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“My People Are Destroyed for Lack of Knowledge”: Spiritual Ignorance and the Voice of the Prophets

Kristopher Endean¹

In Matthew 28:20, Jesus commanded his disciples to teach future disciples to obey everything he commanded them. This aspect of the Great Commission has profound implications for the Lord’s people: every Christian is obligated to know and obey everything that Christ has commanded.² Spiritual growth is a process, however; new believers do not immediately know every command. In this life, believers are always in a state of partial ignorance. Even in their glorified state, humans will never be omniscient. Inevitably, unglorified believers will transgress God’s desired will—at times simply because they are unaware of his expectations. How, then, does God respond to the spiritual ignorance of his people, especially when transgressions may have been averted by a more thorough investigation of his revelation?³

Sin, Ignorance, and Culpability

This article assumes that culpability for divine judgment can be assigned only to what Scripture defines as “sin.” In other words, God is not a capricious deity and does not punish people for things that are morally right. Therefore, it is essential to define “sin” carefully.⁴ Scripture should govern both the framework of the discussion and the nuances of any terms employed. No single definition can encompass every aspect of impurity, transgression, rebellion, straying, failing, iniquity, and unbelief in

¹ Kristopher Endean is the department head of Bible and Christian Service at International Baptist College and Seminary in Chandler, AZ. This article is adapted from a chapter of his PhD dissertation, “The Call to Leave Simplicity: A Biblical Theology of Culpable Spiritual Ignorance among the People of God” (Bob Jones University, 2020).

² John 14:25–26 makes it clear that the Holy Spirit continued the teaching ministry of Christ in and through the lives of the apostles (cf. Acts 1:1, “all that Jesus *began* to do and teach”). Jesus’ ministry of relating truth from the Father continued through the Holy Spirit after his ascension (John 16:12–15). The entire NT, therefore, as the product of the Spirit’s ministry through the apostles, can be said to encompass the “commands” of Christ. Moreover, since the same Father, Son, and Spirit were involved in the giving of the OT, the whole of Scripture is rightly considered the revelation that believers are accountable to know and obey.

³ Ethicists, philosophers, and legal theorists have often debated the extent of one’s blameworthiness for moral wrongs committed in a state of ignorance. Students (and critics) of theological systems have explored the significance of culpable ignorance in Wesleyan or Oberlin Perfectionism or in Roman Catholicism’s distinction between mortal and venial sins. Focused interaction with these theories or systems is beyond the scope of this article.

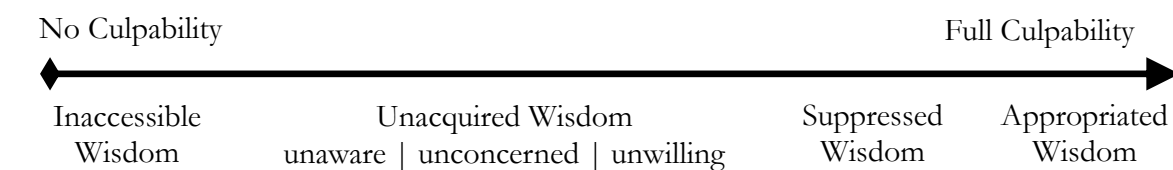
⁴ J. C. Ryle warns, “It may be laid down as a rule, with tolerable confidence, that the absence of accurate definitions is the very life of religious controversy. If men would only define with precision the theological terms which they use, many disputes would die. Scores of excited disputants would discover that they do not really differ, and that their disputes have arisen from their own neglect of the great duty of explaining the meaning of words.” *Knots Untied: Being Plain Statements on Disputed Points in Religion from the Standpoint of an Evangelical Churchman* (London: National Protestant Church Union, 1898), 1.

Scripture. In general, however, “sin” in this article will describe any deviation from God’s revealed will in action, word, thought, or disposition.⁵

Further, it is important to distinguish between wrongness and blameworthiness. This article contends that a violation of God’s revealed will is always *wrong*, but the question at stake is whether the believer is *culpable* if the violation was unintentional due to ignorance.⁶ Although theological systems provide helpful constructs for discussion and identify key lynchpins in biblical thinking, they rarely address the question of how God *feels* (in a relational way) and *reacts* to transgressions of ignorance among his people.

The kind of ignorance that lies behind errors of judgment can be due to a variety of factors. The wisdom necessary to make the best decision may be inaccessible (one cannot know), may be unacquired (one could know, but does not), or may be suppressed (one does know, but does not want to admit it). The degree of culpability increases as one moves along this continuum from what he *cannot* know to what he *does not* know to what he *will not* know.⁷ Someone who sins in spite of full, applied knowledge would incur the greatest culpability (see Figure 1). Yet unacquired wisdom must also be subdivided; there are various reasons why an individual might not appropriate the wisdom that he theoretically could gain. Some are unaware that they need to seek wisdom because they deem their current answer to be acceptable (the issue of misinformation). Others do not pursue wisdom because they deem it to be unimportant at that time or in that arena; therefore, they are unconcerned with their current ignorance (the issue of prioritization). In fact, the very nature of ignorance, “either consciously or unconsciously, judges what is or is not worth knowing and acts accordingly.”⁸ Others are aware that they are deficient in some area of wisdom but are unwilling to put forth the effort to acquire it due to the inconvenience of the learning process or due to the perceived implications of the truth (the issue of motivation). This article focuses on the category of unacquired wisdom.

Figure 1. Degrees of Culpability for Various Causes of Ignorance⁹



⁵ In other words, a right act done for the wrong reason is “sin,” as is a wrong act done for the right reason. “Transgression” in this article denotes a departure from a stated law, regardless of one’s intent. Other terms such as “iniquity” or “wickedness” describe one’s disposition more than one’s act.

⁶ The level of culpability hangs, in part, upon the extent to which the “ignorance” itself was intentional.

⁷ “Will not” here describes volition, not a temporal future. This is the stance of the child who looks groggily at her father at 10:00 p.m. and asserts, “I will not go to sleep.”

⁸ Paul Rauschenbusch, “The Sin of Ignorance,” Day1, aired February 20, 2011; transcription accessed December 26, 2019, https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002c94/the_sin_of_ignorance.

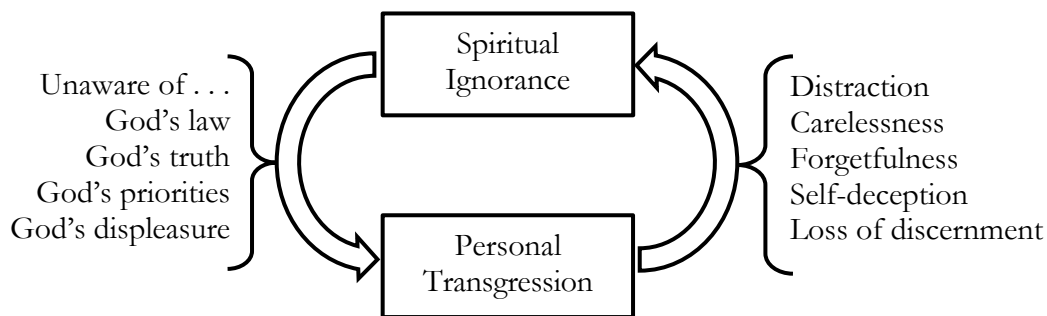
⁹ To define precisely whether “inaccessible wisdom” belongs at the punctiliar beginning of this line (absolutely no culpability) or somewhere along the continuum is outside the purview of this article. This requires an answer to the question “Does culpability require ability?,” which has been addressed at length in Augustinian-Pelagian debates about depravity and the correlation between human ability and human responsibility for sin.

Throughout the history of the world, God has chosen to relay his word through mediators, especially the *prophets*. Inasmuch as prophets withhold, twist, or counterfeit divine revelation, spiritual ignorance will persist and escalate. Inasmuch as prophets declare God's word by announcing, warning, and exhorting their fellow men, spiritual understanding will grow. True prophets, therefore, serve as one of God's great antidotes to spiritual ignorance. Individuals may still reject the light of the truth, but not in ignorance of God's will and ways.

Compounding of Ignorance and Sin

Ignorance and sin are often difficult to distinguish starkly in practice since they can be closely related and mutually reinforcing. Transgression and ignorance each function as both cause and effect. On the one hand, people at times transgress because they do not know the law. On the other hand, people who disregard known laws may lose the opportunity for further clarification or understanding, forget what they previously knew, or otherwise miss out on instruction.¹⁰ Multiple internal and external factors, ranging from self-distraction to self-deception or from diversion to deceit, can contribute to the compounding of ignorance and sin.¹¹ Figure 2 visualizes the cyclical nature of personal transgression and spiritual ignorance, as acts of sin contribute to a personal environment that exacerbates spiritual ignorance leading to further sin.

Figure 2. Compounding of Ignorance and Transgression



God, through his prophets, confronts both sin and ignorance to interrupt this cycle and to establish or restore his people in knowledge and obedience. In particular, he confronts ignorance due to a culture of distraction, personal rebellion, divine judgment, or appointing only affirming advisors.¹²

¹⁰ For example, if a student fails to listen during a foundational lecture, the professor may need to take an extra class period to review this material instead of progressing on to profitable applications that would better equip the student to excel in his professional field.

¹¹ Brian Hand observes, "Knowledge tells us ahead of time where we're likely to find traps of sin, what they look like, and how to avoid them. God's Word shines a light into the recesses of our hearts to reveal what's already going on inside of us. Our natural tendency toward self-justification resists such exposure; so unless we're committed to a sustained campaign against sin, we will treat our sin far too lightly and will fail to expose its hold on our hearts." *Web of Iniquity: The Entangling of Sins* (Greenville, SC: JourneyForth Academic, 2016), 52.

¹² The tone of this article will not be dispassioned, because the biblical texts under consideration exude emotion. It would be a mistake to attribute the reactions in the text to the passions of human prophets alone, because in almost

Ignorance Due to Distraction

One significant enemy of spiritual understanding is a culture of distraction. Isaiah indicts those who (from “early in the morning” until “late in the evening”) intentionally impair their understanding with alcohol, who fill their discretionary time with music and parties, and who have no time to consider the things of the Lord (5:11–12). Such failure to turn one’s attention toward (נִבְט, *hiphil*) the acts of God is called absence of knowledge (מִבְּלִי־דַעַת,¹³ v. 13), and God attributes Israel’s deportation to this spiritual ignorance.¹⁴ If the people had stopped to consider their true condition before God, the outcome may have been different. They exchanged spiritual understanding for a lifestyle of amusement and—both subsequently and consequently (“therefore,” לָכֵן)—the pain of exile. Distraction led to destruction.¹⁵

Hosea extends this indictment, explicitly citing alcohol usage and sexual sins as undermining understanding: “they have forsaken the LORD to cherish whoredom, wine, and new wine,¹⁶ which take away the understanding” (4:10–11).¹⁷ Israel’s rampant wickedness (v. 2) evidenced that there was “no knowledge of God in the land” (v. 1). Errant spiritual leadership was largely to blame (vv. 4–6),¹⁸ but clergy and laity alike were to face God’s judgment (v. 9). God says, in reference to men and women engaging in fornication, adultery, and prostitution, “A people without understanding shall come to ruin” (v. 14). The horror of the extent of the sin described in Hosea is that the perpetrators were

every passage cited, the words were dictated from the mouth of Yahweh. This is not just the voice of the prophets; this is the heart of God!

¹³ Delitzsch argues that the prefix מִן is not a causal particle but a component of the compound preposition מִבְּלִי, meaning “without” (essentially a double-negative: מִן plus בְּלִי). Thus, Israel’s deportation comes upon her “unawares.” God’s people were ignorant, specifically, of God’s wrath. They became secure in their revelry and blind to their peril because they did not recognize the impending judgment of God upon them for their wickedness. *The Prophecies of Isaiah*, trans. James Martin, in Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (1866–91; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 7:111. The causal connection between spiritual misperception and physical exile inheres primarily in the conjunction לָכֵן.

¹⁴ The problem was not merely that they did not consider the facts of God’s works; they were unable to recognize God’s hand in history or to ascertain the significance of what God was already doing (cf. v. 19). “They lacked spiritual perception.” Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007), 174. Ascertaining the significance of information requires more time, effort, and attention than acquiring facts alone.

¹⁵ Isaiah “does not oppose them [these pleasures] because they are wrong in themselves, but because they have become all-absorbing to the point where spiritual sensitivity has become dimmed. . . . When the passion for pleasure has become uppermost in a person’s life, passion for God and his truth and his ways is squeezed out.” John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 160.

¹⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*. Much of the prophetic literature, including this verse, is written in poetic form. Within this article, poetic lines and line breaks are not utilized when verses are quoted in general text, but passages in block quotations are formatted with line breaks as they appear in the ESV.

¹⁷ God mocks the extent of their consequent foolishness by observing that they ask sticks for instructions instead of the living God (v. 12).

¹⁸ David A. Hubbard calls this “a fierce failure.” Indeed, “the collapse of the priest and prophet, key ministers of law and word, leads inevitably to the disastrous destruction.” *Hosea: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 110. The passage highlights “the pitiable folly of the ill-instructed laity” due to the failures of their leaders. Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 118.

God's own chosen people, to whom belonged the patriarchs and the Law and the prophets (2 Kgs 17:13; Neh 9:26; Rom 9:4)!¹⁹

The prophets have many words from God expressing his reaction to his people when they failed to remember his word in the way he commanded. The root זָכַר (“remember”) occurs ninety-two times in Isaiah through Malachi, and שָׁכַח (“forget”) appears thirty-four times. Toward the beginning of the prophetic corpus, Isaiah warns that because Israel had “forgotten [שָׁכַח] the God of [her] salvation and [had] not remembered [זָכַר] the Rock of [her] refuge, . . . the harvest [would] flee away in a day of grief and incurable pain” (Isa 17:10–11).

Immediately before plunging his people into 400 years of revelatory silence, God gives a command (Mal 4:4) and a promissory warning (vv. 5–6). In light of the coming vindication of the righteous and the judgment of the wicked on the Day of the Lord, God exhorts, “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel” (v. 4). For Israel, to forget God's commands (either volitionally or intellectually) was to invite utter destruction. Spiritual sloth is spiritual suicide.

Ignorance in Rebellion

The Israelites' trajectory of rebellion impeded the possibility of repentance (“their deeds do not permit them to return to their God,” Hos 5:4), because their hearts and minds were oriented away from Yahweh (“the spirit of whoredom is within them, and they know not the LORD”). God himself determined to withdraw from them even when they sought for him (v. 6). God reserves the right to make spiritual knowledge harder to acquire for those who have rejected him.

Knowledge of God's omniscience should have acted as a deterrent against iniquity (7:2),²⁰ but the Israelites paid attention only to the affirmation of men (v. 3). The people became oblivious to the progression of their own demise (v. 9), and their pride blinded them to the need to return to God, despite God's judgment (v. 10). Shockingly, these people claimed before God himself, “My God, we—Israel—know you” (8:2)! But lip service did not make it so. Moreover, worship was no substitute for true knowledge of God (6:6). God refused to accept their sacrifices (8:13) because “Israel [had] forgotten his Maker”; the Israelites invested in urban development and military defense rather than in pure devotion (v. 14).

