, anger, and hatred, but not laughter (Ps 2:4). Why?

immutable God cannot experience genuine emotion or be in any way actually affected by events outside himself without compromising his immutability, self-sufficiency, and even eternality? Full-bore anthropopathism would seem to be the logical concomitant of full-bore anthropomorphism.

Yet many—including even some very Reformed theologians—are not prepared to subscribe to anthropopathism. John Frame, citing and concurring with D. A. Carson, attributes the notion that "emotions are unworthy of God" to the influence of Greek metaphysical thought. Such views "are not biblical," says Frame, and therefore "provide no basis for denying the existence of divine emotions."[36] In his dispute with the Socinians, John Owen denied that there are "affections and passions in God, as anger, fury, zeal, wrath, love, hatred, mercy, grace, jealousy, repentance, grief, joy, fear."[37] After affirming Owen's basic arguments, however, Oliphint proposes a crucial qualification to the traditional view of impassibility: "Once God determines to condescend to his creation, that determination itself includes limiting characteristics and properties that God assumes. Because God determines to do this, all limiting characteristics are *self*-limiting, first of all. . . . He does not *have* to do this; he freely chooses to do it."[38] That discreet modification (sovereign self-limitation) of the more traditional Reformed expressions of the issue of divine emotion is substantive, significant, theologically well-grounded, and driven by biblical theological data. J. I. Packer likewise qualifies impassibility to mean "that no created beings can inflict pain, suffering and distress on him *at their own will*. In so far as God enters into any suffering and grief, it is by his own deliberate decision; he is never his creatures' hapless victim."[39]

Toward the other end of the theological spectrum, Arminian Jon Tal Murphree similarly explains how "we can reconcile the notions of impassibility and affectability. The secret is found in a two-word modifying phrase: *without consent*. God is impassible *without consent* to be affected, but He is affectable *with consent*. . . . Scripture depicts a God who has chosen to be affected by His subjects."[40] In other words, an immutable part of God's immutability is his sovereign choice to be affected in the ways he says he is, and to change his posture, relations, and interactions in genuine response to human reactions in the ways he says he does. It is difficult to see on what *scriptural* basis any theologian, Reformed or otherwise, can justify explaining God's actions and attributes in ways that actually contradict his own repeated self-descriptions.

Others are less optimistic about retaining the concept of impassibility at all. Wayne Grudem rejects it as plainly contrary to Scripture and erroneously defended in the Westminster Confession of

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[36] *Doctrine of God,* 609–10. Might not a rigid anthropomorphism that denies not only materiality (correctly) but also form and features also be attributed to similar influences?

[37] Cited in Oliphint, 212.

[38] Oliphint, 218 (emphasis original).

[39] "God," 277 (emphasis added). Packer argues that this is the "Christian mainstream" understanding of impassibility.

[40] *Divine Paradoxes: A Finite View of an Infinite God* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian, 1998), 124 (emphasis added). Murphree was a longtime theology professor (now professor emeritus) at Toccoa Falls Bible College.

Faith.[41] John Feinberg declares that "it is necessary to reject divine impassibility."[42] Robert Reymond also provisionally denies impassibility.[43] Perhaps this is becoming the new "consistent view" even among Reformed theologians.

We need to be prepared to go *only* but *fully* as far as God's self-revelation compels. A genuinely biblical-theological approach to God's self-revelation must be prepared to affirm both *what* God has chosen to say and *how* he has chosen to say it. And as it happens, Scripture has a great deal to say about the emotional dimension of God (see Appendix).

Carson raises the problem that absolute sovereignty and absolute omniscience creates for divine emotion. How can God genuinely respond emotively to what he both controls and foreknows?

> It is no answer to espouse a form of impassibility that denies that God has an emotional life and that insists that all of the biblical evidence to the contrary is nothing more than anthropopathism. The price is too heavy. You may then rest in God's sovereignty but you can no longer rejoice in his love. You may rejoice only in a linguistic expression that is an accommodation of some reality of which we cannot conceive, couched in the anthropopathism of love. Give me a break. Paul did not pray that his readers might be able to grasp the height and depth and length and breadth of an anthropopathism and know this anthropopathism that surpasses knowledge (Eph 3:14–21). . . .
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> Yet before we write off the impassibility of God, we must gratefully recognize what that doctrine is seeking to preserve. It is trying to ward off the kind of sentimentalizing views of the love of God and of other emotions in God . . . [that make him] superficially attractive because he appeals to our emotions . . . [but at a cost of making him] a finite God . . . gradually diminished and reduced from what he actually is. . . .
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> . . . . If God loves, it is because he chooses to love; if he suffers, it is because he chooses to suffer. God is impassible in the sense that he sustains no "passion," no emotion, that makes him vulnerable from the outside over which he has no control, or which he has not foreseen.[44]

It is entirely scriptural to deny that God is ever at the "emotional mercy" of anyone or anything outside himself. But it should strike us as suspicious when a theological explanation essentially argues, for purely logical or philosophical reasons, that the Bible cannot really be saying what it repeatedly seems to be saying, unless there is some compelling scriptural statement or principle to back up such an argument. It is also difficult to maintain that the human capacity for emotion—which distinguishes us from all other creatures—is not part of our creation in the image of God and has no actual correspondence in God whatsoever. That would seem to imply that humans possess more self-

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[41] *Systematic Theology,* 165–66. As to the WCF, Oliphint argues that historically a passion "in scholastic terminology is that which is causally dependent on an external acting agent, and it affects the subject intrinsically. So, when the Confession denotes God to be 'without passions,' what it is saying is that, however and whatever God 'feels,' he does so according to his own sovereign plan and not because he is dependent or because something independent of him caused him to *re*-act to something outside himself" (86–87). Perhaps he is correct; but such nuance seems rare in many Reformed explanations of impassibility based on WCF phraseology.

[42] *No One Like Him,* 277.

[43] "Thus whenever divine impassibility is interpreted to mean that God is impervious to human pain or incapable of empathizing with human grief it must be roundly denounced and rejected." *Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 178–79.

[44] D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 58–60.

expressive and relational capacity than the infinitely personal God who made us. Such a conclusion is not only illogical but also contrary to the way God describes himself in Scripture.

Thesis on Anthropomorphism, Anthropopathism, and Impassibility

My thesis, then, is a simple and perhaps (at this point) underwhelming one. In view of the pervasive and ongoing impact of our fallenness, the intellectual and perspectival limitations of our humanity, and the necessarily partial nature of divine revelation, theologians should be less sanguine about their ability to explain with dogmatic confidence aspects and qualities of the character and being of God that are both experientially and revelationally beyond us.

This is a call not for theological agnosticism on these points but for more candor, modesty, and epistemic humility in our theological formulations and assertions about a being infinitely beyond our experience and comprehension. Ironically, probably no one has expressed this better than John Owen himself:

> Notwithstanding all our confidence of high attainments, all our notions of God are but childish in respect of his infinite perfections. We lisp and babble, and say we know not what, for the most part, in our most accurate, as we think, conceptions and notions of God. We may love, honor, believe, and obey our Father; and therewith he accepts our childish thoughts, for they are but childish. We see but his back parts; we know but little of him. Hence is that promise wherewith we are so often supported and comforted in our distress, "We shall see him as he is," we shall see him "face to face". . . . The queen of Sheba had heard much of Solomon, and framed many great thoughts of his magnificence in her mind thereupon; but when she came and saw his glory, she was forced to confess that the one half of the truth had not been told her. We may suppose that we have here attained great knowledge, clear and high thoughts of God; but, alas! when he shall bring us into his presence we shall cry out, "We never knew him as he is; the thousandth part of his glory, and perfection, and blessedness, never entered into our hearts."[45]

To apply my thesis more specifically, then, I am suggesting that (1) anthropomorphism is a legitimate explanation *only insofar* as it specifies that God (Father and Spirit) has no *material* form or *physical* features, and that (2) anthropopathism and impassibility can be useful categories *only insofar* as they specify that God experiences no *sinful* emotions, nor is he subject to any change, reaction, or response outside his control or apart from his own consent to be affected.[46] Once we exceed these scripturally grounded qualifications, I fear that we confuse logical assumption with logical necessity, and philosophical speculation with theological certainty.

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[45] John Owen, *Temptation and Sin* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace, 2001), 65. This is a published edition from Owen's larger work *On the Mortification of Sin in Believers*.

[46] "God is *impassible* in the sense that he cannot be manipulated, overwhelmed, or surprised into an emotional interaction that he does not desire to have or allow to happen. . . . God is *impassioned*, and he may be affected by his creatures, but as God he is so in ways that accord rather than conflict with his will to be so affected." Rob Lister, *God is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 36.

This section looks more closely at the major "problem" texts concerning God's repentance—Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29. A number of considerations can help us navigate our way through the forest of seemingly contradictory scriptural statements about divine repentance.