¹⁹ Paul observes that not all ethnic Israelites are truly, spiritually God's people (Rom 9:6). God does, however, repeatedly describe the wayward nation as “my people.” (עַמִּי appears 125 times in Isaiah through Zechariah.) It is also apparent that true believers can succumb to gross sins, though in such cases, God's chastisement and the ultimate repentance of the backslidden individual are indicative of a true relationship with God (Heb 12:6–7). Therefore, in principle, God's responses to the sins of the Israelite nation as a whole can be illustrative of his potential responses to wayward churches and believers—not because the church and Israel are coextensive, but because they are the people of God in distinct but significantly overlapping ways.

²⁰ Literally, “They do not say to their heart [that] all their evil I remember.” David A. Hubbard writes, “They behaved as though God no longer held them accountable for their conduct. Being masters of deceit (6:7; 7:1), they had no difficulty deceiving themselves.” *Hosea*, 141.

More revelation—even more clarification of God’s expectations—was not the solution, however, since the people would have dismissed God’s regulations, no matter how detailed he made them (8:12).²¹ Hosea’s appeal was for genuine repentance after divine chastisement (Hos 6:1–3):

Come, let us return to the LORD;
 for he has torn us, that he may heal us;
 he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.
 After two days he will revive us;
 on the third day he will raise us up,
 that we may live before him.
 Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD.

God’s chastisement included both verbal and physical means. God cut them down (חצב) by the prophets and killed them (הרג) with his words (6:5).²² The prophets “continually assail[ed] the people with their guilt” (v. 5),²³ but when they continued to disregard God (v. 7), God condemned the nation to exile (cf. v. 11).

Ignorance by Judgment

Ignorance may also be God’s means of judgment for earlier rejection. God, through Amos, warned Israel of coming judgment that would include “a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD” (Amos 8:11; cf. Deut 8:3).²⁴ Shalom M. Paul writes,

²¹ Charles Simeon observes that estrangement from truth can manifest itself when God’s laws are “neglected as unimportant” or “ridiculed as absurd.” Regarding the former, he writes, “One would imagine that the book which reveals these great truths should be universally sought after with insatiable avidity; and be studied day and night, in order to the obtaining of a perfect knowledge of its contents. But how is this book treated? . . . There is no other book so generally slighted as the inspired volume; not a novel or a newspaper but is preferred before it; so little is the excellence of its mysteries contemplated, and so little the importance of its truths considered.” *Horae Homileticae: Hosea to Malachi* (London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1832), 106. Garrett warns, “Beware of how easy it is to substitute culture and prevalent opinions for true Christianity. It is possible to regard true examples of Christian spirituality as alien.” *Hosea, Joel*, 187.

²² If “judgment” in v. 5 refers to God’s physical chastisement of his people, then the full realization of the prophets’ message was still future. On this basis, the NET Bible identifies these past-tense verbs as “examples of the so-called ‘prophetic perfect’”; thus, “the prophets are pictured as the executioners of Israel and Judah because they announced their imminent destruction. The prophetic word was endowed with the power of fulfillment” (Hos 6:5n11, 12). If, however, “judgment” refers to God’s declaration of their guilt, then the “slaying” ministry of the prophets was a full and present reality through the message of men like Hosea. Garrett, 161.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Lack of direction from leaders in general can also be indicative of God’s judgment among those who are not among the people of God, as seen in Nahum 3:17–18: “Your princes are like grasshoppers, your scribes like clouds of locusts settling on the fences in a day of cold—when the sun rises, they fly away; no one knows where they are. Your shepherds are asleep, O king of Assyria; your nobles slumber. Your people are scattered on the mountains with none to gather them.” How much more dire, however, “is no word from the Lord, an ominous and foreboding silence!” Billy K. Smith and Franklin S. Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 151.

The inaccessibility of God, that is, the absence of prophecy depriving man of the divine word, is regarded throughout the Bible as a dire portent of God's wrath (compare 1 Sam 14:37; 28:6, 15–16). It is often threatened by the prophets, for example, Jer 18:18; Ezek 7:26; Mic 3:6–7; and actually materialized in Lam 2:9 (see Ps 74:9).²⁵

Isaiah bemoaned the witlessness of the people when he chided (29:9–10),

Astonish yourselves and be astonished;
 blind yourselves and be blind!
 Be drunk, but not with wine;
 stagger, but not with strong drink!
 For the LORD has poured out upon you
 a spirit of deep sleep,
 and has closed your eyes (the prophets),
 and covered your heads (the seers).

Isaiah warned that God's word would be beyond the reach of the illiterate, for they cannot read (v. 12), yet it would be inaccessible even to the literate (v. 11) due to their spiritual obtuseness.²⁶ The underlying problem was not what these people claimed about their relationship with God; the issue was their heart stance toward God (v. 13). "Determined spiritual insensitivity becomes judicial spiritual deprivation."²⁷

God declared that he would withhold special revelation, not only in general, but even from those frantically trying to obtain a word from God (Amos 8:12; Hos 5:6; cf. 1 Sam 14:37). An idolater who seeks to obtain a word from Yahweh through a prophet has no right to expect that the answer that he receives will be correct. God says, "If the prophet is deceived and speaks a word, I, the LORD, have deceived that prophet" (Ezek 14:9).²⁸ This scenario is illustrated in 1 Kings 22. When idolatrous Ahab sought a word from Yahweh for an upcoming military campaign, Ahab's prophets unanimous prophesied victory. Micaiah alone dissented, and Micaiah explains, "The LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets" (v. 22). Such deception is indicative of God's severe displeasure. In Ahab's case, "the LORD [had] declared disaster" against him (v. 22). Lying prophets confirm sinners in their impending judgment, as Jeremiah observed when he complained, "Ah, Lord

²⁵ *Amos*, Hermeneia, ed. Frank Moore Cross (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 265.

²⁶ Oswalt notes that these people "have the technical skills to understand God's word, but they lack the spiritual insight which would enable them to see the plain meaning." *Isaiah 1–39*, 532.

²⁷ J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 215. Motyer writes of verse 9, "If we are indecisive spiritually we condemn ourselves to bewilderment." Ibid.

²⁸ John B. Taylor summarizes the interaction of culpable prophets as a secondary cause and God as the ultimate cause: "On the face of it, the lying prophets were . . . prophesying 'out of their own minds'. But in the deepest sense, it was the Lord who was responsible. . . . They had succumbed to spiritual blindness and so the lies they uttered were all part of God's judgment upon them." *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1969), 128. See also Lamar Eugene Cooper, *Ezekiel*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 160–61.

GOD, surely you have utterly deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying, ‘It shall be well with you,’ whereas the sword has reached their very life” (Jer 4:10).²⁹

A lying prophet will still bear culpability in the situation, for God, through Ezekiel, explains that “the punishment of the prophet and the punishment of the inquirer shall be alike” (Ezek 14:10, cf. v. 9b). God’s ultimate motive, even when he confirms his people in ignorance for a time, is restorative. He told Ezekiel, “They shall bear their punishment . . . [so] that (למען) the house of Israel may no more go astray from me, nor defile themselves anymore with all their transgressions, but that they may be my people and I may be their God, declares the Lord GOD” (vv. 10–11).

Ignorance by Invitation

More often than not, when God’s people choose a sinful path, they surround themselves with counselors who will affirm them in their deviation. Spiritual blindness is self-perpetuating. Isaiah explains that Israel, in her unwillingness to accept the truth, pressured prophets to change their message to fit with the spirit of the times (30:9–11):

For they are a rebellious people,
 lying children,
 children unwilling to hear
 the instruction of the LORD;
 who say to the seers, “Do not see,”
 and to the prophets, “Do not prophesy to us what is right;
 speak to us smooth things,
 prophesy illusions,
 leave the way, turn aside from the path,
 let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.”

Micah mocks those who preach against preaching the truth (Mi 2:6) when he writes, “If a man should go about and utter wind and lies, saying, ‘I will preach to you of wine and strong drink,’ he would be the preacher for this people!” (v. 11). Willful self-deception is ultimately futile (Jer 7:8). God

²⁹ God expressly exonerates himself from the preponderance of prophetic deception, however, when he says through Jeremiah, “Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, “It shall be well with you”; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, “No disaster shall come upon you.” For who among them has stood in the council of the LORD to see and to hear his word, or who has paid attention to his word and listened?’” (23:16–18). God’s hiding his word by permitting or promoting deception from the mouth of professional prophets says far more about the persistent promiscuity of the people than it does about God’s truthfulness. These passages do not present God’s role as merely tolerative; he plays an active role in promoting the deception. It is not unjust for him to do so, however, since the people have persisted in rebellion and since he will not hide himself from those who genuinely seek him in humility and repentance. Even when Jeremiah “protests the propriety of God allowing his people to persist in their delusions during such a crisis,” he “notes that God had not left himself without a witness.” R. K. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), 74.

declares, “An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so” (5:30–31a). Then he asks, “but what will you do when the end comes?” (5:31b).

Deceived by a Prophet of God

Not all defective instruction is invited by the people, however. Sometimes, deviant doctrine is foisted upon people by spiritual leaders who, by their falsehood, propagate spiritual ignorance and promote attendant transgressions. Within any environment pervaded by spiritual ignorance, identifying truth amidst a cacophony of error is essential. The fundamental benchmark by which all assertions are to be judged is the previous revelation of God. Anything that does not accord with what God has already revealed cannot be from the Lord.

God demanded through Moses that any prophet be put to death who spoke on the authority of any god but Yahweh or who feigned a message from Yahweh (Deut 18:20). The challenge, of course, was to identify whether a message was truly from Yahweh or not. Anyone who “taught rebellion against the LORD” (13:5) by suggesting that they “go after other gods” (v. 2) was to be killed (v. 5). God predicted, however, that some prophets and dreamers would succeed in giving apparently miraculous signs to validate their doctrine (vv. 1–2); yet even in such an instance, the true test was whether the teaching conformed to the commands of God (v. 4). God expressly allows counterfeit prophets to do counterfeit miracles to test the devotion of his people (vv. 3).³⁰ The validation of future revelation against prior revelation requires, of course, an understanding of prior revelation. Someone who does not already know God’s commands and who is unwilling to cross-check new teaching against former revelation may be unable to identify deviations from the truth.³¹

The fallibility of human leaders throughout Israel’s history highlights the importance of specific revelation from God through his prophets. One of the most striking vignettes in the book of Kings involves a prophet (“a man of God,” 1 Kgs 13:1) from Judah. He traveled to Bethel in the Northern Kingdom for the sole purpose of decrying Jeroboam’s idolatry and predicting the desecration of the illicit altar by a descendant of David named Josiah. No less than four times in these first five verses this prophecy is attributed directly to the speech of Yahweh (vv. 2 [2x], 3, 5), with an additional reference to “the word of the LORD” describing the commissioning of the prophet himself. After a brief altercation, Jeroboam offered the prophet lodging and a reward, but the prophet refused the overtures of this wicked king, specifically citing “the word of the LORD” to him: “You shall neither eat bread nor drink water nor return by the way that you came” (vv. 8–9). The prophet stood firm against lucrative allure and departed in obedience to God’s command (v. 10).

³⁰ Eugene H. Merrill qualifies, “The fact that the false prophet fulfilled a God-ordained function did not deliver him from personal responsibility, however.” *Deuteronomy*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 231.

³¹ In reference to Micah 2:11, Bruce K. Waltke writes, “The profiteers do not bother to verify the authenticity of so-called prophets, for they are not the least surprised or offended by preachers who share their cupidity and venality.” Donald J. Wiseman, T. Desmond Alexander, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 175.

An aged prophet from that district hurried after him (vv. 11–14). Again, the man of God refused to return, citing for the second time “the word of the LORD” (v. 17). The aged prophet, however, pulled rank and introduced a contradictory “word of the LORD,” which he falsely attributed to an angelic messenger (v. 18).³²

The young man of God was persuaded by the aged prophet and violated the divine terms of his commission (v. 19). During their subsequent meal together, God did indeed give “a word” to the aged prophet, who decried the young man of God because he had “disobeyed the word of the LORD and [had] not kept the command that the LORD [his] God commanded [him]” (v. 21). God declared that the man of God would die on the way home, and a lion killed him on the way (vv. 22–25). God conspicuously fulfilled “the word that the LORD spoke” against “the man of God who disobeyed the word of the LORD” (v. 26). This entire scenario underscored the inviolable nature of “the word of the LORD,” including the absolute certainty of the uprooting of Jeroboam’s idolatrous system (v. 32).

God’s concern for the integrity of his words is striking.³³ To disregard his word as unimportant, no longer relevant, or negotiable is foolish. The prophet initially obeyed God’s word, but he turned aside when another prophet falsely claimed to provide new, contradictory revelation.³⁴ The younger prophet was held accountable for what he already knew and killed for his disobedience. To be dissuaded from the truth is perilous indeed. As Walter Gross writes,

When the man of God allows himself to be deceived, it is no longer important if he acts in good faith or not. It is of no importance whether he believed YHWH had rescinded his original prohibition. Decisive alone is that the man of God overstepped YHWH’s command. For that he must be punished. YHWH’s word may not be ignored, least of all by a man of God.³⁵

The aged prophet was, in part, culpable for the young man’s demise. He misused his office. This passage is explicitly clear, however, that the young prophet ought to have known better. Even God’s

³² God was not at fault. It was “the exegete who went astray.” Walter Gross, “Lying Prophet and Disobedient Man of God in 1 Kings 13: Role Analysis as an Instrument of Theological Interpretation of an OT Narrative Text,” ed. Robert C. Culley, *Semeia* 15 (1979): 109.

³³ Regarding God’s jealousy for the integrity of his words, see Layton Talbert, *The Trustworthiness of God’s Words: Why the Reliability of Every Word from God Matters* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2022).

³⁴ Paul explicitly warns against accepting even apostolic or angelic testimony in contradiction to the prior revelation of God (Gal 1:8; cf. 1 Cor 14:32).

³⁵ “Lying Prophet,” 123–124. Gross further warns against seeking to assign motives to characters in this text: “The text remains impenetrable when it comes to the motivation of characters. It can, therefore, only lead to error if exegetes try to gain sense from the text by positing hypothetical intentions for the actors. If intentions of this sort were of decisive importance in 1 Kings 13, the text would provide them or give explicit references. If one argues from hypothetical motivations without mastering the structure of the text, the interpretation dissolves into speculation. At the most decisive point, actions diverge from the characters’ intentions. At this point the continuation of the action does not take the slightest account of intentions.” *Ibid.*, 122. In other words, the focus of the text is on each character’s response to the word of the LORD, regardless of any underlying motivation. “YHWH does punish him but not in spite of his innocence. The text does not present a primitive image of God nor the image of an enigmatic God (see §3.3). Rather, the text simply pays no attention to the subjective level at which the innocence of the man of God would come into play.” *Ibid.*, 124.

prophets are not immune from transgressions of culpable ignorance if they neglect the word of the LORD with which they are entrusted. God has strong indictments for such leaders.