The Centrality of Context

Numbers 23:19 is uttered by Balaam in his second prophetic pronouncement regarding Israel. Balaam was hired by Balak, king of Moab, to curse Israel. Insisting he could only utter whatever God put into his mouth, Balaam agreed and Balak conceded. When Balaam opened his mouth pronouncing God's blessing on Israel (vv. 1–10), Balak—frustrated and displeased—moved Balaam to another vantage point, hoping to elicit a different pronouncement (vv. 11–14; Balak's third try in vv. 27–28 clarifies Balak's thinking—"perhaps it will please God that thou mayest curse them for me from there"). It is in this context that Balaam utters the assertion of verse 19: "God is not a man that He should lie; neither the son of man that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" In other words, God is not fickle. Once God has committed himself by stating his intentions, a change of location or vantage point is not going to make him change his mind or go back on what he said.

First Samuel 15:29 involves precisely the same sort of context; God had issued an explicit charge and warned of the consequences of disobedience (1 Sm 12). Now that Saul had not only broken that charge but also failed to own his sin and repent sincerely, God is not about to go back on his word.

The Significance of Explicit Contrasts and Parallels in the Text

Numbers 23:19 draws a series of clear and explicit contrasts between God and man. First, God is not, like man, vacillating, shifting, manipulatable, bribeable. Second, for God to repent of what he had previously pronounced through Balaam (vv. 7–10) would be the equivalent of lying. "Repenting" in this context, then, would be changing—indeed, reversing—the unconditional purposes he already said he would fulfill for Israel. To expect that God would utter otherwise from a different vantage point (as Balak hoped) was to assume that God was as capricious, his words as unreliable, as sinful humans. Note the concluding elaboration to this effect: "Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? Behold, I received a command to bless: he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it" (vv. 19-20, ESV). One cannot manipulate the true God as one can do with humans, to make him do anything other than what he has already spoken. God's irreversible commitment to a previously stated and unconditional purpose is crucial here.

The same contrast surfaces in the statement of 1 Samuel 15:29; God is not like man. The same parallel surfaces as well; in this case, repenting would be the equivalent of lying. In this context, God had anointed Saul as king with a strict warning of what would happen should he fail. Those consequences are set in motion when God announces through Samuel, "Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king" (v. 23). Saul pleads for a reprieve (vv.

24–25), but Samuel reiterates exactly the same sentence (v. 26) and as he turns to leave, Saul in desperation grabs Samuel's mantle and accidentally tears it (v. 27). That becomes a prophetic picture that prompts Samuel's third pronouncement (v. 28), punctuated with the assurance that what God has spoken will not be altered—he is not like a man who can be persuaded to change what he has purposed; to do so, especially with no genuine repentance on Saul's part, would be to forfeit his integrity (v. 29).

The Point of Other Non-Repentance Passages

In table 1 the rest of the texts listed under "Passages Asserting That God Does/Will Not Repent" (besides Nm 23:19 and 1 Sm 15:29) are not categorical assertions that God does not repent. They are either (1) specific historic pronouncements of which he *did not* repent, or (2) prophetic pronouncements of which he *would not* repent.

God Does Respond Emotionally to Human Actions

God's capacity to grieve in response to our changing circumstances is an element of his infinite personality, in the image of which we are finitely fashioned. We might choose a certain course of action and even say, "I know I'm going to regret this"; and sure enough, sometimes we do. That does not necessarily mean we should not have done it, or even that it was a bad decision at the time. We just came to regret the way it worked out—even if we suspected the possibility ahead of time.

Similarly, God knew the sin and sorrow that would enter the world when he created man. That does not mean he wished he had never created, or that it was a bad decision, or that he was unpleasantly "surprised" by the outcome. It is part of God's real reaction to developing circumstances, even when they are foreknown. The same is true with his reaction to Saul in 1 Samuel 15.

God Does Respond to Prayer[47]

If God is omniscient, then he already knows what he will end up doing; so how can that honestly be called "changing his mind"? But if God is not only omniscient but also immutable (unchangeable) in his character, purposes, and pronouncements, then how can he meaningfully respond to prayer? Because part of his immutable character is his mercy and grace and self-professed responsiveness to man. Note God's response to Abraham's prayer for Sodom and Gomorrah on behalf of his nephew Lot (Gn 18:20-33). But that does not mean that God is obligated to respond positively to prayer once his purpose is irreversibly determined. Note God's assurance to Ezekiel that even the intercession of Noah, Job, and Daniel could not deter his decision to judge Judah (Ez 14:14, 20).

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[47] See * references in table 1.

<div align="center">God Does Respond to Human Responses[48]</div>

God never changes his character. Part of his character is his reliability and faithfulness to his Word. But according to his own self-revelation in the Bible, part of his character is also *to change his posture and actions when people change theirs toward him.*

This is not a mere anthropomorphism. All believers, prior to their conversion, were aliens from God under his wrath and condemnation (Jn 3:36); and yet, after conversion, they are accepted in the Beloved (Eph 1:6). That represents an actual change in God's posture and disposition toward us. God pronounces judgment on the sinner, but when the sinner repents of his sin God "repents" of his judgment—without ever altering his character. That is easy for us to understand because the condition is built into the gospel. God sent Jonah to Nineveh with an apparently unqualified warning ("Yet 40 days and Nineveh will be destroyed"), yet when they repented, so did God—again demonstrating that God "repents" without ever changing his character or contradicting his word (Jon 3:4, 9,10; 4:2).

Similarly, God may promise blessing on obedience to his word, but when someone like Saul rejects the word of the Lord, the promised blessings are forfeited; and the Lord may be said both to regret or grieve over man's actions, and to change his intentions regarding Saul. God appointed Saul in response to the demand of the people—a concession the consequences of which grieved God. And whereas he would have blessed Saul with an endless dynasty (13:13), those good faith intentions were also forfeited.

By way of illustration, we can watch a movie we have seen before—maybe even several times—so that the events and the outcome are not surprising to us in the least, and yet still laugh or cry as we watch the familiar events unfold. Or we may watch a videotape of a ballgame whose final score we already know and display genuine emotional expression regarding events we already foreknow.

Obviously, we are dealing with a dimension of mystery, as we are finite representations of an infinite God, with limited capacities of the perfections of his personality. God reveals himself to have an emotional capacity (he loves and hates, may be grieved or joyful). This may strike us as strange, because most of our emotions are generally reactionary to largely unexpected events. With God there are no unexpected events. When we "repent" in the sense of changing our minds it is often due to the unanticipated development of circumstances or the reception of new information—both of which are also impossible for God.

<div align="center">*Conclusion regarding Divine Repentance*</div>

We return, then, to the original conundrum that introduced us to the larger issues of anthropomorphism and anthropopathism in search of a more biblical-theological solution. Does God repent or not? Yes and no. That is the only genuinely biblical answer to the question, because the Bible says both "yes, he does" and "no, he does not." The difference lies not in the subjective dictates

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[48] See ** references in table 1.

of a previously decided theology based on what makes sense to us, nor on invented lexical senses that allow the same word to be used in completely contradictory ways, but in the objective implications of the context. Three conditions can be summarized as follows:

1. God never "repents" of any absolute and unconditional pronouncements; to do so would be to lie, like man does. God is always unfailingly true to his covenants and his words.[49]
2. God may "repent" in the sense of altering his posture or disposition, or changing from his expressed intentions of conditional promised good or conditional warned judgment in response to (a) intercessory prayer (e.g., Ex 32:9–14), or (b) a change in man's posture toward God (Jer 18:7–10).
3. God does "repent" in the legitimately lexical sense of regret or grief over evil and its effects; that does not mean he "changes" his mind in the sense that he realizes that he made a bad decision, or wishes he had not done something, or is surprised by the outcome; it simply means that he responds genuinely and emotionally even to foreseen developments.

So, for example, the threats of God that express his hostile posture against sinners are neither empty words, nor are they necessarily irrevocable (unless he indicates otherwise, as he does on occasion, Jer 7:16, 11:14, 14:11). God's threats are often warnings designed to produce a repentant and submissive response.[50] When they do not, the threat is unfailingly fulfilled. But when they do, God may change his posture. "God's relenting is his sovereign decision," notes Frame. "His right to withdraw his announced judgment and blessings is part of his sovereignty."[51] Again, part of God's immutable character is to respond to human responses to his words and works (Jer 18:7–10; 26:3, 12–13, 18–19).[52]

Final Thoughts

I will conclude with a sermon quotation, a biographical illustration, a biblical example, and an apropos scriptural prayer. The sermon quotation comes from B. B. Warfield on Philippians 2:5–8.

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[49] Openness theologian John Sanders posits that Genesis 2–3 recounts the first example of divine repentance, a "divine relenting from negative consequences in favor of mercy." God—not unlike an indulgent parent, it seems—simply chose not to do what he solemnly said he would do. In a sense, Sanders argues, Satan was right and God was wrong. After all, they did not "die" that day, precisely because "when God faces the sin, he cannot bring himself to fulfill his threat." *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007), 48. Rather than even considering the possibility that the concept of dying in Genesis 2:17 might be meaningfully informed by other Scripture (e.g., Eph 2:1–3), Sanders seems perfectly willing to throw the integrity of God and his words under the theological bus in favor of a more appealing divine attribute.

[50] Two illustrations (one fictional, one historical) of this communicational phenomenon are Henry V's Har Fleur ultimatum (heeded by the French) in Shakespeare's *Henry V* and President Truman's two ultimatums (ignored by Japan) prior to dropping the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

[51] *Doctrine of God,* 564.

[52] This consideration opens up a whole separate discussion of prophetic contingency. Based on Jeremiah 18, some have erroneously argued that all prophecy that is not *explicitly* unconditional is implicitly contingent. See, for example, Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "When Prophecy Appears to Fail, Check Your Hermeneutic," *JETS* 53/3 (September 2010), 563–64; Derek Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987), 76–77. But that is a subject for another essay.

Men tell us that God is, by very necessity of his nature, incapable of passion, incapable of being moved by inducement from without; that he dwells in holy calm and unchangeable blessedness, untouched by human sufferings or human sorrows forever . . . . *Let us bless our God that it is not true.* God *can* feel; God *does* love. . . . We have *scriptural warrant* for believing that God has reached out loving arms and gathered to his bosom that forest of spears which otherwise had pierced ours. But is this not gross anthropomorphism? We are careless of names: it is the truth of God. And we decline to yield up the God of the Bible and the God of our hearts to any philosophical abstraction.[53]

The biographical illustration comes from Humphrey Carpenter's biography of J. R. R. Tolkien: "What [Tolkien] once wrote of prejudices held by C. S. Lewis could have been said of [Tolkien himself] in his old age: 'He had several [prejudices], some ineradicable, being based on ignorance but impenetrable by information.' . . . It was not so much a matter of prejudice as the habit (and it is not an uncommon Oxford habit) of making dogmatic assertions about things of which he knew very little."[54]

Theologians, too, can become habituated to making dogmatic assertions about things of which they know very little. Indeed, this "habit of making dogmatic assertions about things of which he knew very little" is precisely what Job, in the end, confessed and repented of: "*You asked,* 'Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know. Listen, please, and let me speak; You said, 'I will question you, and you shall answer Me.' I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I [recant] and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:3–6).

Finally, I like to think of Psalm 131:1 as the theologian's prayer: "LORD, my heart is not proud, nor are my eyes lofty, nor do I strut in great matters or in things too wonderful for me."[55] I can think of no more appropriately biblical posture for theologians (of all people!) to cultivate when it comes to matters so clearly beyond our experience, our knowledge, and our comprehension.

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[53] "Imitating the Incarnation," in *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950), 570–71 (emphasis added).

[54] Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 235–36.

[55] My translation. I have used the word *strut* to translate the common Hebrew verb meaning "to walk" [הלך] because there are, of course, many different kinds of walking, depending on the implications of the surrounding context.

Appendix:

The Emotional Capacity of God to Suffer with His People

The notion of divine *suffering* is one of the specific areas that the doctrine of impassibility is intended to guard against. And yet there are numerous passages that describe a dimension of God's emotional experience that may be identified as divine empathy. "This emotional empathy," notes Frame, "can be called 'suffering,' although that is perhaps a misleading term. There is no reason in these passages to suppose that God suffers injury or loss." Nevertheless, "God experiences grief and other negative emotions, not only in the incarnate Christ, but in his non-incarnate being as well."[56]

Judges 10:15–16: "And the children of Israel said to the LORD, 'We have sinned! Do to us whatever seems best to You; only deliver us this day, we pray.' So they put away the foreign gods from among them and served the LORD. And *His soul could no longer endure the misery of Israel.*"

Isaiah 63:9: "*In all their affliction He was afflicted,* And the Angel of His Presence saved them; *In His love and in His pity* He redeemed them; And He bore them and carried them all the days of old." E. J. Young comments: "This is one of the most remarkable verses in the prophecy and one of the most disputed. . . . *In all their affliction, there was affliction to Him.* The meaning is beautiful and filled with great comfort for God's people. Calvin says that in speaking this way God declares the incomparable love He has toward His people. . . . When affliction is directed against us and we must suffer for His sake, we may remember that He too is bearing that affliction and suffering."[57] Gary Smith concludes, "Surely God's emotional involvement with people who are unfaithful affects him with grief, and he delights and gains pleasure from those who honor him."[58]

Note also Isaiah 15:1–5:

> The burden against Moab. Because in the night Ar of Moab is laid waste And destroyed, Because in the night Kir of Moab is laid waste and destroyed, He has gone up to the temple and Dibon, to the high places to weep. Moab will wail over Nebo and over Medeba; On all their heads will be baldness, and every beard cut off. In their streets they will clothe themselves with sackcloth; On the tops of their houses and in their streets everyone will wail, weeping bitterly. . . . *"My heart will cry out for Moab;* His fugitives shall flee to Zoar, like a three-year-old heifer. For by the Ascent of Luhith they will go up with weeping; For in the way of Horonaim they will raise up a cry of destruction."

Isaiah 16:9–13 is similar:

> *Therefore I will bewail the vine of Sibmah, With the weeping of Jazer; I will drench you with my tears, O Heshbon and Elealeh;* For battle cries have fallen over your summer fruits and your harvest. Gladness is taken away, and joy from the plentiful field; In the vineyards there will be no singing, Nor will there be shouting; No treaders will tread out wine in the presses; I have made their shouting cease. *Therefore my heart shall*

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[56] *Doctrine of God,* 612–13. Frame notes only a couple such passages. This appendix highlights many more, adding emphasis to the key statements.

[57] E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 3:481.

[58] Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66,* NAC (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 671.

resound like a harp for Moab, And my inner being for Kir Heres…. This is the word which the LORD has spoken concerning Moab since that time.

Jeremiah confirms this divine response in 48:30–32a: "I know his wrath," *says the LORD,* "But it is not right; His lies have made nothing right. *Therefore I will wail for Moab, and I will cry out for all Moab; I will mourn for the men of Kir Heres. O vine of Sibmah! I will weep for you with the weeping of Jazer."* And Jeremiah 31:20 adds, "Is Ephraim My dear son? Is he a pleasant child? For though I spoke against him, I earnestly remember him still; Therefore *My heart yearns for him;* I will surely have mercy on him, *says the LORD.*

Ezekiel 6:9: *"*Then those of you who escape will remember Me among the nations where they are carried captive, because *I was crushed by their adulterous heart* which has departed from Me, and by their eyes which play the harlot after their idols; they will loathe themselves for the evils which they committed in all their abominations." Ezekiel 21:16–17: "Swords at the ready! Thrust right! Set your blade! Thrust left – Wherever your edge is ordered! "*I also will beat My fists together, And I will cause My fury to rest;* I, the LORD, have spoken." Ezekiel 22:12–13: "'In you they take bribes to shed blood; you take usury and increase; you have made profit from your neighbors by extortion, and have forgotten Me,' says the Lord GOD. 'Behold, therefore, *I beat My fists* at the dishonest profit which you have made, and at the bloodshed which has been in your midst.'"

Hosea 11:7–11 records these words of Yahweh:

"My people are bent on backsliding from Me. Though they call to the Most High, none at all exalt Him. How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you like Zeboiim? *My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred.* I will not execute the fierceness of My anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim. For I am God, and not man, the Holy One in your midst; and I will not come with terror. They shall walk after the LORD. He will roar like a lion. When He roars, then His sons shall come trembling from the west; they shall come trembling like a bird from Egypt, like a dove from the land of Assyria. And I will let them dwell in their houses," says the LORD.

Isaiah 53:3–5: "He is *despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief,* and we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was *despised,* and we did not esteem Him. *Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows;* Yet we esteemed Him *stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted.* But He was *wounded* for our transgressions, He was *bruised* for our iniquities; The *chastisement* for our peace was upon Him, And by His *stripes* we are healed." This final passage raises the incarnational factor in the discussion of God's impassibility. Despite systematic theological arguments for divine impassibility, it seems difficult to circumvent the following conclusion, each point of which has independent scriptural corroboration: (1) Christ suffered; (2) Christ was fully God and fully man, united in one indivisible person; (3) therefore, God is capable of suffering.