Indictment of Israel's Leadership

Spiritual ignorance became rampant among God's people due largely to the disobedience of the prophets and priests. It was as if the prophets had conspired against the people (Ezek 22:25). The prophets oppressed the people (v. 25), the priests deluded the people (v. 26), the princes abused the people (v. 27), and the people persisted in their sin (v. 29); yet all the while the prophets purported that everything was okay between them and God (v. 28). God was not pleased; in fact, he was indignant and wrathful (v. 31). He sought someone to mediate on behalf of the wayward people, but he found no one (v. 30). Therefore, God gave all of them what their ways deserved (v. 31).

Isaiah describes Israel's watchmen as "blind," "all without knowledge," and "shepherds who have no understanding" (Isa 56:10–11). He compares them to mute watchdogs incapable of barking to warn of danger, slothful sleepers who merely dream, and pragmatic egotists who invent whatever promises the most profit.³⁶

Indictment against the Priests

God singled out the priests for special indictment (Hos 4:4–9). Despite God's contention with the spiritual anarchy of his people in general (vv. 1–3), God said through Hosea (4:4–6),

Yet let no one contend,
and let none accuse,
for [your people are as priest-accusers].³⁷
You shall stumble by day;
the prophet also shall stumble with you by night;
and I will destroy your mother.³⁸

³⁶ Sadly, one outcome of such leadership is that people do not understand that when righteous, devout men are removed, it is not an indictment upon the upright; instead, it is God's reward to remove the upright before he brings calamity on the wicked (Isa 57:1).

³⁷ For line 3 of verse 4, the ESV reads, "for with you is my contention, O priest" (cf. CSB and NET), following an emendation of וְעִמָּךְ כְּמִרְיָי כֹהֵן. The emendation is supported by Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea*, trans. Gary Stansell, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 70; Douglas Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 70, 72; and J. Andrew Dearman, *Hosea*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 155, 157. The issue, however, as Garrett observes, "is that although the significance of the verse is debatable, the Hebrew itself is quite clear. The LXX and Vulgate do not support emendation." *Hosea, Joel*, 116. Garrett quips in conclusion, "This [emendation] would be helpful if it had any supporting evidence." Ibid., 116n28. Taking the text as it stands, God is demonstrating that, although he had a "controversy with the inhabitants of the land" (v. 1), their very state bore testimony against the priesthood. No one can argue the point, and indeed no one need try, for the people themselves are evidence enough to incriminate the leadership (v. 4).

³⁸ This line (וְדָמִיתִי אֶמְךָ), too, has suggested emendations. The net translates this line, "You have destroyed your own people!" (וְדָמִיתִי עַמְךָ), since the "2nd person masculine singular form וְדָמִית . . . is preserved in several medieval Hebrew MSS and reflected in Jerome's Vulgate" (Hos 4:5n10). This suggested reading parallels nicely with the final line of verse 4 ("because your [own] people are the priest-accusers" and "you have destroyed your [own] people") and strengthens the

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge;
 because you have rejected knowledge,
 I reject you from being a priest to me.
 And since you have forgotten the law of your God,
 I also will forget your children.

Instead of decrying the sinful ways of the nation, these leaders reveled in the people's sin (Hos 4:8).³⁹ Because the priests propelled and perpetuated the moral degradation of God's people instead of inhibiting their depravity (v. 7), God declared that the priests would stumble even in the daytime and would fall at night, together with the prophets (v. 5). This picturesque imagery portrays the spiritual stupefaction of such leaders as antecedent to the corporal punishment upon God's people. The priests "rejected knowledge,"⁴⁰ and God's people were "destroyed for lack of knowledge" (v. 6).⁴¹ The priests had "rejected knowledge,"⁴² so God rejected them; the priests had "forgotten the law of

directness of the divine indictment. Douglas Stuart posits that these two words belong instead to the following line, reading, "You will push in terror when [my people are destroyed]." *Hosea-Jonah*, 70, 72. In support of the WLC pointing are the ESV, CSB, KJV, NASB, and NIV) along with Wolff, *Hosea*, 70, and Dearman, *Hosea*, 158n11. The parallelism and progression are significant in the three-fold divine judgment: "I will destroy your mother" (v. 5), "I will reject you" (v. 6a), and "I will forget your children" (v. 6b).

³⁹ If **הַטָּאָה** refers to the sin offering, rather than to sinful acts themselves, then the first line of the couplet identifies a utilitarian motive behind the priests' reveling: more sin means more sacrifices, and more sacrifices mean more economic prosperity for the priests. For those whose livelihood is built on the failings of others, a godless heart can revel in continued failure. Beyond mere economic gain, however, it is tempting to vicariously enjoy the unfolding or rehearsing of sin, even (or especially) sins which one would be unwilling to commit himself in most circumstances. This is certainly the case for audiences of most of what the secular entertainment industry produces, who "give approval to those who practice" all kinds of sin (Rom 1:32). Through a subtle shift of the flesh, however, even spiritual leaders who regularly counsel with others about their sin problems can inordinately meditate on and fantasize about the moral failures of others while hypocritically preserving the moral high ground for themselves because they have never actively engaged in that particular sin. Jesus confronted this attitude in the Sermon on the Mount by focusing on the internal expectations of God's moral law, in addition to the external manifestations of a wicked heart (Matt 5:27ff).

⁴⁰ The second-person masculine singular pronominal suffixes have been interpreted as referring to the nation as a whole in its priestly role between God and the nations. See Keil, *Hosea*, trans. James Martin, in *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10:52. That the priests (or the priesthood: **כֹּהֵן**, v. 4; **כֹּהֵן**, v. 6; **כֹּהֵן**, v. 9) are in view is apparent, however, by the interposition of "priest" and "people" as distinct entities in verse 9.

⁴¹ Keil, unlike Delitzsch (see footnote 13 above), does not seek to divest **מִן** of causative import in the phrase **מִבְּלִי הִדְעַת**. Ibid., 52. The practical difference, however, is insignificant between "my people are destroyed *because* they do not know something" and "my people are destroyed and they do not know it." Both ways of rendering the Hebrew clause indicate that spiritual ignorance enervated by spiritual leadership contributed to the destruction of the people, either by withholding truth or by withholding warning. The people were kept in the dark about either God's requirements or God's perspective. As other passages corroborate, the people were, in reality, ignorant of both.

⁴² "Knowledge" in Hosea, remarks Stuart, "involves a constant awareness of and obedience to the covenant relationship." *Hosea-Jonah*, 78.

[their] God,”⁴³ so God would “forget [their] children” (v. 6).⁴⁴ The synonymous parallelism between “You have rejected the knowledge [of God]” and “You have forgotten the law of your God” demonstrates that the knowledge of God and the instruction (*torah*) of God are directly related.⁴⁵ To forget *torah* is to reject *the* knowledge—the only knowledge that really matters—that is, knowing God himself. Leaders would not be exempt from judgment when God punished his wayward people (v. 9). In fact, they were to bear the brunt of God’s vengeance.

In the Israelite economy, God provided regular memorial days to prompt remembrance. Regarding the Sabbath Day, in particular, God mandated that his people “remember” (i.e., observe and consider) it in order to “keep it holy” (i.e., guard it as a special day; Exod 20:8). The sacredness of the day and the realization of its intended purpose required active attention. That day served as an aid for Israelites to recall God’s creation of all things in six days (v. 11) and their unique relationship with Yahweh, who set them apart to himself (Ezek 20:12). The people of Israel, however, failed to honor this day; instead they “greatly profaned” God’s holy days (v. 13).

God placed a significant weight of responsibility for such neglect on the shoulders of spiritual leadership. Although God commanded the sons of Aaron “to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, and . . . to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them by Moses” (Lev 10:10–11), Ezekiel says (22:26),

Her priests have done violence to my law and have profaned my holy things. They have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.

These priests failed to declare (לֹא הוֹדִיעוּ, hiphil of יָדַע; “they have not caused to be known”) and, indeed, hid away (הֶעֱלִימוּ, hiphil of עָלַם; “they have caused to be secret” or “have concealed”) the LORD’s instruction for his people. God’s reputation was debased in this case, not because the priests blatantly denied God’s word but because they “distorted the line”; they turned into gray areas what God had made clear.⁴⁶

Indictment against the Prophets

In many cases, the people were not innocent victims, since they themselves “loved to wander” (Jer 14:10). Nevertheless, they became established in their chosen path because the prophets spoke “a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds,” without a commission from the

⁴³ Dearman clarifies that “to forget” in Hebrew “does not necessarily mean to be unable to recall something. . . . To forget something means to fail to bring something to conscious focus or to ignore its significance, so that it no longer guides a person to the proper response.” *Hosea*, 159.

⁴⁴ When God says that he will “forget” the children of the priests, this is “the language of the curses of childlessness and/or bereavement (Deut 32:25; 28:18, 32, 41, 53–54).” Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, 78.

⁴⁵ Jeremiah 22:16 indicates, for example, that true knowledge of God is expressed through justice and righteousness.

⁴⁶ Cooper, 222.

LORD (v. 14). The people fell under the smarting judgment of God, because “both prophet and priest [plied] their trade through the land and [had] no knowledge” (v. 18). Prophets and priests were professional ignoramuses. The prophets allowed the people to remain comfortable in their sin and thus to persist on the path to judgment. As Jeremiah lamented of Jerusalem, “Your prophets . . . have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes, but have seen for you oracles that are false and misleading” (Lam 2:14).

God responded to such deceit, in part, by warning his people through true prophets. He says through Jeremiah, “The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them” (Jer 14:14). Again, God says, “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. . . . I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied” (23:16, 21). Twice more, God warns, “Do not listen to your prophets” (27:9), and “Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream” (29:8). God identifies malicious intent within these perjured prophets, who thought that they could “make [his] people forget [his] name by their dreams that they [told]” (23:27). These liars stole God’s words from each other (v. 30), and led God’s “people astray by their lies and their recklessness” (v. 32). They did not “speak [God’s] word faithfully” (v. 28), “so they [did] not profit this people at all” (v. 32). Zechariah describes the dearth of spiritual direction that afflicts those who lack spiritual leadership, especially when the people turn to futile sources of revelation. “Household gods utter nonsense,” he writes, “and the diviners see lies; they tell false dreams and give empty consolation” (Zech 10:2). When people cannot obtain true spiritual direction, they “wander like sheep; they are afflicted for lack of a shepherd” (v. 2).

God lamented, “My people know not the rules of the LORD”; indeed, the instinctive, seasonal compass of migrating birds was better than the instilled, moral compass of God’s people (Jer 8:7). The people claimed, “We are wise, and the law of the LORD is with us,” but in actuality, they had fallen prey to the lies of the scribes (v. 8). The so-called “wise men” of Israel had “rejected the word of the LORD,” so God asked rhetorically and incredulously, “What wisdom is in them?” (Jer 8:9). What kind of wisdom can someone who has rejected God’s ways offer? Instead of giving true remedies, these prophets prescribed Band-Aids for mortal wounds (v. 11; cf. 6:14). They proclaimed that all was well despite the people’s abominable sin. As a result, the people “[held] fast to deceit” and “refuse[d] to return” (8:5). The people even lost their ability to be ashamed of their sin: “they did not know how to blush” (v. 12; cf. 6:15). They did not give their ways a second thought and continued headlong and headstrong, each in his own chosen path (8:6). The people mis-assessed their own spiritual condition because they failed to examine themselves against the light of Scripture. They were unteachable, unrepentant,⁴⁷ and unreserved in their perpetual pursuit of sin (v. 5) while the leaders aided and abetted their sedition against Yahweh.

⁴⁷ F. B. Huey points out that “several verbal forms of שׁוּב are found a total of five times in Jer 8:4–5,” emphasizing that Israel had “turned away” from her covenant obligations and was in dire need of “turning back” to God. *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 113n17.

God responded to the prophetic perpetrators themselves by pronouncing woe on such shepherds (Jer 23:1), who “prophesied by Baal and led [his] people Israel astray” (v. 13).⁴⁸ The kings, officials, priests, and prophets would be openly disgraced alongside the people they misled into destruction (8:1–2). They would eventually be utterly overthrown (v. 12). Micah declared that, in the meantime, God would withhold his revelation from prophets who were declaring blessing (שְׁלוֹם) only upon people who remunerated them and were declaring woe upon those who did not (Mic 3:5–6). God himself would refrain from responding to them, resulting in their own humiliation (v. 7).⁴⁹

Through the prophet Ezekiel, God says, “Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing!” (13:3). These prophets were self-deceived to the point that they actually “expect[ed] God] to fulfill their word,” even though Yahweh had not commissioned them (v. 6). They misled the people by making them comfortable in their sinful ways, removing the fear of retribution for sin, and “whitewashing” their endeavors (v. 10). These prophets inverted proper discernment and trained people’s consciences to accuse right and excuse wrong. God chides, “You have disheartened the righteous falsely, although I have not grieved him, and you have encouraged the wicked, that he should not turn from his evil way to save his life” (v. 22). As a result, God asserted personal vindication (“I am against you,” v. 8; cf. Jer 23:30–32, three times) with tailored reckoning from his own “hand” (v. 9). God viewed their actions as “hunt[ing] down souls” (v. 18) and bartering God’s reputation for bread (v. 19).⁵⁰ They cared more about good food than God’s fame. Through their lies, they were “putting to death souls who should not die and keeping alive souls who should not live” (v. 19). God’s response to the prophets’ role in creating and perpetuating spiritual ignorance was partly a message of judgment against them and partly a promise to one day “deliver [his] people out of [their] hand” (vv. 20, 21, 23). God’s anger was an expression of his devoted love toward his abused flock (Zech 10:3).

Responsibility of the Watchman

In contrast to arrogant and abusive prophets, God intends for his prophets to serve a role spiritually parallel to that of a city watchman (צִפְּרָה), who is commissioned to warn people of impending danger (Ezek 33:2–6). Just as a derelict watchman would be held responsible for the death of any citizens who fall unprepared in an attack (v. 6), so it is incumbent upon a prophet to warn people of sin and its consequences. God’s true prophets must take heed to themselves to ensure that they discharge their duties properly. God himself set Ezekiel up as one such watchman (3:17; cf. 33:7).⁵¹

⁴⁸ “Something disgusting” (Jer 23:13) and “something horrible” (v. 14) may be parallel expressions (see CSB) denoting equally offensive deviations from God’s expectations for his prophets, or they may be contrastive (see ESV), where God moves from the unsavoriness of false religion to the horribleness of wickedness under the auspices of true religion.

⁴⁹ In contrast to a false prophet, a true prophet is one who is willing to confront sin directly. Micah contrasts his own ministry with that of his counterfeit contemporaries when he writes, “But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin” (3:8).

⁵⁰ In Ezekiel 13:18–23, God addresses women (“woe to the women,” v. 18, followed by third-person feminine plural forms and suffixes throughout) who misled his people. Both men and women can mislead, and God pronounces woe against all who do so.