Two points need to be made here. First, *the doctrine of the hypostatic union* prohibits us from isolating this emotional capacity as an expression of Christ's human nature only. The objection may be raised: "What about Christ's capacity to die? Must not that experience be isolated as a capacity of his human nature only? Does Christ's capacity to die mean that God is capable of dying?" If by "die"

one means experiencing *bodily* death, that is by definition a capacity exclusively limited to human nature (since God has no corporeality). If, however, by "die" one means ceasing to exist or even ceasing *conscious* existence, even humans do not "die" in that sense. So, the fact that Christ died does not mean that God, as God, is capable of dying.

Second, *the doctrine of the Trinity* prohibits us from relegating such emotional capacities to the Second Member of the Godhead only (cf. the capacity of the Holy Spirit to be "grieved"; Is 63:10; Eph 4:30). It is also difficult to circumvent the idea that God is capable of suffering if we are willing to accord God the *positive* emotional activities of compassion, joy, love, and delight. For example, Isaiah 62:4–5 says, "You shall no longer be termed Forsaken, Nor shall your land any more be termed Desolate; But you shall be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; *For the LORD delights in you,* And your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a virgin, So shall your sons marry you; And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, *So shall your God rejoice over you.*"

Finally, Christ is the ultimate, visible, incarnate expression of the divine capacity to suffer and feel with (*com - passion*) his people in their sufferings (cf. Heb 4:15).

Book Reviews

Talbert, Layton. *The Trustworthiness of God's Words: Why the Reliability of Every Word from God Matters.* **Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2022. 240 pp. + 40 pp. (back matter).**

Christians recognize that God is jealous for his glory, but they sometimes forget that God is also jealous for his integrity. In *The Trustworthiness of God's Words,* Layton Talbert reminds us that God's glory is at stake if we do not trust what God has said, since the person of God is inseparable from his words. Talbert does not try to guilt us into trusting God; rather, he meticulously shows from Scripture itself that God is true to his word, and that great blessings and comfort come to those who trust him.

In Part 1, Talbert lays a theological foundation that provides a bedrock for a believer's unequivocal trust in God's words. Trust, he argues, is more than belief. Building from Reformation thought, Talbert suggests that biblical faith moves past mere knowledge (*notitia*) to assent (*assensus*) and a kind of confidence (*fiducia*) that results in action (19–20). "Believing and trusting are twins," Talbert suggests—"Believing (*'āman*) is predominantly an act of thinking and deals with processing information (facts or claims). Trusting (*bāṭaḥ*) is the choice to act on that knowledge. . . . But trusting also denotes an emotional experience," an "inner peace" (23–24). He demonstrates from Scripture that to distrust God's words is to question God himself. He explains that trustworthiness is essential to the character of God—God always tells the truth (77–78), he always knows the truth (78–79), he always has the power to do what he promises (79–80), and he has clearly communicated those promises in his Word (81–83). Thus, Talbert suggests that "God's trustworthiness is at the root of our confidence in all his other attributes" (36), and this is why repeatedly in Scripture God "has expressed a compelling interest in demonstrating the integrity of what he says" (37). If God were not trustworthy, he would cease to be God. Since his words are integral to who he is as God—he is "inseparable from his words" (58)—Christians should "lean all their confidence on the trustworthiness of God's words in every circumstance, just like Jesus did" (86).

Part 2 builds on this foundation with practical applications for how Christians can and should trust God's words. Talbert argues that we must trust God's words in Scripture about past history (chapter 7), his own character (chapter 8), and even "unbelievable" promises (chapter 9). He explores how the events recorded in Genesis are particularly under attack, but then he astutely notes that this questioning of God's words was at the root of the first sin: "God's testimony regarding the progression of the Fall reveals that the reason they sinned is because they were persuaded that God's words were not reliable" (123). From that point on in human history, God's people have struggled with trusting God's words; but using examples of Jacob (130), Naomi (131), Job (133), David (134), Habakkuk (135), Lamentations (138), and Martha and Mary (141), Talbert admonishes believers that "because all God's words are trustworthy, we can always rely on God to be exactly what he says he is, even when it doesn't look to us like he is" (130). This kind of trust in God's words, as Talbert demonstrates in chapters 10 and 11, "inevitably manifests itself in how we live life" (174).

In Part 3, Talbert steps back to cap the practical discussion with firm support from the overarching narrative of Scripture. "The Bible is God's record of reality," Talbert notes, "to help us see and interpret our experience through his eyes, because he is the only one who sees everything, and sees it as it really is" (207). This is why we must immerse ourselves in Scripture, allowing the larger story of God's Word to fortify our hearts to trust his words in our everyday lives. Chapters 13 and 14 trace that biblical storyline in more detail through the Old and New Testaments. Ultimately, as Talbert argues in his final chapter, a Christian's response to the steadfast faithfulness at the core of who God is should be an equally fitting steadfast trust in him.

At times the reader may begin to feel like the trees are lost for the forest in some of Talbert's broader discussions of Scripture's metanarrative and worldview, especially in Part 3, yet he skillfully connects the broader story to the particular issue of God's trustworthiness in just the right places. The value of Talbert's approach is that he does not treat distrusting God as a mild ailment with a simple remedy; rather, he painstakingly shows how serious a vice it is and offers the only real solution—a complete worldview reorientation based on God's view of reality as expressed in his Word. Helpful definitions throughout and "Review and Reflect" questions at the end of each chapter make this book ideal for use in a small group or other teaching settings. Deeply biblical and thoroughly pastoral, this book is a must-read for every Christian.

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Fanning, Buist. *Revelation.* ZECNT. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020. 575 pp. + 46 pp. (back matter).

Buist Fanning's commentary on Revelation is the most significant futurist, premillennial commentary since Grant Osborne's commentary in the Baker Exegetical Commentary series and the most significant Revelation commentary from a dispensational perspective since Robert Thomas's two-volume set.

In the introduction Fanning discusses authorship, date, interpretive matters (genre, symbolism, use of the OT, etc.), text, style, and structure. Placing more weight on internal rather than external evidence, Fanning concludes that Revelation was written by "a prophet known to the churches of Asia Minor" rather than the Apostle John, though he is careful to emphasize that this conclusion does not detract in any way from the book's status as inspired Scripture (28). In his brief discussion of the book's date, Fanning does not take a hard position between a date in the late sixties or a date in the late nineties, though he leans toward the latter.

Fanning includes an up-to-date discussion of the state of textual criticism in Revelation, including the unique challenges that textual critics face with Revelation as well as a discussion of the unique style of Greek in Revelation. Fanning proposes that Revelation's Greek is idiosyncratic because Greek is John's second language, though he is quick to clarify that John remains a competent writer in this second language. Fanning grants that John's allusions to OT texts account for some of his Semitic style—a point made by G. K. Beale. However, Fanning thinks that Beale presses this observation beyond the evidence when he claims that John was trying to evoke the feel of the OT Scriptures throughout. Fanning also thinks that some of John's style can be accounted for by changes occurring in Hellenistic Greek.

The most helpful parts of the introduction are the discussion of literal and symbolic language and the discussion of typology and OT allusions. Fanning recognizes the problem of insisting on "literal" interpretations that are insensitive to intentional metaphor and symbolism while also critiquing those interpreters who think that the symbolism in Revelation itself indicates that the judgments in view are spiritual rather than physical. In his discussion of typology Fanning observes that Beale and McDonough (representative of many recent interpreters) create a false dichotomy when they propose that the OT promises and predictions are either understood "in a pedantically 'literal' fashion" or in light of the progressive revelation of the NT (44, citing CNTUOT, 1088). Fanning argues that it is possible to read OT texts in way that takes into account both their original setting and progressive revelation.

Fanning's discussion of typology includes five helpful guiding principles (47–48):

(1) Typology is not just a matter of Old Testament to New Testament relationships. . . . (2) Typology is not limited to features of Christology and soteriology, although these are common topics. . . . (3) Typology does not necessitate a metaphysical shift from physical, geographic, or historic entities in the Old Testament type to spiritual and eternal realities in the New Testament antitype. Sometimes the typological escalation works this way, but it is not necessary for it to do so. . . . (4) Typology does not

necessitate the abrogation of the type in favor of the antitype. . . . (5) The future counterpart or antitype may not be limited to a single, climactic exemplar, although this is often the case. It is also possible for an Old Testament pattern to find more than one future replication on the way to its ultimate fulfillment.

Finally, the introduction deals with the structure of Revelation. Fanning follows Merrill Tenney, Richard Bauckham, and others in identifying a prologue (1:1–8) and epilogue (22:10–11) that bookend four major sections (1:9–3:22; 4:1–16:21; 17:1–19:10; 19:11–21:8; 21:9–22:9), marked by the repetition of key phrases. Within chapters 6–16, Fanning argues for a chronological sequence (as opposed to recapitulation) interspersed with "interludes or digressions," which "pause the chronological progression" (62). Fanning recognizes that the third major section (17:1–19:10) overlaps in time with some of the events described in the second major section (4:1–16:21).

The commentary proper unfolds according to the format of the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament series. The commentary contains twenty-eight chapters, each of which include the following sections: Literary Context, Main Idea, Translation, Structure, Exegetical Outline, Explanation of the Text, Theology in Application.

"Literary Context" is typically a paragraph that describes how the verses under consideration fit into the larger structure of Revelation and what they contribute to the book's development. The "Main Idea" summarizes the verses under consideration in a single sentence. The "Translation" provides Fanning's own translation laid out as a clause display so that the logical flow of the passage is evident. The "Structure" describes the flow of the passage under consideration in paragraph form. The "Exegetical Outline" presents the structure of the passage in outline format.

The "Explanation of the Text" section is the heart of the commentary. Fanning's translation of a verse or two is followed by the verse or verses in Greek. Pastors will appreciate that Greek terms appear in Greek characters throughout (not in transliteration), and those without the knowledge of Greek will appreciate that Greek words are accompanied by English translation, making the commentary accessible to all serious students of Scripture.

The heart of the "Explanation" section consists of Fanning's summary of the meaning of the text under consideration. On key points of dispute, he will summarize and evaluate alternate interpretations. In the footnotes Fanning deals with text-critical issues and matters of Greek grammar. Fanning is a recognized expert in Greek grammar, and his numerous grammatical footnotes have great value for the student of Greek while not obscuring the commentator for other readers. Fanning's comments in the "Explanation" section are concise but full of good sense. Some futurist commentators develop idiosyncratic interpretations by interpreting symbolic language "literally" contrary to authorial intent. Idealist commentators similarly write themselves into oddities by wrongly insisting that *all* the language in Revelation is symbolic. Fanning avoids both these errors.

A sample of Fanning's interpretive choices will give a sense of his approach to the book. Fanning understands the angels of the seven churches as "supernatural messengers or instruments of God, who serve as guardians or representatives of the congregation" (107). He persuasively argues that Revelation 3:10 supports a Rapture that precedes the Day of the Lord judgments described in the book. He understands the white horse and rider to symbolize a "destructive conquest" that begins the

judgments of the tribulation period; he does not identify the rider with an individual since the riders of the following three horses do not represent specific individuals (240). He understands the 144,000 in chapter 7 to refer to ethnic Israelites who are distinct from the numberless multitude from every nation mentioned later in the chapter. He understands the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments to unleash physical calamities upon the earth. Even the demons released in the later trumpets bring about physical torment. Fanning understands the temple in Revelation 11 to refer to a physical temple structure in Jerusalem, and he understands the two witnesses to be two latter-day prophets whose work is described in terms of the ministries of Moses and Elijah. He does not understand the prophets to *be* Moses and Elijah or Enoch and Elijah. He interprets the woman clothed with the sun to be ethnic Israel. He links the number 666 to Nero, whom he takes to be a type of the eschatological Antichrist. He understands Babylon in Revelation to be a type of evil opposition that was manifested in Rome in John's day and that will also have a last-days manifestation. Fanning interprets Revelation 20 in a premillennial fashion, and he understands the Millennium in continuity with the new creation described in chapters 21 and 22.

Following the "Explanation of the Text" is the section "Theology in Application." In this section Fanning develops two theological ideas from the preceding exegetical material and applies them to Christians today. This section addresses in practice the objection that futurist interpretations of Revelation have no applicatory value to Christians today.

The lucid brevity of this commentary will make it a helpful resource for pastors who are preaching through or from the book of Revelation. It is also a commentary that idealist and preterist commentators should reckon with. Too often those opposed to futurist readings of Revelation or pretribulational, premillennial eschatology use Hal Lindsey or Tim LaHaye as their foils rather than interacting with pretribulational, premillennial, futurist scholars. This should not be. The greatest fault with this volume (leaving aside the inevitable interpretive disagreement) is that Fanning is sometimes too brief.

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Biblical Worldview Lead Specialist | BJU Press

Jamieson, Bobby. *The Path to Being a Pastor: A Guide for the Aspiring.* **Wheaton: Crossway, 2021. 124 pp. + 23 pp. (back matter).**

How does a man know whether to pursue pastoral ministry, and how should he move towards that goal once he is persuaded to do so? Is the answer as simple (or complicated) as his sensing a call, enrolling in a Bible college and seminary, then serving as an assistant pastor while waiting for a church to call him as a lead pastor? Is this even the right approach? In a biblical and methodical manner, Jamieson attempts to answer this question with *The Path to Being a Pastor.* With this book he hopes to guide a man's desire to be a pastor "from seed to fruition," offering guidance for taking deliberate and meaningful steps towards achieving this aspiration.

To accomplish this task, Jamieson follows a Scripture-oriented strategy. He titles and focuses each chapter (twenty-seven in total) with an imperative, which he either draws from Scripture directly or "distills and deploys" from the "sense of Scripture" as he understands it. He maintains this focus consistently throughout the book by quoting the Scripture verse(s) that undergird each chapter at the outset of each chapter. Then he develops a key truth from these verses throughout each respective chapter. If the reader expects a rigorous exegetical or technical examination of these key verses, he or she will be disappointed. Jamieson is not writing for an academically sophisticated audience. He is writing to men who are considering pastoral ministry, whether they have acquired advanced linguistic and theological skills yet or not. Consequently, he has chosen a winsome, insightful, compact, and accessible style that accentuates biblical truths and applies them to the question of pursuing pastoral ministry.

The author arranges his material into three main parts: Finding the Path (four chapters), Walking the Path (nineteen chapters), and Approaching the Destination (four chapters). He also provides a thorough general index and extensive Scripture index afterwards—the latter revealing a strong reliance on NT references, which corresponds suitably to the NT nature of his topic. Many chapters, though not all, feature a set of standard endnotes—some of which commend additional resources pertaining to the topic addressed in the chapter. Each chapter is both brief and substantive, and each is well-suited for brief mentorship or training discussions, though suggested discussion questions are absent from the end of each chapter and would be a welcome addition to any future editions.

In Part 1, Finding the Path, the author encourages an aspiring pastor to foster heartfelt humility, which invites outside criticism and crucifies prideful ambition. He also upholds biblical, epistolary qualifications and promotes seeking wise counsel, especially from within a man's current congregation—offering a helpful diagram that demonstrates the value of balancing ability, desire, and opportunity within the local church. But the author offers his most helpful (or controversial) perspective of Part 1 in Chapter 1 when he says, "Instead of saying 'I'm called to ministry,' say 'I aspire to be a pastor'" (17). Jamieson observes that the NT nowhere uses "call" language to describe God's leading into pastoral ministry. He further suggests that to say, "God has called me to be a pastor," is presumptive and that this phraseology fosters an unhealthy sense of entitlement. Therefore, he recommends replacing "I am called" with "I aspire," terminology that he believes is more biblical,

humble, accurate, fruitful, and freeing. In Chapter 1, it is worth noting that the author presents "elder," "overseer," and "pastor" as interchangeable terms for the same office, while also recognizing that some—though not all—pastors should be remunerated.

In Part 2, Walking the Path, the author offers an extended series of points of advice for men who "aspire" to become a pastor. He presents this advice in no apparent order or priority—whether logical, chronological, or otherwise. Nor does he develop each point or follow any clear persistent theme. Even so, core values such as personal preparation and practical experience repeatedly shine through in tangible and concrete ways. This observation makes clear that Jamieson strongly recommends an active approach rather than a passive "wait and see" one— an approach that will require patience and persistence on the part of an aspiring pastor.

In the opening chapter of this section, Jamieson urges an aspiring pastor to be an observant, involved member of a church. This is crucial advice for sure, but some pastors may pause when he says, "If you desire to pastor but are not, and have never been, a member of a healthy church, I would strongly urge you to join a thriving, mature church" (45). Though this advice should cause nonmembers to join a biblical church, will it also embolden some aspiring pastoral candidates to abandon a good church for another that they deem to be more "thriving" and healthy? By failing to give a clear explanation of what constitutes a "thriving, mature" church, apart from being a church that develops and mentors aspiring pastors, Jamieson leaves this detail open to interpretation.

Despite this minor quibble, Jamieson provides a wealth of advice that, if embraced, will equip a man to pursue his pastoral aspirations with godly maturity and wisdom. At one point he even offers helpful guidance to pastors who intend to mentor aspiring pastors by detailing the process of an effective apprenticeship model, citing Andrew Wilson: "I do—you watch—we talk. I do—you help— we talk. You do—I help—we talk. You do—I watch—we talk. You do—someone else watches" (69). Jamieson's advice is thorough, spanning church, family, and personal zones. The reader will especially appreciate his three-chapter focus on attending to family duties. Regarding the role of seminary training in pastoral preparedness, Jamieson states: "My counsel in this chapter is simple: if you can, make the most of seminary." Then he qualifies his counsel by saying, "Not everyone can or should" (98). With this advice, he offers a thoughtful and reasonable perspective that encourages seminary training without insisting on it universally.