⁵¹ As with a city watchman, the number of corroborative opinions among watchmen is ultimately of no consequence. It is the authority and responsibility of the one appointed watchman that is under consideration. The vulnerable people

God commissioned Ezekiel to steward his revelation; whenever Ezekiel heard a word of condemnation from God, he was obligated to relay the message.⁵²

God proposes two hypothetical situations: God may pronounce condemnation upon the wicked who are already on a path toward judgment (Ezek 3:18–19), or he may warn the righteous not to deviate from that which is good (vv. 20–21). In both cases, God’s goal is restoration (“in order to save his life,” v. 18; “he shall surely live,” v. 21). In both cases, the individual who sins will die for (אֵלָיו)⁵³ his sin, regardless of the obedience of the prophet (vv. 18, 21). In both cases, the prophet must discharge his duty to warn, lest God hold him accountable for the spiritual destruction of the sinner (“his blood I will require at your hand,” vv. 18, 20).⁵⁴ In both cases, the prophet will not be implicated in the downfall of the sinner as long as he has sounded the warning (“you will have delivered your soul,” vv. 19, 21).

This passage emphasizes each party’s individual relationship to God and his word. Divine prerogative and initiative are seen in the commissioning of the watchman (v. 17), communication of the warning (v. 17), condemnation of the sinner (v. 18), downfall of the apostate (v. 20; cf. Jer 6:21), and evaluation of the watchman (vv. 18–21). For the prophet of God, whether or not the offending party heeds the warning is not the primary issue; there is great responsibility on the part of one who knows the word of God to declare truth to others by warning them to turn from their wicked ways.

If God’s spokesman knows the word of the Lord and keeps silent, God will judge the sinner for his own sin (even though the sinner is ignorant of the word of God due to the negligence of the prophet), but God will also hold the prophet accountable for shirking his responsibility. Both the wicked and the righteous may choose not to listen to the warning of the watchmen (צַפִּים, Jer 6:17); but if they never hear the warning, they will not have the opportunity to repent, turn to God, and be delivered. God holds spiritual leaders (e.g., pastors, professors, or parents) particularly culpable for how they lead—or mislead—those within their sphere of influence.

Prophecy of God’s Solution

It is apparent from the prophets’ messages that there is a twofold problem underlying spiritual ignorance. First, leadership has failed in its God-given role to pass along the truth. Second, people are unwilling to receive instruction. The solution is threefold: on God’s part, he commits to orchestrating history (both socio-political and redemptive history) to vindicate his glory. In addition, mankind needs

do well to listen to the one watchman who sounds the alarm rather than the multitude of optimists who claim continued peace.

⁵² Daniel I. Block calls this the “formal call to sentry duty.” *Ezekiel 1–24*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 144.

⁵³ The preposition אֵלָיו could mean either “in” (KJV, NKJV, NASB) or “because of” (“for,” ESV, CSB, NET, NIV). In this passage, both senses are apropos. The wicked will die in his sinful state because he remains unwarned and unchanged, and death is the direct consequence of his sin. Like a man in the midst of the sea with a millstone around his neck dies both “by” (proximity) and “by” (means) the boulder, this sinner dies because of his sin on account of its presence with him at the end.

⁵⁴ “Indifference that fails to save a life is comparable to negligent homicide. The prophet would be guilty of murder by his failure to fulfill his calling.” Cooper, 86.

both new leadership and a new heart if he is going to please God. The prophets anticipate a future time when God will provide all of these for his people.

A New Knowledge of God

The prophet Isaiah foretold of a time when the people of Israel would return to their land with such help from the host nations of their exile that the fingerprint of God would be absolutely unmistakable. God said to them, “Then you will know that I am the LORD” (Isa 49:23). God later employed this phrase as a thematic refrain through the prophet Ezekiel. Eighty-eight times in the OT, God acts or responds so that people would “know that I am the LORD.” Seventy-two of these are in Ezekiel. God employs judgment upon Israel so that the nation would recognize him as Yahweh (e.g., Ezek 6:14; 7:4, 9; 24:24; 33:29). God employs judgment upon other nations to emphasize to both Israel and the pagan peoples that he alone is Yahweh, the true God.⁵⁵ God also identifies the purging of unbelievers from Israel’s midst (20:38), restoration of a future Israelite leader (a “horn,” 29:21), restoration and rebuilding of Israel to unprecedented proportions (36:11), and complete repopulation of the land (v. 38) as means to spread his knowledge among his people and all the earth.

True knowledge of God is more than intellectual affirmation, but it is never less. True knowledge includes experiential understanding, which, for God’s people, should result in relational commitment. Pharaoh naïvely said, “Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD” (Exod 5:2), and God responded, “The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them” (7:5; cf. vv. 17; 8:22; 10:2; 14:4, 18).

God’s people come to know him through both chastisement and blessing. God’s enemies come to know him through selective judgment and blessing—judgment upon them and blessing upon his people (Isa 49:26).

A New Heart

God promises to break the cycle of multi-generational sin and judgment (Jer 31:29–30) by establishing a New Covenant with his people (v. 31).⁵⁶ In contrast to the Mosaic Covenant of legal code, which Israel so grossly violated (v. 32), God, in his New Covenant, would emboss his instruction upon the very hearts of his people (v. 33).⁵⁷ This internalized law transcends the limitations and

⁵⁵ God cites retribution against Ammon (25:5, 7), Moab (v. 11), Philistia (v. 17), Tyre (26:6), Sidon (28:23), Egypt (29:9, 16; 30:8, 18, 26; 32:15), Edom (35:9, 15), and the nations in general (28:24, 26), culminating with the destruction of Gog (38:23).

⁵⁶ “In addition to maintaining the continuity of his own faithfulness (Lam 3:22–32), it is because God is able to break the continuity between past sins and present or future experience . . . that he could provide Israel with a ‘new’ covenant.” Huey, 278.

⁵⁷ Huey argues that תּוֹרָה here refers “to something more basic or foundational than its specific manifestation in the Mosaic law.” Ibid., 286. Just as Abraham obeyed God’s “voice . . . mandate . . . commands . . . statutes, and . . . instructions” (Gen 26:5, CSB) before the giving of the Mosaic law and just as Paul speaks of “the law of God” and “the law of Christ” in the NT (1 Cor 9:21), God’s תּוֹרָה indicates in this passage his fundamental expectations for his creatures, which underly the various expressions of those expectations in specific commandments. Ibid.

liabilities inherent in a system of revelation that requires mediation by finite beings. By design, the law will be known so personally and intimately that God declares, “No longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (v. 34).

The nature of this knowledge is important to understand. Both words in verse 33 used to identify the locus of God’s internalized law (לֵב and קֶרֶב) describe the inner man beyond mere intellect; these synonyms together denote the center of one’s mind, will, and emotions.⁵⁸ Commentators disagree as to which aspect of the transformed inner man is primarily in view when God promises, “They shall all know me” (v. 34). Huey writes, “To ‘know the Lord’ . . . is the result of faith rather than instruction. . . . It is exhortation rather than instruction that is to be rendered superfluous by the new covenant” because the emphasis is “primarily a changed nature rather than the acquisition of facts.”⁵⁹ Harrison identifies the fundamental change as taking place in the will, such that obedience will be “by choice rather than by compulsion.”⁶⁰ Lalleman describes this knowledge of God as “living in fellowship with him and obeying his commands,” not because teachers will cease to exist but because “everyone will know in their hearts what to do and what not to do in accordance with God’s will.”⁶¹ Thompson writes, “The verb *know* here probably carries its most profound connotation, the intimate personal knowledge which arises between two persons who are committed wholly to one another in a relationship that touches mind, emotion, and will.”⁶²

Verse 32 identifies that the Israelites’ problem was fundamentally not one of ignorance but of infidelity. Nevertheless, intellectual knowledge is not absent from this passage. To say “no longer” implies that, at the time God made this promise, such knowledge could be “taught” (לָמַד, piel) in a way that involved both rehearsal of facts (as when Moses taught Israel God’s statutes [Deut 4:5] as God commanded him [6:1]) and exhortation toward obedience (as when Moses taught Israel “to observe” those same statutes [4:1, NKJV]).⁶³ God promises that in the New Covenant he will give them not only knowledge of his law but also the will to obey him. He says, “I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. . . . And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me” (32:39–40). To have God’s instruction “on their hearts” is to understand intuitively what God expects, and to “know the LORD” is to fellowship intimately with God himself such that God’s people will obey instinctively what God desires (cf. Jer 24:7).

⁵⁸ The NET Bible, Jer 31:33n78, 79. In Ezekiel, God promises Israel a “new heart and a new spirit” (לֵב חָדָשׁ וְרוּחַ חֲדָשָׁה), 36:26; cf. 11:19), a parallel expression denoting the comprehensive scope of the transformation.

⁵⁹ *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, 285–86.

⁶⁰ *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 139.

⁶¹ Hetty Lalleman, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013), 233–34.

⁶² J. A. Thompson, *Jeremiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 581.

⁶³ NT believers currently need to instruct one another to “know the Lord” in the same way that they must read the Bible. The “Word” is not fully written on hearts yet (either intellectually or volitionally). The future state of complete obedience promised in the New Covenant is even now imperfect.

Attending and underpinning this new heart is the divine promise, “I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (v. 34). When God completely cleanses from guilt and forgives the sin and rebellion of his chosen people, his goodness will be on grand display (33:8–9). When God regathers his people into the land of Israel, he will renew his relationship with them as his own special possession (31:33; 32:38). This covenant, God says, will be “everlasting” (v. 40). The certainty of these promises is guaranteed by the fixed order of creation. As long as the sun, moon, stars, and ocean waves persist (31:35); as long as there is more astronomy and geology to explore (v. 37); and as long as day and night continue (33:20, 25), God will keep his promises to national, ethnic Israel (31:36; 33:26), to David (33:21, 26), and to the Levites (33:21).⁶⁴

Accompanying (and, indeed, causing) the internal change is a heightened manifestation of God’s Holy Spirit.⁶⁵ As God says through Joel, “It shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions” (2:28).⁶⁶ Spiritual understanding, including (at times) new revelation, is indicative of the work of God’s Spirit (cf. Num 11:25–29; 1 Sam 10:6, 10; 19:20–23).⁶⁷

A Perfect Shepherd

Even when giving his people a new heart, God does not leave them without new leadership. Indeed, the prophets predict the demise of all false shepherds and the coming of a perfect Shepherd to lead God’s people.

Although God’s care for his people as a good shepherd is woven throughout Scripture, this pastoral theme is particularly prominent in Ezekiel 34. After rehearsing how Israel’s shepherds mishandled their occupation by starving (v. 2), exploiting (v. 3), abandoning (v. 4), and scattering (vv. 5–6) God’s sheep,⁶⁸ God cries out for the shepherds to “hear the word of the LORD” (vv. 7, 9). God swears by his very existence (v. 8) and declares through an overwhelming string of promises that he will personally liberate his sheep from the hand of these shepherds.⁶⁹ God says (vv. 10–24),

⁶⁴ The promises of a new heart, a restored nation, a Messianic kingdom, and right worship stand or fall together in this passage. They all have the same bases in God’s written promises and sustaining testimony in Creation. Interpreters cannot deny one or more components without threatening the integrity of all these promises together. God already kept his promises to judge Israel for their sin, and it is no less certain that he will keep his promises to them for blessing (v. 42).

⁶⁵ “The gift of the Spirit connotes direct experience with God, as in Joel, as well as the grace that enables his people to love God from the heart, as in Ezekiel. It also is the distinctive sign and mark of membership in the new people of God, as in Isaiah.” Garrett, 368.

⁶⁶ David A. Hubbard cautions, “It is not the various means of revelation that should be underscored. The variety is probably mentioned for the sake of enriching the poetic parallelism. It is the true knowledge of God (v. 27) and the power to share that knowledge that the prophet intended to stress (cf. Num. 12:6–8).” *Joel and Amos: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 75.

⁶⁷ In Acts 2:16–22, Peter correlates this passage with the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. Pentecost was “the beginning of the fulfillment” of God’s promise, starting with 120 Jews in Jerusalem and extending in the consummation to the entire world. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, NICNT, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 61.

⁶⁸ Taylor calls this “that most pathetic of all states, at least to the eastern mind” (215).

⁶⁹ God’s intervention is not limited to rescuing the sheep from the selfish shepherds; he also discerns among those in the flock those who are truly his: “As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I judge between sheep and

Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand. . . . I will rescue my sheep from their mouths. . . . Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. . . . I will seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them . . . and I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them. . . . I will feed them with good pasture. . . . I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down. . . . I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice. . . . I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. . . . I am the LORD; I have spoken.

God does not intend for his people to remain forever under the deception and exploitation of ungodly leadership.

God's righteous leadership of his people will be centered in his Messiah. Isaiah 11:2 predicted that the Messiah would be the apex of wisdom, since he would be endowed by "the Spirit of wisdom [חִכְמָה], . . . understanding [בִּינָה], . . . counsel [עֲצָה⁷⁰], . . . knowledge [דַּעַת], and the fear of the LORD [יְרֵאת יְהוָה]."⁷¹ With this Spirit, Messiah will make only right decisions (vv. 3–4). His leadership will be characterized by righteousness and faithfulness (v. 5; cf. Eph 6:11–18). God reiterates his promises of a future Messiah within the New Covenant (Jer 33:15–16). Mankind does not have the inherent ability to solve the problem of spiritual ignorance. It requires divine enablement, and God has promised to provide.

Concluding Principles

A variety of internal and external components can contribute to spiritual ignorance. Ignorance and transgression on the one hand, or knowledge and obedience on the other, are mutually reinforcing components of a downward or upward spiral. God's people, therefore, must beware of distracting themselves away from active meditation upon God's character, works, and words.⁷² God's people must be quick to repent of rebellion lest they refuse his instruction or, more fearfully, lose access to God and his truth entirely. God's people, further, must invite critique and warning from spiritually

sheep. . . . Behold, I, I myself will judge. . . . And I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them" (vv. 20–24).

⁷⁰ "Counsel" is paired with "might" (גְּבוּרָה) in this verse. In addition to the Spirit-given ability to "devise amazing plans," Messiah would "have the power to carry them out." Gary Smith, 272.

⁷¹ Smith states that three couplets in Isaiah 11:2 describing the Spirit's role refer to (1) "mental" and "moral ability to make right choices," (2) "gifts related to the practical accomplishment of tasks," and (3) "an intimate relationship between this ruler and God." Ibid. The role of the Spirit includes intellectual apprehension of God's wisdom yet extends beyond until the full flower of righteousness blossoms forth from a heart that delights to apply that wisdom to order everything as God intends.

⁷² Immorality and insobriety are particularly acute hazards for spiritual understanding (Hos 4:10–11), but activities that are not necessarily sinful in and of themselves (e.g., music and parties, Isa 5:11–12) can also contribute to a culture of distraction and thus be unhealthy for God's people.

minded counselors instead of surrounding themselves with affirming people who tell them only what they already want to hear.

Not all who claim to convey God's truth do so accurately, honestly, or faithfully. God's previous revelation is always the benchmark by which current teaching is to be evaluated. To be persuaded against what God has already said is perilous. Prophets themselves are not above the message they preach; God holds all people accountable for what they do with his words, regardless of their education or formal office.