In Part 3, Approaching the Destination, the author gives final recommendations for aspiring pastors to consider when the opportunity arrives to step into a pastoral role. He differentiates between godly and ungodly ambition and makes perceptive points about accepting an assistant pastor role only after the pastoral candidate has determined that he and the lead pastor will be compatible. For instance, he warns well when he says, "Beware of the vague succession plan" (116). He also offers valuable guidance for "candidating candidly" and concludes with a crucial reminder to "cherish Christ."

Jamieson writes this book with the advantage of experience. Though not a lead pastor himself, he writes as one of the pastors at Capitol Hill Baptist, a church which hosts an intense, full-time, reputable pastoral training internship program, which the author himself oversees. Furthermore, he "aspired" to be a pastor for eleven years before becoming one; so a healthy dose of empathy permeates the biblical advice that he shares with his readers. These factors qualify Jamieson to write this book.

Though many books have been written about how to be a godly and effective pastor, few have been written about how to *become* a pastor. This book fills that void and therefore meets a real need in the church today. It will help any man who wonders whether he should pursue pastoral ministry and will make both an excellent reading assignment for pastoral church interns and a worthy undergraduate- or master's-level textbook. It will even help a lead pastor or pastoral team develop a philosophy or strategy for guiding, training, and mentoring pastoral candidates within the church.

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Garrett, Duane. *The Problem of the Old Testament: Hermeneutical, Schematic, and Theological Approaches.* **Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2020. 355 pp. + 40 pp. (back matter).**

   The Problem of the Old Testament is Duane Garrett's prolegomenon (354) to his forthcoming multi-volume series addressing biblical theology and hermeneutics in the OT. Garrett, an OT professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, seeks to solve the Church's challenge of reading, defining, and reconciling the OT with the NT. He desires to remedy the problems by identifying a unifying theme in the OT and introducing a hermeneutic that bridges the gap between the NT Christian and the OT text.

   Chapter 1 defines the three problems that are advanced throughout the volume. First, how are readers to understand Messianic prophecy? Specifically, what was the hermeneutic of NT authors in their use of OT prophecies? Second, how does the Mosaic law relate to NT believers? Third, what is the relationship between ethnic Israel and the NT Church? Acknowledging that these questions are not new, chapter 2 surveys the unsuccessful answers of Justin Martyr and Tertullian.

   Chapters 3–6 evaluate three spheres of inadequate solutions: hermeneutical, schematic, and conceptual. In chapters 3–4 the *hermeneutical* solutions of the Alexandrian and Antiochian traditions are contrasted. Garrett exposes the dangers of historic allegory, noting that "an allegorized text loses all authority" (74). He further applies his warning to advocates of the current theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS) movement. His appraisal of the Antiochian school is more positive. He commends their attempts at a literal hermeneutic but expresses disappointment that the result was often a displacement of the OT within the life of a believer (100).

   Chapter 5 quickly dismisses covenant theology and dispensationalism as *schematic* solutions to problems in the OT. Regarding the former, Garrett finds no biblical justification for a covenant of works or grace (115). He also dismantles dispensationalism for creating such separation between the Church and Israel that the OT is rendered as "someone else's mail" (127) with no New Covenant implications for NT believers (126).

   Chapter 6 addresses *conceptual* solutions that seek to find a unified theme within the OT via biblical theology. Three factors are considered: "the nature of the canon," "the meaning and focus of biblical theology," and "the models for organizing an Old Testament theology" (129). A survey of various methods of biblical theology results in the conclusion that no model is adequate, and a "hybrid approach" is necessary.

   Chapter 7 introduces Garrett's new approach. He defines the unifying theme of the OT as the "election of Israel" (169). He divides the OT into Election Literature, which "tells Israel's history" (165), and Wisdom Literature, which is universally applicable since God "made the world according to wisdom" and thus "its teachings are timeless and not governed by the progress of salvation history" (166). Within this framework NT believers find meaning in the OT as being grafted into Israel (Rom 11:17–19) and thus fellow family members who can experience and apply the OT by "family identification" (173).

   Chapter 8 argues against a progressive view of OT covenants, suggesting that the theme of covenant is secondary in biblical theology and proposing that each covenant is individualized to its

context (175). Chapter 9 maintains the OT law as a unified whole and posits four functions of the law (234). First, the law is a covenant document (234). Second, the law is a demonstration of the need for New Covenant (235). Third, the law is an ideal of righteousness and basis for judgment (237). Fourth, the law is a teacher, leading those who meditate upon it into righteousness (238). He notes only the fourth function as "abiding" and the previous three as "in some sense obsolete" (238). The final application of Garrett's new approach focuses on reading OT narrative (chapter 10). Garrett warns against reading each OT story exclusively through the lens of the biblical metanarrative lest it lose its authorial and contextual intent. He develops a grid for interpretative intertextuality defined as "allusive patterns" (272), which allows for connective hope as one reads the "dark" literature of the OT. The final chapters (11–13) and appendix represent Garrett's application of his principles through case studies in Hosea, Joel, and Isaiah 7:14.

This work is self-defined as prolegomenon, but Garrett does more than introduce topics for his upcoming series. He attempts in a single volume to deconstruct long-standing theological perspectives and reconstruct his own model for reading the OT. In deconstruction the book is expansive in its breadth, but it fails to accomplish its purpose. In less academic terms, Garrett attempts big-game hunting using buckshot from long-range. The result is minor injury, but no substantial harm. As he communicates his own model, valuable insights are shared, but they lack enough development to form a cohesive hermeneutic or biblical theology.

The weaknesses of the volume can be categorized by both style and content. In style, Garrett develops his argument unevenly, makes overstatements, and misrepresents those he deems incorrect. First, the space given to significant topics is underweighted. Little time is spent on covenant theology, dispensationalism, the use of types and anti-types, biblical theology, or the use of fulfillment language in the NT. Second, overstatements are laced throughout the book. For instance, Garrett says, "The apostles give few guidelines about how we are to handle the Law" (33), without noting Acts 15, Romans 7, or the Book of Galatians. Third, Garrett's explanations of dispensationalism and covenant theology are misrepresentative. For example, he suggests that two of the essential distinctives of dispensationalism are a pre-tribulation Rapture and the absence of the NT Church from any aspect of the New Covenant (125–26). Yet a reading of dispensational literature would evidence that these two issues are not considered distinctives. Garrett's attempt to quickly dismiss dispensationalism without valid warrant creates within the reader a spirit of distrust. His equally dismissive handling of covenant theology would no doubt meet with similar cries of "unfair" from proponents of that system.

The weaknesses in content center on Garrett's development of his own methodology. His most important decision is to make the election of Israel the dominant and unifying theme of the OT. Garrett presents this conclusion in three paragraphs of explanation with no corresponding exegesis (165–66). His choice is based on the chronology of Genesis 12 and 15. Yet Garrett's claim of priority by chronological order only suggests that election preceded covenant. He does not consider other unifying options. He simply states, "In short, Israel is the elect people of God. All the laws, history, prophecy, and psalmody of the Old Testament build upon this foundational idea, that God chose Israel for a specific purpose" (166).

A second weakness in content is Garrett's understanding of the Church's relationship with Israel. He declares that the Church "partake(s) of the collective experience of Israel. We recognize ourselves not just by analogy but by family identification—we have been adopted into this people" (174). By this "family identification," Garrett surmises that OT texts now have new significance within the NT community. The Church can "recover a lost memory, recapitulating the experience of sin, punishment, and repentance of the elder members of our family" (174). To understand the OT fully, Garrett sees a need for NT Christians to identify with OT Israel in a visceral, family manner. Such a conclusion seems hermeneutically unnecessary. Christians can identify with all OT characters as fellow fallen creatures. There is no need for family relationship outside of common humanity. Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 10 that OT stories were written for our "example" not for our experience.

The strengths of the volume are numerous. Historically, Garrett traces the challenges of reading the OT from the early Church era, through the Reformation, and into the contemporary Church setting. In doing so, he connects the fallacy of allegorizing with the current reoccurrence of those failures in TIS. He also challenges extremes within the dominant theological systems of dispensationalism, covenant theology, and progressive covenantalism. Garrett's dismissal of each is too hurried and uneven, but his explanatory work through the OT covenants, Mosaic law, and OT narratives remains helpful. His delineation of the three types of covenants, the development of the Hebrew structure, and the evidence for the mutual independence of each covenant is worthy of consideration. Garrett's perspective of the Mosaic law grounds it in its historic context and theological distinctiveness. He critiques the threefold division of law into moral, ceremonial, and civil, and he properly reminds readers that the law is a unified whole and a singular covenant with Israel. His development of the four-fold role of the law is effective. He emphasizes that the law declares the fullness of God's character and encourages meditation on it without adherence to it.

Garrett's understanding of the role of OT narrative is cognizant of the current conversation on metanarrative. While embracing the metanarrative of Scripture, he emphasizes the place of an OT story it in its historic and canonical context. This preserves the author's original intent prior to envisioning the broader redemptive framework. Also of value, though not equally so, is the attempt to address the current movement toward intertextuality. He rejects the language of type and intertextuality for his own term, "allusive pattern" (272). He also provides ten principles that govern the use of the tool (285–88). This safeguards from other forms of intertextuality that provide no means of evaluating a biblical warrant for textual connections.

Garrett's volume is both satisfying and unsatisfying. The "buckshot" nature of the writing stirred unanswered questions, unresolved conundrums, and underdeveloped arguments. What is appreciated is the awareness of the current trends in OT hermeneutics and commitment to an accurate handling of the Word. The attempt to make the OT attainable to the Church prompts valuable reflection even if there are disagreements.

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Craig, William Lane. *In Quest of the Historical Adam: A Biblical and Scientific Exploration.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021. 380 pp. + 21 pp. (back matter).

William Lane Craig is Professor of Philosophy at Houston Baptist University. Craig studied at Wheaton College for his undergraduate degree and earned master's degrees in both Church History and Philosophy of Religion at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He holds a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Birmingham, England, and a Doctor of Theology from Universität München, Germany. He is a prolific author of journal articles and works on apologetics.

In his latest book, *In Quest of the Historical Adam*, Craig seeks to harmonize Scripture and science regarding the existence of Adam. Craig sets out to "pursue the hermeneutical task first and independently of an examination of scientific evidence pertinent to human origins" (20). But throughout the book he unquestionably adopts the evolutionary theory of origins, which requires him to deny Genesis 1–11 as literal history. Craig holds that Genesis is "mytho-history." It is history in that it contains fragments of truth, but whereas it is myth, it is not to be understood literally. Craig does believe that Adam and Eve existed but not in the near past.

Craig arranges the book into four parts. Part 1 discusses the importance of the historical Adam. Part 2 examines the biblical data concerning the historical Adam. Part 4 examines the scientific evidence relative to the historical Adam. In Part 4 Craig brings together his research and draws his conclusions.

In Part 1 Craig notes that traditional theologians hold that the historicity of Adam is a vital part of hamartiology, but he maintains that making "the doctrine of sin a necessary condition of the doctrine of atonement is, however, an overreach" (5). He advocates that "Christianity need not embrace the traditional doctrine of original sin but may content itself with affirming the universal wrongdoing of human beings and their inability to save themselves" (6). He agrees with Peter Enns that Paul's interpretation is for theological purposes and goes beyond a "plain reading" of the story (6). Craig does argue that because Christ believed in an historical Adam, "denial of the historical Adam threatens to undo the deity of Christ and thus to destroy orthodox Christian faith" (8).

Craig says that while the authors of Scripture may have believed in a literal reading of Genesis 1–11 (six-day creation, worldwide flood, etc.), "we are not committed to the truthfulness of the author's personal beliefs" (10). He holds that young earth creationism's hermeneutic is "eminently plausible," but its science is "wildly implausible" and "places Genesis into massive conflict with mainstream science, not to mention history and linguistics" (13).

According to Craig, the narratives of Adam and Eve must be read "within the context of the primaeval history of Gen 1–11" and "the primaeval history within its ANE cultural context" (31). This leads Craig to consider Mesopotamian and Egyptian myths more closely to see how Genesis 1–11 conforms to the nature of ANE myths.

In Part 2 Craig explores the nature of myth. He adopts the approach that myths are "stories that expressed the faith and worldview of a people and so would have much to say about their view of origins" (36n1). Craig labels Genesis 1–11 as primaeval history and 12–50 as Israel's history. He dismisses the *tôlǝdôt* formulae ("these are the generations of") that argue against such a divide (132–

137). He agrees that the formulae constitute a timeline, but he holds that it does not determine the structure of the book (47–48). Relying on tradition criticism, he holds the text of "Gen 1–11 has a different history of tradition than Gen 12–50 and the rest of the Pentateuch" (52). And this tradition was changed and adapted over hundreds of years before it was written down. Craig concludes that because Genesis 1–11 is a sacred narrative meant to be believed by its target audience with a deity as a main character and set in a primaeval age, it therefore has the characteristics of myths of origination (64). This primaeval narrative lays the "foundations of Israel's worldview" (65).

Craig calls the anthropomorphisms of God's forming man with dirt, breathing into man, and strolling in the cool of the day as "incoherence" and "storyteller's art, not serious theology" (102). Perhaps one unique contribution to the discussion is Craig's concept of *fantastic elements*—elements that "if taken literally, are so extraordinary as to be palpably false" (104–105). The original audience might have believed them to be true, "but in light of our increased knowledge of the world," we do not (106). Craig holds that six-day creation (109–110), original vegetarianism (111), the talking snake (111–113), the trees of life and of the knowledge of good and evil (113), the rivers of Eden (113ff), the Cherubim (119), and even nonmiraculous elements in the narratives are *fantastic* and therefore "palpably false" (131).

Craig returns to the *tôləḏôt* formulae and holds that they "help order the primaeval narratives chronologically" (136), but chronology does not necessarily "indicate a historical interest" (136). He continues, "It is important not to confuse an interest in history with historicity" (137). He concludes that the genealogies evince "a historical interest but not relating straightforward history" (151).

In Craig's mind, Genesis 1–11 with its *fantastic* elements is myth and with its genealogical records it is history. He holds that "myth is combined with history" (157) and labels it as "mytho-history." Craig then wrestles with the truthfulness of myth. In his mind, "the language of myth is figurative and therefore need not be taken literally" (198). But there are fundamental truths found in Genesis 1–11, and "such truths do not depend on reading the narratives literalistically" (202).

When Craig approaches the references to Adam in the NT, he appeals to "truth-in-a-story." Craig says that it is essential to determine whether the references to Adam "assert truths or merely truths-in-the-stories-of-Genesis" (207). He says that when Jesus is discussing marriage and refers to Adam and Eve, Jesus is "not asserting its historicity" (221). In other words, Jesus is not confirming that it is true in history, but that it is true-in-the-story. Craig holds that Paul on the other hand, does "assert a historical Adam (224ff, 241f), but the result of Adam's sin was only spiritual death and not physical death (235). Adam and Eve were mortal and required the tree of life to be rejuvenated (236).

In Part 3 Craig seeks to determine when Adam lived. He turns to "modern science" because of "the mythical nature of the primaeval history of Gen 1–11" (245). Craig accepts the evolutionary process without question. Within the evolutionary framework, he details various pre-human ancestors. He wrestles with determining what it is to be human. He concludes, "Human beings, in the full sense of organisms anatomically similar to ourselves and capable of abstract thought; deep planning; behavioral, economic, and technological innovativeness; and symbolic behavior, therefore originated on this planet sometime between the Lower and Middle Paleolithic" (264). After a lengthy analysis of

palaeoneurology and archaeology, he concludes that "Adam, then, may be plausibly identified as a member of *Homo heidelbergensis*, living perhaps >750 kya" (336).

In Part 4 Craig asserts that "Adam and Eve emerged from a wider population of hominins" (376). But their "contemporaries were not human and therefore not in the image of God" (376). The change from hominin to human required biological and spiritual changes that were "perhaps divinely caused" (376). The cognitive capacity of the brain was most likely increased and would "equip the organism with the neurological structure to support a rational soul" (377). Out of several thousand hominins, God chose Adam and Eve. They sinned and brought on spiritual death.

Although Craig does hold to a historical Adam and Eve, his position has several serious flaws. First, Craig repeatedly refers to modern science as defining the factual history of human origins. But "science" is a method and not a conclusion. Scientists, not *science*, draw conclusions about the past. Furthermore, the historicity of any event does not have to be confirmed by the scientific method. The scientific method focuses on repeatable events and not historical events.

Second, Craig's view of Genesis 1–11 as mytho-history does not reflect the language or content of the text. The waw-consecutive and other elements show that the author wrote it as historical narrative.

Third, Craig marks any elements in Genesis 1–11 that fall outside of what science can explain as *fantastic*. Other miracles throughout Scripture exist that are far more *fantastic* than those found in Genesis (i.e., resurrection from the dead). With this logic, what is to stop someone from going past Genesis 11 and declaring everything in Scripture as *fantastic*?