God appointed his prophets to convey his mind directly to his wayward people. Yet spiritual leaders may disregard God's ordinances and obscure God's expectations from his people. Spiritual leaders may disregard God's warnings and repudiate God's judgments against his people. God displays a vehement visceral response against spiritual leaders who perpetuate spiritual ignorance, especially those who do so negligently or maliciously. Individuals will still be liable for their own sin, but God will hold such leaders culpable for the destruction of those under their care. God expresses special care toward his people who are victims of deceit. He warns them through his true prophets, but he also promises ultimate deliverance as he overthrows deceivers and restores truth among his people.

God understands the fallenness and finitude of his creatures, so God promises to enable them to know and understand by providing them with a new heart, a perfect Shepherd, and his Holy Spirit to guide them. In the end, God will be glorified as all people recognize his goodness and greatness and as his true people know him intimately and obey him fully. In the meantime, it is appropriate for God's people to acknowledge the problem of spiritual ignorance, to delight in God's mercy while submitting to his instruction and actively pursuing wisdom, and to take personal responsibility to instruct others "as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor 4:1).

Save Yourself and Your Hearers: The Relationship between the Minister's Sanctification and Ministry Effectiveness in 1 Timothy

By Timothy Hughes¹

The Pastoral Epistles transport the reader to another world: a world whose government was Roman and whose culture was Greek; a world of competing worldviews, competing theologies, and competing armies; and a world which was being confronted with a new faith. This faith, which was grounded in expectation nourished by the Hebrew Scriptures and catalyzed by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, had moved beyond the narrow bounds of Palestine to establish itself in the heart of the Roman Empire. Its growth and spread were due in large part to the Lord's remarkable use of its most able emissary, the Apostle Paul. At the end of his ministry, Paul was headed toward his final confrontation with the power of that Empire—one that would take his life. Other apostles had already paid the ultimate price for their witness to the living Christ. Paul himself had already experienced years of imprisonment, numerous trials, and eventual acquittal in the imperial court. Released, he continued his critical mission. But his time was limited. Continuing a correspondence ministry that had already produced numerous treasured epistles to Christian assemblies, he addressed letters to his close ministerial associates Timothy and Titus.² Later, imprisoned for the last time and facing imminent death, Paul once again wrote to Timothy. These three letters are the last of Paul's preserved writings; and their contents are revealing.

A study of the Pastorals' contents confirms that the same concern motivates these letters as motivates the more typical Pauline letters: a consuming passion to see God glorified through the spiritual health and steadfastness of the churches.³ In the Pastorals, Paul communicates spiritual goals for those who will be influenced by the ministry of his delegates and the other leaders of the

¹ Timothy Hughes is an executive assistant and project manager at Bob Jones University and Seminary, where he also teaches Bible survey and biblical language courses. This article is adapted from a chapter of his PhD dissertation, "Meet for the Master's Use: The Relationship between the Minister's Sanctification and Effectiveness in the Pastoral Epistles" (Bob Jones University, 2015). A superscript cross symbol indicates the author's translation. Unless otherwise indicated, other Scripture quotations taken from the NASB.

² Most conservative interpreters believe that Paul was released from his first Roman imprisonment (recorded in Acts) and enjoyed a period of ministry before he was once again imprisoned by Rome and executed. The difficulty of matching the historical references of the Pastoral Epistles with anything in the Acts account of Paul's ministry, as well the weight of early tradition, both favor this theory. Many have questioned Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles. Many able defenses for the Pauline authorship of these epistles exist; and in this article Pauline authorship will be assumed rather than argued.

³ "Perceiving that Paul was a missionary helps us understand his letters. They serve as pastoral words to churches he established to ensure that they would stand in the faith. Paul did not conceive of his mission as successful if his converts initially believed his gospel and then lapsed. His work was in vain unless his converts persisted in the faith (1 Thess. 3:1–10). Thus, his letters were part of his missionary work, written to encourage believers to continue in their newfound faith." Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 39.

congregation. At the same time, these letters speak directly to those called to spiritual leadership and contain a significant amount of spiritual instruction aimed specifically at Timothy and Titus. The close proximity of these two emphases in the Pastoral Epistles raises an important question: *How do the Pastoral Epistles present the relationship between a minister's personal sanctification and the effectiveness of his ministry?*

In 1 Timothy, Paul frequently addresses the personal spiritual life of the minister.⁴ He includes extensive teaching regarding the minister's spiritual life and character, instructions for the Christian minister's public ministry, and ideal spiritual outcomes for those under his leadership. The material dealt with under the heading of *sanctification* in this article involves teaching regarding the minister's spiritual life, character, and conduct.⁵

First Timothy also expresses important ministry goals, indicating the ideal outcomes of ministry.⁶ These apostolic goals form benchmarks for measuring ministry effectiveness in scriptural terms. Three basic categories of ministry goals emerge in 1 Timothy: apostolic expectations for ministry, ethical/spiritual goals for believers, and missional goals for the church. Each category of ministry goals addresses a different dimension of ministry. (1) Apostolic expectations for ministry—in other words, *God's* expectations for ministry as communicated through his apostolic spokesman Paul—*address the Godward dimension of ministry*. (2) Ethical/spiritual goals for believers *address the effect of a man's ministry on God's people*. And (3) missional goals *address an outward-focused dimension of ministry to reach the lost*. Formulating these together into a contextual benchmark, effective ministry may be defined as ministry that meets apostolic expectations for right ministry, ministry that results in meeting ethical or spiritual goals in the life of the congregation, and ministry that advances the gospel mission to lost people.

The letter's side-by-side presentation of personal spiritual exhortations for the minister and apostolic goals for public ministry suggests a strong correlation between the minister's sanctification and the effectiveness of his ministry. In 1 Timothy, each of these three categories is clearly connected material on the sanctification of the minister. In addition to these *explicit* connections, the letter contains *implicit* connections. By presenting these numerous connections between a minister's sanctification and apostolic ministry goals, 1 Timothy indicates a close relationship between a minister's personal sanctification and his ministry effectiveness.

⁴ The word *minister* evokes various images. In this study, *minister* is not restricted to vocational pastors. The Pastoral Epistles address Timothy and Titus in their role as apostolic delegates but also contain a great deal of teaching regarding the life and character of other congregational leaders. *Minister* serves as an umbrella term encompassing biblical church leadership.

⁵ In this study, *sanctification* stands for *progressive sanctification*. Positional or definitive sanctification is a key biblical teaching to which some in recent years have called needed attention, but for the most part the material treated under the heading of sanctification in this study will be descriptive of the minister's *progressive* sanctification.

⁶ These goals provide a contextual standard for determining ministry effectiveness. *Effectiveness* is achieved when ministry accomplishes its scriptural goals. In the Pastorals, Paul's apostolic direction to Timothy and Titus makes clear the ideal outcomes of ministry. In this article, ministry that meets contextually articulated apostolic *goals* for ministry is considered *effective* ministry.

*Sanctified for an Approved Ministry—
Effectiveness Measured by Apostolic Expectation and Evaluation*

In 1 Timothy, Paul repeatedly makes the connection between a minister's spiritual life and proper public ministry as defined by apostolic expectation and direction. These ministry expectations may be divided into two broad categories. First, Paul directly expresses a number of ministry expectations for the man of God. Second, he uses positive descriptive terminology to identify ministry that is worthy of approbation. Both of these subcategories are connected with the minister's sanctification in 1 Timothy.

Connections between the Minister's Sanctification
and General Apostolic Expectations for Ministry

In 1 Timothy, Paul sets high expectations for the public ministry of the man of God. The Christian minister must refute false doctrine and teach true doctrine and right behavior (1:3–4; 3:2; 4:6, 7, 11, 16; 5:7; 6:2, 14, 17–19, 20). As part of this effort, he is to give careful attention to the primary means of public instruction for the gathered congregation (4:13; 5:17). He is to exemplify Christian conduct and spiritual progress (4:12, 15). He must be able to care properly for God's church (3:5). He is to demonstrate both caution and courage in the church discipline of leadership (5:19–20), all without partiality (5:21). Not only should he seek to build accountable leadership for God's church, but he must also exercise caution in the selection and ordination of candidates for church ministry (5:22). Several of these passages clearly connect apostolic ministry expectations and the minister's sanctification.

A Good Household Manager—3:4–5

By his sanctified and capable leadership in the home, a candidate for overseer gains experience and credibility to care for God's household. "He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)" (3:4–5). According to verse 4, a qualified overseer is a successful household manager whose children testify by their behavior to the capable and godly parenting of their father. The verse describes a man who has demonstrated consistent leadership in the home, managing his household well and bringing his children into obedience *with all dignity*. To meet this qualification, the overseer must be a sanctified man. Among other things, for instance, he must exercise personal discipline, demonstrate sacrificial love for his family, patiently shepherd his children, and strive for God-taught wisdom. The passage makes abundantly clear that the primary test of a man's qualification to manage properly God's household as an overseer is how he has managed his own household as a father. This standard calls for a sanctified minister who is both credible and experienced.

The rhetorical question of verse 5 communicates an apostolic expectation that the overseer properly care for the church. "If a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?" When a potential overseer leads his own household in a serious,

dignified, holy way to follow his spiritual leadership, he gains both the experience and the credibility he needs for a ministry of tending to the needs of God's church—the household of God. His godly leadership in the home provides a foundation for ministry, functioning both as schoolroom and proving ground for his public labors.

Sanctified for Public Ministry—4:12–16

In 1 Timothy 4:12–16, Paul sandwiches apostolic expectations for Timothy's public ministry directly between instructions related to his sanctification. Addressing him in this way about his public ministry and his personal sanctification, Paul implies the closest possible relationship between the two. The passage moves from instructions about Timothy's sanctified role-modeling to instructions about the exercise of his public ministry, to directions that seem to bring both together.

Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe. Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching. Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery. *Take pains with these things*; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all. (4:12–16, emphasis added)

Rather than allow his relative youthfulness to become a reason for people to reject his leadership, Timothy is to offer a compelling Christian example in speech, lifestyle, love, faith, and purity. This example setting is to be coupled with *faithful observance of the primary elements of corporate worship* and a careful cultivation of the gifting he received at ordination.

This passage weaves together highly personal instructions for Timothy's spiritual life and growth with a broader concern for the ministry impact of his own character and conduct. In 4:15, Paul removes any remaining distance between the personal and ministerial exhortations of 4:12–13 when he urges Timothy to “take pains with these things [ταῦτα].” The ταῦτα apparently encompasses both the personal and ministerial exhortations in the immediate context.⁷ When the minister gives proper attention both to his own spiritual life and to his public ministry, his progress becomes “evident to all.” Timothy is to immerse himself in these things, giving diligent, continued attention to the essentials for effective ministry—apostolic doctrine, and his own character and conduct (4:16a).⁸ For Paul, personal life and public ministry are inseparable.

⁷ See I. Howard Marshall and Philip H. Towner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 570; Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 326; Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 140; and J. H. Bernard, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906), 73. Luke Timothy Johnson says that “the things (*tauta*) that Timothy is to give his attention to are the practices of the church and, especially, the moral qualities appropriate to his *anastrophe* (manner of behaving) as a person of faith.” *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 35A of Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 254.

⁸ Verse 16 will be dealt with in greater detail at a later point in this article. Its inclusion here is appropriate, since, like the preceding verses, it emphasizes the need for both personal and ministerial excellence. Luke Timothy Johnson identifies

Some might wonder whether a heavy emphasis on this connection might make a man artificial and “ministerial” rather than transparent, authentic, and focused on his private walk with God. Actually, the reverse is true. A minister who realizes that he cannot separate his spiritual life and his public ministry becomes a better man, not a worse minister. A solemn awareness that his effectiveness for life-changing, eternity-influencing spiritual ministry to others is linked inextricably to his own personal spiritual health becomes a powerful impetus for personal spiritual growth. Then, spiritual ministry becomes a natural outworking of his own relationship with God—and his progress becomes evident to all who benefit from his genuine, God-honoring ministry.

Keeping the Commandment without Stain or Reproach—6:13–14

By instructing Timothy to “keep the commandment without stain or reproach,” Paul connects Timothy’s ministry charge with blameless behavior. “I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate, that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (6:13–14). Interpreters have differed on the identification of “the commandment,”⁹ but given the historical situation and the nature of the letter, it seems best to understand the commandment as reflective of Timothy’s apostolic charge to minister faithfully. Just as the charge in 1:18 likely refers to Paul’s ministry charge to Timothy (see 1:3–5), so the commandment of 6:13 seems to refer again to Timothy’s ministry mandate, perhaps particularly as communicated and reinforced in this epistle. Towner observes that “in spite of a rather surprising amount of discussion about the meaning and scope of ‘the command[ment]’ (better ‘the mandate, order, commission’), the reference is surely to what Paul has charged Timothy to do in Ephesus. This charge is introduced in 1:3–5 and filled out in the course of the letter.”¹⁰ Timothy is to “keep” this ministry charge without stain (ἄσπιλος) and without reproach (ἀνεπίλημπος) until the Lord’s appearance. The thrust of the charge requires Timothy’s spotless and blameless conduct as he carries out the ministry mandate he has been given. Once again, Paul tightly connects the minister’s personal spiritual life and growth with the effectiveness of his public ministry. To fulfill his ministry charge faithfully, a minister must carry out his ministry with personal purity and integrity.

Connections between the Minister’s Sanctification
and Positive Apostolic Evaluation of Ministry

Several times in 1 Timothy, Paul uses certain positive descriptions for his conception of right ministry. Table 1 identifies these apostolic commendations of effective ministry and the connections

a “focus throughout this section both on Timothy’s personal character and on the quality of his instruction” and observes that “this final command [4:16a] . . . summarizes the point of the entire paraenesis” (254).

⁹ See especially Knight’s listing and discussion. George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 266–268.

¹⁰ *Timothy and Titus*, 414. In a similar vein, Luke Timothy Johnson comments, “By this point, we recognize the *entolē* as the entire commission that Timothy has received from Paul, and whose *telos*, as we saw in 1:5, is *agapē* sprung from internal dispositions of faith and a good conscience” (308).

that the letter makes between ministry described in these terms and the minister's sanctification. In eighty percent of the passages in this epistle in which Paul uses a positive description to identify commendable ministry, he connects ministry so described with an element of the minister's sanctification.

Table 1. Connections between the Minister's Sanctification and a Positive Evaluation of His Ministry in 1 Timothy

Positive Evaluation	References	Connected with Minister's Sanctification?
"good fight"	1:18	The good fight performed <i>by means of</i> "keeping faith and a good conscience" (1:19)
"good servant of Christ Jesus"	4:6	Followed by further description "nourished on the words of the faith and of the sounds doctrine which you have been following" (4:6)
"rule well . . . worthy of double honor"	5:17	No connection explicitly drawn
"fight the good fight of [the] faith"	6:12	Seamless integration of the man of God in his personal spiritual life and in his role as a man of God
"you made the good confession"	6:12	Seamless integration of the man of God in his personal spiritual life and in his role as a man of God

Faith and Good Conscience—1:18–19

First Timothy 1:18–19 reveals an *instrumental* relationship between the minister's personal sanctification and effective ministry. "This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you fight the good fight, keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith." Timothy will be *enabled* to fight the good fight by giving attention to his own spiritual health.