Fourth, if an account is true, truth-in-story and truth are equivalent. Craig does not prove that Jesus thought of the creation account as non-literal history when he referred to the foundation of marriage. There are no indicators in the NT that any of the authors saw Genesis as anything other than literal history.

Fifth, Craig's view that Adam's sin brought about only spiritual death does not align with 1 Corinthians 15. Paul clearly refers to physical death with a physical resurrection (1 Cor 15:21). Paul also sees physical death as the "last enemy to be destroyed" (1 Cor 15:26), which is part of Christ's work in redeeming God's creation.

My brief summaries of each part and the rebuttals do not adequately cover the overwhelming amount of detail that Craig delves into regarding ANE myths, palaeoneurology, and ancient archaeology. I was disappointed that Craig so quickly dismisses the effects of the Fall as merely part of the evolutionary process. Concerning the creation/Fall/redemption narrative of Scripture, Craig downplays all three. His book provides an excellent example of what lengths theistic evolutionists will go to accommodate Scripture to modern pseudoscience.

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Smith, Steven D. *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021. 224 pp. + 49 pp. (back matter).

Steven D. Smith is a penetrating legal and moral thinker whose interests in religious liberty, textual interpretation, and secularism make him an able biblical worldview assistant. Smith—like the somewhat similar thinker whom he thanks in his acknowledgments, Stanley Fish—tends to stick to critical analysis and to defer concrete claims. But, again like Fish, Smith's analyses are so sharp, and so cognizant (and respectful) of the claims of Christian theism, that his books are like quasi-Christian commentaries exegeting the signs of the times. While the lenses through which one views the world may be of first importance, Christians must actually get around to viewing the world, not merely staring at and polishing those lenses. Smith is an expert world-viewer.

Smith's *Fiction, Lies, and the Authority of Law* is almost two books in one, both of which are highly interesting for and relevant to Christian thinkers. The book is an exploration of the difficulties attendant to the interpretation of legal documents, and it is a rigorous yet entertaining effort to answer the question posed by the title of the last chapter: "Is Genuine Authority Possible?" It is that question that sets up the book's program.

Smith opens his prologue with a quotation from Hannah Arendt: "Authority has vanished from the modern world. . . . Practically as well as theoretically, we are no longer in a position to know what authority really is."[1] A statement like this immediately raises powerful and important worldview questions: In a materialist universe, what does it even mean for an intangible authority to "be"? If matter and energy are all that exists, then "authority" has no ontological substance; it is simply what lions in press conferences claim to have over weaker animals. "Authority" is window-dressing for "power," nature red in tooth and claw.

As Smith points out, the modern liberal West cannot permit authority to be *real*, something that makes people have to obey "just because" an authority figure expresses a particular desire. Such an authority does not square with the West's "commitment to freedom . . . understood in terms of individual autonomy" (3). People have to obey out of self-regard, or out of some independent judgment about morals (though how real are *those* in a materialist world?). Heirs of the Enlightenment are supposed to Question Authority, as the bumper sticker says. How indeed can a government exist among autonomous agents?

Democratic Western societies have a neat answer to this apparent conundrum, an answer they insist is "self-evident": the American founders' "consent of the governed." Autonomous beings can *choose* to be governed for their own good.

Fictions

But here Smith switches on his relentless, analytical jackhammer, the noise of which resounds throughout his book. He notices, for example, the rather obvious fact that none of us (aside, perhaps

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[1] "What Was Authority?," in *Authority: NOMOS I,* ed. Carl J. Friedrich (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 1:81–82.

from naturalized citizens?) is ever asked to give his or her consent to the powers that be. Even the first generation of citizens to live under the US Constitution did not exactly provide individual consent. Some were Tories! And the rest of us were born into the system. We have not consented to be ruled; we have not signed a "social contract." Does this mean, then, that the US government has no authority over us? The "flags, anthems, uniforms (including police uniforms with badges and judges' robes), stately or majestic architecture, rituals and ceremonies (such as presidential inaugurations and solemn swearing-in ceremonies), and ponderous official language" (16) that lend an "aura of authority" (16) to the US government—are they only so many clever talking points on the lion's teleprompter, meant to convince the wildebeests in the press corps that they are being despoiled for their own good?

Smith has an answer that provides one of the words of his book's title: the origin myth of the US government is a beneficent *fiction*, not unlike a good movie. We suspend disbelief for our own enjoyment; the story does not work if it does not feel real on some level. Political authority in the American legal and political system, and probably in other liberal democracies as well, has a fictional quality. Authority itself is a fiction, perhaps, or at least it is grounded in fictional foundations (xii).

It is when we must leave that level and ask specific questions the fiction cannot answer that its character as a fiction is most clearly revealed. How did Darth Vader not know he had twins? Was Dumbledore gay? Likewise: Did the framers' intent include women's suffrage—or gay marriage? Smith argues: "When we ask what the Constitution means or what some statute means with respect to some contentious question, experience shows that notwithstanding all of our debate and research, we are unlikely to agree. An important reason for this impasse . . . is that we are trying to squeeze factual-type answers out of things that are, at their core, fictions" (27). Smith points out that in fictions, there is no "fact of the matter," no baseline reality to which one might appeal. And this presents a problem for government.

Government

First, government. It turns out in Smith's telling the intent of legislatures is ultimately a fiction, too: how can a body of more than one person have a clear intent? The Supreme Court is ultimately a fiction for the same reason. Smith calls this the "aggregation error."

The textualist tradition of legal interpretation, says Smith, responds to the aggregation error with this argument: "We will not concern ourselves with the motives of the framers of any given law, but only with the final text they produced." But, Smith says, you cannot say this, because when you sever authorial intent from the law, you also sever the authors from it—and with them any reason you might have for regarding their text to hold authority. (Smith's book can be mind-bending, but for the same reason that Pilates is body-bending: good health requires it.) Smith calls this the "separation error."

I am a grateful citizen of these United States, and of course I found myself hoping that Smith would neatly explain in the final chapter why governmental authority is *not* an ultimate fiction and how we may come to the *right* interpretation of any given legal document. But I read the entire book, and no such explanations were forthcoming. Under the sun, at least, authority in liberal democracies is a fiction. That is, true authority may exist in republican/democratic governments (I believe it does, as I

will explain momentarily), but they cannot give an adequate account of this authority on their own "lower-story" terms, to borrow from Francis Schaeffer. Governmental authority can also be expected to falter when projected into ensuing generations. How indeed could we expect fallen, finite framers to form a Constitution that accounts for all future possibilities?

I cannot give a blow-by-blow of Smith's intricately argued and brilliantly written book. I must already cut to the final scene, the one he did not write.

God

I felt as if Smith, whose religious affiliation I do not know (I have reason to believe he is a theist, perhaps a cultural Mormon), wrote a book in which he kept pointing members of modern liberal democracies to their Unknown God. He kept pointing to a God-shaped hole in their logic about authority. Like a Sunday school teacher, he kept raising questions to which the children were supposed to answer, "God!"

God solves the aggregation problem. When God speaks, he speaks with unified intent: though he is three, he is also one. And though the Spirit of the Lord spoke using human agents ("our father David . . . said by the Holy Spirit," Acts 4:25, ESV), there were no contradictions in their respective motives. Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost: he made sure of that.

God solves the separation problem, too, because his Spirit goes with his word. But we suffer from that problem when we try to make his word into a mere object of analysis and not something living and active, not divine speech. As Smith says, "A mode of interpretation that severs the connection between the text and the legal authority that enacted or promulgated that text will in effect deprive that designated legal authority of actual lawmaking authority. It will take away with the left hand what the right hand purported to give" (35).

God also solves the authority problem. And he does so rather neatly: *The powers that be are ordained by God.* There may be a sense in which governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, but that sense is not the ultimate sense. Authority, as theologian John Frame says, is a personal relation. What Smith calls "just because" authority—an intangible something that means I have to do something "just because" an authority figure said it—is precisely what God has over us as his image-bearing creations. And he invests that authority in countless offices in government, the family, education, the church, and other creational spheres. Also: God's authority is not a fiction, and he can write authoritative texts that can account for all future possibilities.

God also solves the common problem of authority turning into authoritarianism—because he is love. Our Authority became man and laid down his life for those whom he would make his friends. Christians can know what authority really is, and we can know that Authority really *is.*

Conclusion

It is bad book-review practice to write out the ideas the author did not. So let me close by mentioning again what Smith did say, what he did do.

I have long felt that there were ties between the hermeneutical debates over the interpretation of laws—debates into which Antonin Scalia famously waded—and debates over the proper methods for interpreting Scripture. Smith, a legal scholar, helped me immensely by drawing out these connections at key points.

He also helped me by explaining how and why debates over the present meaning and application of the US Constitution are so intractable. We are asking a human document to be divine.

No: I come away from Smith's book certain again that we need a divine document in order to be truly human.

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