"This command" refers to Paul's charge to Timothy (in 1:3–5) to remain at Ephesus to combat the false teaching that was apparently threatening the Ephesian church.¹¹ The most logical identification of the "fight" in the context of 1:3–17 is the war Timothy is to wage against the Ephesian heresy and its malignant moral side effects. Now reiterating his charge to Timothy in 1:18, Paul identifies three means by which Timothy will be able to "fight the good fight." The first of these means is for Timothy to act in accordance with "the prophecies previously made" about him. This instruction likely has reference to prophetic utterances made regarding Timothy and his ministry at the time of his ordination (see 4:14).

In 1:19 Paul provides two further, significant means by which Timothy will be enabled to fight the good fight as he confronts the doctrinal and moral defections of others. Timothy is to fight faithfully "the good fight" *by* maintaining or holding (ἔχων) his personal faith (πίστιν) and a good conscience (ἀγαθὴν συνείδησιν). The participle ἔχων is likely best taken adverbially as indicating further *means* of fighting the good fight, rather than simply indicating some sort of accompanying action in

¹¹ "The verbal link with vv 3, 5 seems very strong. Paul may be thinking of the command as it is expounded in vv 4–17, and thus v 18 acts as a summary of vv 13–17." William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 65.

vague connection with *στρατεύη*.¹² A godly Christian minister must keep a careful watch over his own soul when confronting the doctrinal and moral defections of others. In particular, he must be careful to maintain a clear conscience, and he must steadfastly maintain personal faith in God and his words.

If the Christian minister faithfully contends for the faith over the course of his life without abandoning personal faith and good conscience, at the end he will be able to say with Paul: “I have fought the good fight” (2 Tim 4:7). As an essential part of his preparation for spiritual warfare, the minister’s personal sanctification *enables* effective ministry.

Nourished through Faithful Ministry—4:6

In 1 Timothy 4:6, Paul teaches that faithful ministry helps the minister grow in his own sanctification. Here, effective ministry is ministry that receives a positive evaluation because it faithfully teaches scriptural truth even in the face of intense opposition. “In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following” (4:6). As Timothy faithfully teaches the Christian community at Ephesus that God’s good gifts are not to be rejected (as those who teach the “doctrines of demons” would have them to believe), he will be a “good servant of Christ Jesus.”

The participial phrase that follows this descriptive evaluation of effective ministry further explains the result of ministry rightly carried out. Not only does such ministry earn the minister the description “good servant,” but it also furthers his own sanctification. Timothy will progress in his own growth in the faith as he ministers the Word to others. The same doctrine that nourishes his hearers will nourish him spiritually. As he ministers it to others, it is ministered to his heart as well. According to this passage, faithful, effective ministry of the Word to others actually furthers the personal spiritual growth of the minister.

Fighting the Fight and Taking Hold of Eternal Life—6:12

Waging good warfare for the Christian faith is impossible in isolation from personal belief in and faithful adherence to God’s Word and ways. Paul places the two in close connection when he says, “Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (6:12, ESV).

It is difficult to be certain whether the ESV translation “the good fight of the faith” better reflects Paul’s intention than the NASB translation “the good fight of faith.” The Greek text contains the article, but a number of interpreters see the fight as a struggle of personal faith rather than as a contending for the faith. If the question were to be decided merely on the basis of the article’s presence, then the ESV translation is likely the strongest. *Πίστις* occurs thirty-three times in the Pastorals. When articular, it can typically be translated as “the faith.” No anarthrous occurrence in the Pastorals *requires* the sense of “the faith,” but there are some occurrences where such a sense is

¹² Towner sees the participial phrase as “underlin[ing] the means by which Timothy will be able to wage the good war” (157). Marshall argues that “the participial phrase possibly continues the metaphor by describing the soldier’s equipment” and notes that “in any case, it details two elements essential both to effective ministry and authentic spiritual life” (411).

permissible. Towner states, “The use of *pistis* in the NT consistently divides into two categories. Frequently, it occurs in connection with the believer’s personal relation to Jesus Christ. In the Pastorals this usage is certainly present, especially where *pistis* denotes a Christian quality . . . and where the verb *pisteuein* occurs (1 Tim 1.16; 3.16; Titus 3.8; cf. 2 Tim 1.12). However, the second category of use—*he pistis*=‘the faith’—predominates in the Pastorals.”¹³ The article in this passage should probably be seen as the individualizing article rather than the article with abstract nouns, and the ESV translation is probably to be preferred.

Keeping in mind that the article tips the scales in favor of the ESV translation, it is necessary next to examine immediate contextual factors. Significantly, Paul addresses Timothy as a “man of God.” “Fight the good fight of [the] faith” is conceptually similar with Paul’s earlier charge to “war the good warfare” in 1:18. And 1:13 makes reference to public confession. These factors may together suggest that Timothy’s public ministry is at least partly in view in 6:12, no matter how *τῆς πίστεως* should be translated.

If it is indeed the good fight of the Christian faith that is in view, or if indeed a ministry struggle in particular is at least partly in view, then 6:12 reveals a close connection between the minister’s sanctification and his public ministry. Timothy is to “fight the good fight of the faith”; another component of the same charge now turns his attention to his own spiritual life and calls him to “take hold of the eternal life” to which he has been called. The latter part of the verse solidifies this connection by moving the focus of attention immediately back to the public sphere by referencing Timothy’s public, good testimony of his personal faith (“in the presence of many witnesses”). The fact that Paul can mix in an impassioned plea elements of Timothy’s ministerial responsibility and personal sanctification so seamlessly is instructive. It indicates that for Paul there was no real separation between what a man is in his personal spiritual life and what he is as a man of God.

Summary

In 1 Timothy, Paul consistently connects the minister’s spiritual life and apostolic expectations for the public ministry of the man of God. An overseer’s godly leadership in the home functions as a schoolroom and a proving ground for his public labors. The minister’s careful attention both to his own spiritual life and to his public ministry results in progress that is evident to all. In order to fulfill faithfully his ministry charge, he must maintain a ministry that is spotless and blameless, carrying out his responsibilities with purity and integrity. He is to maintain personal faith and a good conscience to enable him to “fight the good fight.” His faithful, effective ministry of the Word to others actually furthers his own personal spiritual growth. Paul’s seamless connection between a leader’s ministry responsibility and his personal sanctification indicates deep continuity between who a man is spiritually and who he is as a man of God engaged in public ministry for the people of God. No man can contend effectively for the faith apart from strong personal grounding and growth in grace.

¹³ Philip Towner, *The Goal of Our Instruction: The Structure of Theology and Ethics in the Pastoral Epistles* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 230.

*Sanctified for Effective Ministry as a Teacher and Model for God's People—
Effectiveness Measured against Goals for the People/Church of God*

First Timothy's extensive spiritual and ethical teaching for the people of God presents apostolic ministry goals by setting forth ideal congregational responses to effective ministry. The letter nowhere promises that a minister's sanctification guarantees the ideal response from his people at all times. It does, however, consistently link the minister's sanctification to his credibility and therefore to his potential impact upon responsive people—and through them, upon a lost world.

God's people are to adhere to sound doctrine and maintain genuine faith and adherence to the truth (1:3, 5, 10; 2:15; 4:1, 3, 10, 12; 5:8, 12, 16; 6:2–3, 10, 21). They are to further the stewardship entrusted to them by God (1:4). They are called upon to maintain a vital prayer life (2:1, 8; 4:5; 5:5) and offer thanksgiving (2:1; 4:3–4). They should fix their hope in God (5:5; 6:17). They must avoid wrath, strife, and dissension (2:8; 6:4–5) and demonstrate honor and/or submission as appropriate in various relationships (2:11–12; 5:4, 17; 6:1–2). They must maintain a pure heart and clean conscience (1:5, 4:2) and live godly lives (1:9; 2:2, 10; 3:16; 5:4; 6:3, 5–6), demonstrating holiness (1:9; 2:8, 15), dignity (2:20), modesty (2:9), self-control (2:9, 15), temperance (3:11), and order (2:9). They must engage in good works (2:10; 5:10; 6:2, 18), show hospitality (5:10), and serve others (5:10, 6:2), demonstrating genuine love (1:5; 2:15; 6:2). They are to exhibit a proper attitude toward wealth (6:5–10, 17–19). They must demonstrate faithfulness in their marriages (5:9), maintain an excellent testimony (5:7, 10, 14; 6:1), and generally conduct themselves properly (3:15). Ultimately, God's true people persevere in salvation and “take hold of that which is life indeed” (2:15; 4:16; 6:19).

First Timothy contains both explicit and implicit connections between these spiritual/ethical goals for the congregation and the minister's sanctification. One of the minister's main responsibilities is to nurture God's people toward God's ideals. He will not be able to do so effectively unless he has first embraced God's ideals for his own spiritual life.

Explicit Connections

Two key verses located in the heart of the letter draw a clear connection between the minister's sanctification and spiritual or ethical goals for God's people.

Exemplary—4:12

Although Timothy apparently is young, he is called to live in such a way that in spite of this potential limitation he exercises a highly effective ministry. “Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather [ἀλλά] in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe” (4:12). The phrase “let no one” faces outward and is clearly oriented to the effectiveness of Timothy's ministry. The conjunction ἀλλά then signals the contrasting circumstance that will prevent others from looking down on Timothy's youthfulness—and this circumstance has everything to do with Timothy's personal sanctification. The grammatical structure of the verse itself emphasizes the connection between Timothy's sanctification and effective ministry.

Not just the grammar, but also the vocabulary of the passage indicates that personal sanctification is essential for effective ministry. Paul's command for Timothy to be an example (τύπος) implies that he intends for the congregation to follow that example. This intention is implicit in the very idea of a τύπος. The minister should provide an example so that those under his ministry will imitate his example. As the Christian minister faithfully lives an exemplary life before his congregation, he provides them with a model to follow. As they imitate his godly example in "speech, conduct, love, faith and purity," they meet apostolic spiritual goals for the congregation.¹⁴

Self-Heedful—4:16

"Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you" (4:16). This solemn exhortation closely links the minister's personal spiritual watchfulness and the salvation of his hearers, making this verse perhaps the Pastorals' most indisputable instance of connection between the minister's sanctification and the effectiveness of his public ministry. The Christian minister must exercise intentionality in his spiritual life. Just as Timothy must guard apostolic teaching, so he must carefully guard his own spiritual life and walk. The importance of this command is highlighted by its eternal ramifications—ramifications not just for the minister, but also for those to whom he ministers.

The passage culminates with a spiritual goal for Timothy and his hearers.¹⁵ "As you do this you will ensure salvation [σώζω] both for yourself and for those who hear you" (4:16). The question naturally arises: in what sense will Timothy save himself and his hearers? Some have suggested that the "salvation" indicated in the passage is a deliverance from false teaching, but most commentators agree that salvation should be understood "soteriologically and eschatologically."¹⁶ Given that σώζω elsewhere in the Pastorals is "clearly soteriological in orientation,"¹⁷ it seems best to understand this occurrence in the same way as well.

Paul explicitly connects the minister's sanctification and the salvation of Timothy's hearers when he orders Timothy to take heed to himself and to the teaching and then follows up by instructing him further: "Continue in these things [ἐπίμενε αὐτοῖς], for doing this [τοῦτο γὰρ ποιῶν] you will save yourself and your hearers"[†] (4:16). The γὰρ gives the reason or motivation for the minister to "continue in these things." The Christian minister is motivated in his own sanctification by the truth that giving attention to his own sanctification is one of the God-ordained *means* for bringing others to the Lord.¹⁸

¹⁴ For further elaboration, see "Thematic/Lexical Connections" below.

¹⁵ George M. Wieland believes that 4:16 is the climax of the paraenesis that begins in 3:14. *The Significance of Salvation: A Study of Salvation Language in the Pastoral Epistles* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 98. Luke Timothy Johnson identifies a "focus throughout this section both on Timothy's personal character and on the quality of his instruction" and observes that "this final command [4:16a] . . . summarizes the point of the entire paraenesis" (254).

¹⁶ See Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 211, for a helpful listing.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mounce agrees that the participle ποιῶν indicates means and translates "by doing" (265). Romans 12:20, containing an identical participle phrase, may provide further corroboration for this understanding: "But if your enemy is hungry,

Timothy's careful attention both to his own sanctification and to his doctrine is essential to his salvation and the salvation of his listeners. This statement is neither forced exegesis nor un-Pauline theology. Scripture teaches that those who fail to persevere in the Christian faith (including right living and right belief) will not in the end be saved, and evidence that they have never been justified to begin with.¹⁹ So careful students of the Scripture are not surprised to find that Timothy's faithfulness in *both* of these areas (sanctification and orthodoxy) is essential. God has so designed the Christian ministry that through faithful living, the minister will be an instrument of God's saving power extended to his hearers. His personal sanctification becomes an instrument of effective ministry—ministry that affects the eternal destiny of his hearers.

Thematic/Lexical Connections

First Timothy seldom draws explicit connections between the minister's sanctification and ethical/spiritual goals for the congregation, but implicit connections abound. These implicit connections include tight lexical and thematic links between what Paul urges upon the minister and what he envisions for God's people generally. As David Mappes argues, the qualifications lists in 1 Timothy and Titus "call church officers to be examples (τύποι) of the godly life"; and "elders and deacons are to set the standard for ethical behavior to which all believers should aspire."²⁰ By their exemplary living, "church leaders are to model a life of godliness so that others can imitate them."²¹ This is true not only with reference to the virtues *highlighted* in the qualifications for the overseer, but also with reference to *other* virtues urged upon the man of God in 1 Timothy.

God's minister is to adhere to sound doctrine and maintain genuine faith and adherence to the truth (1:4, 12, 19; 3:9; 4:6, 12, 16; 6:11, 12); so are God's people (1:3, 5, 10; 2:15; 4:1, 3, 10, 12; 5:8, 12, 16; 6:2–3, 10, 21). God's minister is to demonstrate ἀγάπη (4:12; 6:11), as are His people (1:5; 2:15; 6:2 [ἀγαπητός]). A good conscience must be a minister's personal goal (1:19). That God's people maintain a good conscience (συνείδησις) is a ministry goal (1:5; 3:9; 4:2 [negative]). Like the Christian minister is called to εὐσέβεια (4:7, 8; 6:11), so are God's people (2:2; 3:16; 5:4; 6:3; 6:5). Christian ministers must not be fighters (3:3), are called to be peaceable and gentle (3:3), and are to "pursue . . . gentleness" (6:11); Christian men in general are to pray "without wrath and dissension" (χωρὶς ὀργῆς καὶ διαλογισμοῦ, 2:8). Ministers are to show themselves exemplary in purity (ἀγνεία, 4:12), relate to the younger women "in all purity [ἀγνεία]," and keep themselves pure (ἀγνός, 5:22); the men of the church are to "lift up holy [όσίος] hands" (2:8) and the women are to "continue in . . . holiness [ἀγιασμός]." Elders are to demonstrate dignity in their child-rearing (σεμνότης, 3:4). God's people generally are to live lives of dignity (σεμνότης, 2:2)—especially deacons (σεμνός, 3:8) and deaconesses (or deacon's wives, 3:11). A qualified overseer is prudent (σώφρων, 3:2); similarly, the women of the

feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing [τοῦτο γὰρ ποιῶν] you will heap burning coals upon his head."

¹⁹ For a helpful overview and compelling argument, see Thomas R. Schreiner, "Perseverance and Assurance: A Survey and a Proposal," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1998), 58.

²⁰ David A. Mappes, "Moral Virtues Associated with Eldership," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160, no. 638 (April 2003), 215.

²¹ Ibid.

church are to demonstrate σωφροσύνη (2:9, 15). God's ministers are to engage in good works (3:1; 5:25); so are his people (2:10; 5:10; 6:2, 18). A qualified overseer has shown hospitality (3:2); a qualified widow has done so as well (5:10). Just as the minister must have a proper attitude toward wealth (3:3, 8; 6:11), so must those to whom he ministers (3:8; 6:5–10, 17–19). The minister must be faithful in marriage (3:2) just as those in his congregation are to be faithful in their marriages (3:12; 5:9). He is to maintain an excellent testimony (3:2, 7; 6:14) as are the rest of God's people (5:7, 10, 14; 6:1). Ultimately, just as his ministry goal is that his people grasp true life (ἵνα ἐπιλάβωνται τῆς ὄντως ζωῆς, 6:19), so he must follow Paul's admonition to grasp eternal life (ἐπιλαβοῦ τῆς αἰωνίου ζωῆς, 6:12), as both he and his hearers persevere in their salvation (see 4:16). These strong lexical and thematic links between the minister's sanctification and ministry goals for the congregation further evidence the close relationship between the minister's sanctification and ministry effectiveness.

Summary

First Timothy links the minister's sanctification to his effectiveness in leading people to meet God's goals for their spiritual lives and for their conduct. It does so both through explicit statement and through lexical and thematic connections between the minister's sanctification and the sanctification of his people.

Sanctified for Effective Mission— Effectiveness Measured against Missional Goals

The missional goals of the Pastorals hold a prominent place in the structure and argument of the letter, even though they do not occupy as much space in the epistle as do the ethical goals. God desires the salvation of the lost (1:15–16; 2:4; 4:10); he has designed the church to be the pillar and support of the truth (3:15); and he calls its members to live in such a way as to bring no reproach to his name and ways (5:14; 6:1). This missional emphasis is highlighted in each chapter of 1 Timothy.

Emphasizing God's desire for all to be saved and explaining the importance of proper conduct for God's people, 1 Timothy consistently highlights the mission of God to bring lost sinners to himself—and his intention to use his people's witness to do so. In the teaching of 1 Timothy, the man of God has an essential role in God's plan to bring people to himself, and it is imperative that he be sanctified for the task.

Motivated for Godliness and Witness—4:7–10

Diligent effort in personal godliness and agonizing labor in ministry both spring from the same motivation, as careful study of 4:7–10 reveals.

But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. It is a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance. For it is for this we labor and strive, because

we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers. (1 Tim 4:7–10)

The lasting profit of εὐσέβεια motivates the Christian minister to exercise (γυμνάζω) himself “in godliness”[†] (4:7–8). Πρὸς εὐσέβειαν could mean either “for the purpose of godliness” or “in godliness,”²² but likely “indicate[s] that εὐσέβειαν is that *in* which one exercises, and not just that toward which one exercises.”²³

The lasting profit of εὐσέβεια also motivates the Christian minister to exercise himself in gospel ministry. Referring back to the faithful saying of verse 8, Paul expresses the right motivation for labor in the gospel when he makes this statement: “For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope [ὅτι ἠλπικαμεν] on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers” (4:10). Godliness promises eternal profit, so it is to this end or for this reason that “we labor and strive.”²⁴ The passage continues, “because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.” The Christian minister can labor confidently with eternity in view, for the eternal profitability of godliness is not a vague principle but the promise of the living God who has made salvation available for all if they will believe.

Motivated by the truth that godliness is of eternal profit and by a hope firmly fixed on “the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers,” godly ministers “labor and strive” in ministry.²⁵ Understanding the eternal profit of godliness and armed with the confidence that comes from knowing the salvific purposes and power of God, the Christian leader seeks the eternal welfare of men as a primary ministry goal.

Summary

First Timothy 4:7–10 reveals that diligent effort in personal godliness and agonizing labor in ministry both spring from the same motivation. The minister is to exercise or train (γυμνάζω) himself in godliness because it is of eternal profit. And he is to agonize (ἀγωνίζομαι) in ministry because godliness is of eternal profit—and because he knows that God is the Savior who can bring people to eternal life. A man who doubts the promise of life that godliness holds and who reflects his doubt by a failure to pursue it diligently is a man who lacks motivation to do true life-changing gospel work. On the other hand, a minister who genuinely exercises himself in godliness because he knows it is of eternal profit is motivated to labor for others. Energizing both his personal and ministerial labors is a

²² See Mounce, 251.

²³ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 197. R. C. H. Lenski also argues this point, citing the way πρὸς is used in the two immediately following occurrences in verse 8. *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1937), 632.

²⁴ Marshall points out that εἰς τοῦτο could either mean “for this reason” or “with this aim” (555); either way, the eternal promise of godliness motivates the minister’s toil in the gospel.

²⁵ “Because godliness has the promise of life, ‘we’ ‘labor and struggle’ (v. 10a). Such effort is undertaken ultimately because our hope is fixed on θεῷ ζῶντι, who can give such ζωή (v. 10b) as the Savior of all who believe on him (v. 10c)” (Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 202).

confident expectation that the Savior who has made propitiation for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2) and desires all men to be saved (1 Tim 2:4) grants this eternal life freely.

The athletic image evoked by *γυμνάζω* and *ἀγωνίζομαι* suggests a further point of connection. In the Greek culture with which Paul was intimately familiar, an athlete would train (*γυμνάζω*) with an eye toward engaging in competition (*ἀγωνίζομαι*).²⁶ But such language was not limited to physical training for physical competition. A Greek writer from several centuries before Paul had already drawn upon the same athletic imagery to impress upon rulers the importance of attending to their own souls as training for kingship. “Therefore, no athlete is so called upon to train his body [τὸ σῶμα γυμνάζειν] as is a king to train his soul [ὡς τοῖς βασιλεῦσι τὴν ψυχὴν τὴν ἑαυτῶν]; for not all the public festivals in the world offer a prize comparable to those for which you who are kings strive [ἀγωνίζεσθε] every day of your lives.”²⁷ This passage may present a similar challenge—not to secular kings, but to Christian leaders—in the form of a deliberate, extended metaphor designed to teach that the minister’s personal training in godliness *prepares* him to compete with success in the strenuous struggle of the Christian ministry.

Indirect Connections

First Timothy also contains an indirect but strong point of connection between the minister’s sanctification and the missional goals of the church. A minister’s godly life is designed to serve as a model for his congregation (4:12), and (as is suggested above) much of 1 Timothy’s material on the minister’s sanctification likely has in view his impact upon the congregation. First Timothy consistently draws strong connections between the ethical behavior of God’s people and God’s saving purposes. The ethical goals of 1 Timothy serve the missional goals. This relationship between the ethical and missional goals makes it apparent that the minister’s sanctification, in furthering ethical goals for God’s people, helps the church move forward in meeting missional goals as well. It does so by equipping the people of God for a brighter witness.

Connections between Ethical and Missional Goals in First Timothy

Some interpreters apparently have failed to grasp the strength of the connection between ethics and the mission of the church in 1 Timothy (and the other Pastorals). Since the time of Dibelius, a number of liberal interpreters have advanced the thesis that in light of the delay of the Parousia, the author of the Pastorals (not Paul) presents an ethic designed to help Christians peacefully co-exist with and prosper in the world.²⁸ Dibelius and Conzelmann argue that, unlike Paul, “the author of the Pastorals seeks to build the possibility of a life in this world, although on the basis of Christian principles. He wishes to become part of the world. Thus, for him, the peace of a secure life is a goal

²⁶ See for instance Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* 31.126–127, and Philostratus, *Gymnasticus* 43.

²⁷ Isocrates, 3.11.

²⁸ See Philip Towner, *The Goal of Our Instruction*, 259. In the course of his discussion, Towner provides a summary of the viewpoint and (in a note) lists a number of authors/works that have advanced it. Towner’s refutation of this viewpoint was published in 1989, but the idea has persisted.

of the Christian.”²⁹ This view of Christian existence sees the Christianity of the Pastorals as a *christliche Bürgerlichkeit*, often translated “*bourgeois* Christianity.”

Philip Towner has argued against this hypothesis in his insightful monograph *The Goal of Our Instruction*. His work, along with others, provides a thorough refutation of the *christliche Bürgerlichkeit* viewpoint, so in-depth interaction with its proponents is not necessary in the present study. In his treatment, Towner rightly highlights what he calls “a missionary or witness motive” in the Pastorals. Indeed, this “witness motive” is so conspicuous, and so conspicuously provides the ground for much of the ethical material, that it is difficult to understand why any responsible interpreter would feel compelled to adopt the *christliche Bürgerlichkeit* theory to begin with. The ethics of the Pastorals do not spring from a diminished sense of urgency. They spring from the true urgency of the church’s mission in the world.

This mission is so crucial that God’s people dare not endanger it through a careless lifestyle that is unworthy of their stature as members of God’s household. And it is a mission so crucial that the man of God dare not be casual about his own personal sanctification as he exercises spiritual leadership in the household of God.

First Timothy 2:1–8

In chapter 2, Paul offers directions for prayer in the assembly (2:1–8). The Christian congregation is to engage in public prayers on behalf of political rulers.³⁰ The passage indicates that these prayers are to be accompanied by the lifting up of “holy hands.”³¹ Key to offering prayers in holiness is offering them “without wrath and dissension” (2:2a).³² The behavioral goal of prayers accompanied with a peaceable demeanor and a holy lifestyle is designed to promote an important outcome: a “tranquil and quiet life” characterized by “all godliness and dignity” (πάση εὐσεβείᾳ καὶ σεμνότητι, 2:2). The passage’s layered collection of ministry goals culminates in a goal greater than merely a non-disruptive lifestyle, however. Far from being the end goal of Christian existence, a godly, dignified, peaceable life is important precisely because it furthers the salvific purposes of “God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1:3–4).

²⁹ Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 39.

³⁰ The passage seems to focus on the role of the men in corporate prayer, addressing the women later on in the chapter.

³¹ Apparently, the prayer posture involving uplifted hands is both assumed and affirmed. However, holiness is the larger point of emphasis in this passage. See Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 129, and Towner, who notes that “the image of ‘purified hands’ acquired metaphorical status in its reference to moral purity (e.g. *1 Clement* 29:1; LXX Pss 25:6; 72:13) just as the image of ‘bloody’ or stained hands signified metaphorically the reverse (Isa 1:15)” (*The Goal of Our Instruction*, 202).

³² It is possible that this warning against wrath and dissension has in view an attitude of hostility Christians could easily develop against government officials who in many ways may be opposed to their faith. If this is indeed what is in view, the passage indicates that the scriptural response in such a situation is holy prayer rather than angry, subversive attitudes and rhetoric. However, it is quite likely that the point of the exhortation really is for the worshippers to avoid wrath and disputation among themselves. On this last point, see Marshall, 446.

First Timothy 3:14–16

Paul writes in order to give direction for Christian behavior, as the explicit purpose statement of 3:14 makes clear. In the immediately previous verses Paul has given instructions regarding the prayers of the congregation (especially the men), proper behavior for women, and qualifications for church leaders. Now he emphasizes that he is writing “in order that you should know how one must live in the household of God”[†] (3:14). This ethical emphasis permeates the letter. But the ethics are not there merely for their own sake. Nor are they there simply to create the right conditions for a *bourgeois* Christianity that, in light of a longer stay in the world than anticipated, enables the church to get along successfully in the world. At the heart of Paul’s burden to provide guidelines for the conduct of God’s people is his concern for the God-ordained role of the church in the world, as the further development of the passage reveals.

Christian conduct is important because the church’s mission is important. “This [description of the church as *στῦλος καὶ ἐδραῖωμα τῆς ἀληθείας*] is perhaps the most significant phrase in all the PE. It shows more clearly and more dramatically than anything else what is at stake in the Ephesian heresy and why it is essential that the church, especially the church leaders, conduct themselves properly.”³³

The relative clause immediately following Paul’s purpose statement identifies the church itself as the “pillar and support” of the truth, charged to uphold apostolic doctrine and the common confession of believers (3:15–16). The central feature of this common confession of true Christians is the theological and historical message regarding the life and work of the incarnate Christ. This memorable and concise confession of the gospel paints in bold, vigorous strokes the truth that the church is to defend. And as the confession reveals, proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles is an essential mission of those who confess it. First Timothy 3:14–16 connects the goal of right behavior in the household of God with the church’s mission to proclaim and defend apostolic truth. In doing so, it highlights the close connection between Christian conduct and Christian mission that is so crucial to understanding the epistle.

First Timothy 5:14

This passage highlights the goal of stable Christian individuals and families and discourages church support of a spiritually unhealthy lifestyle for young widows. Ultimately, the passage has in view the mission of the church in the world. In following Paul’s instructions, the younger widows will avoid giving the enemy “occasion for reproach” (5:14). As elsewhere in 1 Timothy, Paul highlights an outward dimension to church ethics; the church must seek to maintain a bright gospel witness in the world.

First Timothy 6:1

In 6:1, Paul gives instructions for members of the church who are “under the yoke.” Slaves are to honor their masters “so that the name of God and our doctrine will not be spoken against” (6:1). The

³³ Mounce, 222.

point of concern is the church's witness in the world and its effect on the world's reception of the Word. Here as elsewhere, the gospel mission of the church guides Christian behavior.

Summary

The ethical teaching of 1 Timothy equips believers to reach the lost world with the gospel by maintaining an excellent testimony individually and corporately. Since the minister's own right conduct is indispensable for his right modeling and credible teaching of God's ethical ideals,³⁴ his personal sanctification is a crucial component in effectively reaching the lost with the gospel message.

Conclusion

First Timothy consistently links the minister's sanctification and the effectiveness of his ministry. His sanctification lends credibility to both his leadership and his teaching. It has a direct impact on the eternal destiny of his hearers. It enables his continued faithfulness to a scriptural ministry. It enables a ministry that elicits divine commendation. And it provides his people with an example of godliness they can imitate, helping them to meet God's goals for their spiritual lives and behavior and ultimately influencing the testimony of the church to a watching world. Table 2 summarizes the key passages in 1 Timothy that present a direct connection between the minister's sanctification and his ministry effectiveness.

Table 2. Key Passages Revealing a Connection between the Minister's Sanctification and Effective Ministry in 1 Timothy

Expectation/Approbation	Minister's Sanctification	Connection
"fight the good fight" (1:18)	"keeping faith and a good conscience" (1:19)	The good fight is performed by means of "keeping faith and a good conscience."
"take care of the church of God" (3:5)	"one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity" (3:4)	"If a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?" (3:5)
"good servant of Christ Jesus" (4:6)	"constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following" (4:6)	"In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished [ἐντρέφόμενος] on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following." The ministry described in the passage not only earns the minister the description "good servant"; it also has the result of furthering his own sanctification.

³⁴ See "Sanctified for Effective Ministry as a Teacher and Model for God's People" above.

Expectation/Approbation (cont.)	Minister's Sanctification	Connection
<p>"Let no one look down on your youthfulness. . . . Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching. Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery. Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all. Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching." (4:12–16)</p> <p>"fight the good fight of [the] faith" (6:12)</p> <p>"you made the good confession" (6:12)</p>	<p>"in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe" (4:12)</p> <p>"Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you." (4:14)</p> <p>"Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them." (4:15)</p> <p>"Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things." (4:16)</p> <p>"take hold of the eternal life to which you were called. . . . keep the commandment without stain or reproach" (6:12, 14)</p> <p>"take hold of the eternal life to which you were called. . . . keep the commandment without stain or reproach" (6:12, 14)</p>	<p>This passage weaves together highly personal instructions for Timothy's spiritual life and growth with ministry instructions. In 4:15, "these things" apparently encompass both the personal and ministerial exhortations in the immediate context. If the man of God gives proper attention to his own spiritual life and his ministry duties, his "progress will be evident to all."</p> <p>Seamless integration of the man of God in his personal spiritual life and in his role as a man of God</p> <p>Seamless integration of the man of God in his personal spiritual life and in his role as a man of God</p>
Edification	Minister's Sanctification	Connection
<p>"Let no one look down on your youthfulness. . . . show yourself an example of those who believe" (4:12)</p> <p>"you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you" (4:16)</p>	<p>"but rather [ἀλλά] in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe" (4:12)</p> <p>"Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things." (4:16)</p>	<p>The conjunction ἀλλά signals the contrasting circumstance that will prevent others from looking down on Timothy's youthfulness.</p> <p>Paul's command for Timothy to be an example (τύπος) implies that he intends for the congregation to follow that example. This intention is implicit in the very idea of a τύπος.</p> <p>"Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this [τοῦτο γὰρ ποιῶν] you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you." (4:16)</p> <p>The Christian minister is motivated ("for") in his own sanctification ("pay close attention to yourself") by the truth that giving attention to his own sanctification is one of the God-ordained <i>means</i> for bringing others to the Lord.</p>

Mission	Minister's Sanctification	Connection
"For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers." (4:10)	"discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (4:7)	Diligent effort in both personal godliness and labor in ministry springs from the same motivation. Energizing the minister's personal sanctification <i>and</i> ministerial labors is a confident expectation regarding the eternal profitability of godliness and the assurance that God desires to grant salvation (see in-text discussion).

In 1 Timothy, Paul connects the minister's spiritual life and apostolic expectations for his public ministry, either by generally expressing apostolic expectations as such or by describing the kind of ministry that earns commendation. Tight connections between ministry and the minister's sanctification indicate strong continuity between who a man is personally and who he is ministerially. In this letter, both explicit statements and lexical and thematic connections link the minister's sanctification to his effectiveness in promoting spiritual growth and obedience among God's people. By carefully guarding his own testimony, the minister maintains credibility for his message and models right living for those in the church. The teaching of 1 Timothy also reveals connections between the minister's sanctification and his ability to further God's missional goals for the church. His personal and ministerial labors are motivated by the eternal profit of godliness and fueled by a confident expectation that God is working to bring people to himself. Since the minister's own behavior affects the testimony of other believers by influencing them toward godly behavior, his personal sanctification ultimately furthers the gospel mission to a lost world.

Ruth and the Covenant Heir: Reading Ruth in Light of Isaac's Famine and Sojourn

Joshua Jensen¹

The Book of Ruth has a foreboding beginning: “And it came about, in the days that the judges judged, that there was a famine in the land, and a man journeyed from Bethlehem, in Judah, to live for a time in the fields of Moab—he, and his wife, and his two sons” (1:1).² In this opening sentence, the reader is introduced to the geographical and historical setting, four of the characters, and the situation that launches the events narrated in the next four chapters.

But these opening words set the stage in another way: they connect the story of Ruth to the patriarchal narratives, giving clues to the reader about the significance of the events to follow. The initial verbal parallel comes with the words “that [lit. and] there was a famine in the land” (וַיְהִי רָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ) (Ruth 1:1), which exactly replicates the announcement of the famine that sent Abram to Egypt (Gen 12:10) and Isaac to Gerar (Gen 26:1), where, like Elimelech’s family, they “lived for a time” (גֹּר) (Gen 12:10; 26:3; Ruth 1:1).³ In this article, I argue that this and other allusions in Ruth to the patriarchal narratives invite the reader to understand the story as a covenant election narrative; in particular, the Lord’s election of Isaac as covenant heir prefigures the Lord’s election of David, whose birth is the ultimate goal of the events in Ruth.⁴

Scriptural Allusions in Ruth and the Significance of Isaac

Scholars and commentators have seen connections between the Book of Ruth and a host of other OT narratives based on parallels in wording, plot, and theme.⁵ Especially notable are Abram’s

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² All translations are my own. “The Lord” always represents the name יהוה “YHWH.” (The Hebrew word אֲדֹנָי “lord, master” is not used in reference to God in the texts cited in this paper.)

³ See especially Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 40, 85, and sources cited there. This essay takes up Hubbard’s encouragement to read Ruth 1:1 as a “notice that the reader should watch for the development of [the] thematic continuity” between Ruth and the famine stories of Genesis 12:10 and 26:1 (85). Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky are notable, too, for their careful attention to patriarchal allusions and their relevance to the book’s purpose. *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, JPS Tanakh Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011), xxi–xxvi.

⁴ I provide clarification about which covenant is in view and what it means to be a covenant heir, only after arguing in detail for the thematic and theological connections between the Ruth story and the Isaac narratives.

⁵ An early source that takes account of the extensive allusions to other scriptures in Ruth is Edward Robertson, “The Plot of the Book of Ruth,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 32, no. 1 (1949), 18–43. Hubbard’s list of patriarchal parallels, 40, is probably the most comprehensive of its kind.

departure from his native land and kin to settle in Canaan (Gen 12:1);⁶ Abram's famine and sojourn in Egypt (Gen 12:10–20);⁷ the separation of Lot, Ruth's ancestor, from Abram and the plot of Lot's daughters to maintain their father's line through a nighttime deception (Gen 13:11; 19:30–38);⁸ Rebekah's betrothal to Isaac (Gen 24);⁹ Isaac's famine and sojourn in Gerar (Gen 26);¹⁰ Jacob's deception of his father to gain the blessing (Gen 27);¹¹ Tamar's plot to maintain her dead husband's line by deceiving her father-in-law Judah (Gen 38);¹² the *toledoth* ("generations") lists in Genesis;¹³ Israel's exodus from Egypt to the land of Canaan;¹⁴ the Book of Judges generally;¹⁵ the violence inflicted on the Levite's concubine (Judg 19);¹⁶ various episodes in the life of David;¹⁷ the competent wife of Proverbs 31;¹⁸ and the expulsion of foreign wives from Israel after Israel's return from exile (Ezra 9, 10; Neh 13:23–31).¹⁹ This is not to mention the legal background to the Book of Ruth,

⁶ Gabriel H. Cohn discusses Ruth in light of a variety of OT passages, including Abram's call. *Textual Tapestries: Explorations of the Five Megillot*, trans. David Strauss (New Milford, CT: Maggid, 2016). Phyllis Tribble's comparisons between Ruth and Abram are more extensive, but some of her conclusions seem to grow out of a commitment to feminism rather than from the contours of the text. "Two Women in a Man's World: A Reading of the Book of Ruth," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 59, no. 3 (1976), 251–79.

⁷ Hubbard, 85, cites Gillis Gerleman, *Ruth; Das Hohelied*, 2nd ed., Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament 18 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1981) as highlighting this parallel.

⁸ Harold Fisch, "Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History," *Vetus Testamentum* 32, no. 4 (1982), 425–37; Jonathan Magonet, "Rabbinic Readings of Ruth," *European Judaism* 40, no. 2 (2007), 150–57.

⁹ Irmtraud Fischer, "The Book of Ruth as Exegetical Literature," *European Judaism* 40, no. 2 (2007), 140–49, especially 142. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 1st ed. (New York: Basic, 1981). See especially Alter's chapter on the "Biblical Type-Scenes and the Uses of Convention," 47–62.

¹⁰ Hubbard, 85. See, too, Zipora (Zipi) Yavin, "Ruth, the Fifth Mother: A Study in the Scroll of Ruth (The Semantic Field as a Ground of Confrontation between Two Giants—The Judean Writer and the Ephraimite Writer)" [Hebrew], *Jewish Studies* 44 (2007), 167–213, especially 187.

¹¹ Edward Allen Jones III, "'Who Are You, My Daughter [מי את בתך]': A Reassessment of Ruth and Naomi in Ruth 3," *CBQ* 76, no. 4 (2014), 653–64.

¹² Robertson; Fisch; Magonet.

¹³ Fischer, 142.

¹⁴ Peter J. Leithart, *A House for My Name: A Survey of the Old Testament* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2000), 119, 120. The Exodus themes in Ruth are developed at some length in Alastair Roberts and Andrew Wilson, *Echoes of Exodus: Tracing Themes of Redemption Through Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 83–86.

¹⁵ Tod Linafelt, *Ruth*, vol. 1 of Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal, *Ruth and Esther*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999), xix. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 79.

¹⁶ Edward F. Campbell Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 7 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 35, 36; David J. Shepherd, "Ruth in the Days of the Judges: Women, Foreignness and Violence," *Biblical Interpretation* 26, no. 4–5 (October 22, 2018), 528–43.

¹⁷ Yitzhak Berger, "Ruth and Inner-Biblical Allusion: The Case of 1 Samuel 25," *JBL* 128, no. 2 (2009), 253–72; Yitzhak Berger, "Ruth and the David—Bathsheba Story: Allusions and Contrasts," *JSOT* 33, no. 4 (2009), 433–52.

¹⁸ Carlos Bovell, "Symmetry, Ruth and Canon," *JSOT* 28, no. 2 (2003), 175–91; Laura Quick, "The Book of Ruth and the Limits of Proverbial Wisdom," *JBL* 139, no. 1 (2020), 47–66.

¹⁹ Basileioy M. Vellas, "The Book of Ruth and Its Purpose," *Theologia* (Athens) 25 (1954), 201–10; see especially 205–6, where Vellas argues against such a connection.

especially provision for gleaning (Lev 19:9, 10; Deut 24:19), redemption (Lev 25:23–34, 47–55), the prohibition against Moabite incorporation (Deut 23:3–6 [4–7]), and levirate marriage (Deut 25:5–10).²⁰

Of all the proposed parallels between Ruth and other scriptural texts—and my list above is by no means exhaustive—the connections to the patriarchal stories should be given especially close attention, in part because the very first verse recalls the patriarchal famines, and in part because allusions to Genesis are pervasive from start to finish in Ruth. Although interpreters of Ruth have often focused on connections to Abraham, the following list of possible echoes to stories involving Isaac suggests that Isaac’s life, too, provided important background in shaping the narrative of Ruth.

First, the story is introduced with the clause “and there was a famine in the land” (וַיְהִי רָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ) (Ruth 1:1), which also introduces the famine that leads Abram to Egypt (Gen 12:10) and Isaac to Gerar (Gen 26:1). But while Abram “goes down” (יָרַד) to Egypt (Gen 12:10), Isaac and Elimelech simply “journey” (הָלַךְ) (Gen 26:1; Ruth 1:1) to the places they will “live for a time” (גֹּר) (Gen 26:3; Ruth 1:1). Like Isaac, Elimelech has a wife and two sons at the time of his sojourn (Gen 25:24; 26:1; Ruth 1:1).²¹ Upon her departure from Moab, Naomi has two Moabite daughters-in-law (Ruth 1:4, 6), and Rebekah’s two Canaanite daughters-in-law are given special mention at the close of the story of Isaac’s return from Gerar (Gen 26:34).²² In speaking to her daughters-in-law, and later to the women of Jerusalem, Naomi complains of the Lord’s “bitter” (מָר) dealings with her (Ruth 1:13, 20), much as Rebekah’s spirit is said to be “bitter” (מָרָה) on account of her foreign daughters-in-law (Gen 26:35).²³

When Boaz enters his field in chapter 2, he exchanges greetings with his reapers, “the Lord be with you” (יְהוָה עִמָּכֶם) and “the Lord bless you” (יְבָרֶכְךָ יְהוָה) (Ruth 2:4), replicating a verbal pairing found nowhere else in Scripture except in the Gerar famine narrative, where the Lord promises, “I will be with you [וְאֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ], and I will bless you [וְאֶבְרַכְךָ]” (Gen 26:3; see too 26:24).²⁴ When Boaz gives Ruth permission to glean in his field, he tells her that he has “commanded” (צוה) his young men not to “touch” (נָגַע) her (Ruth 2:9), just as Abimelech “commanded” (צוה) the people of Gerar not to “touch” (נָגַע) Isaac or Rebekah (Gen 26:11). Other elements of the scene are reminiscent of Rebekah’s

²⁰ Gary Edward Schnittjer, for example, focuses almost exclusively on legal background to Ruth, including the legal concerns listed above. *Old Testament Use of Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Guide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021), 578–90. See, too, the discussion of background legal texts in Jeremy Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible 7D (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 14–16.

²¹ The report of Isaac’s move to Gerar makes no mention of either wife or children, in keeping with the common narrative practice in Genesis (see, e.g., Gen 12:10, which says that “Abram went down to Egypt,” with no mention of his wife until he has reached the border of Egypt in the next verse). The parallel between Isaac’s and Elimelech’s families is also noted by Yavin, 187.

²² After Ruth has insisted on returning with Naomi, the story continues, “and the two of them journeyed [on]” (וַתֵּלַכְנָה) (Ruth 1:19), a possible (but certainly weak) echo of Isaac and Abraham’s ascent of Mount Moriah: “and the two of them journeyed [on] together” (וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו) (Gen 22:8). Berger, “Ruth and Inner-Biblical Allusion: The Case of 1 Samuel 25,” 255, 256.

²³ If Mark S. Smith is correct that Ruth’s affirmation of loyalty to Naomi takes the form of a covenant (Ruth 1:16, 17), then that finds a parallel to Isaac’s covenant with Abimelech after his sojourn in Gerar (Gen 26:28–31). “‘Your People Shall Be My People’: Family and Covenant in Ruth 1:16–17,” *CBQ* 69, no. 2 (2007), 242–58.

²⁴ The harvest setting of Ruth is prominent throughout, and it is perhaps significant that of the patriarchs, only Isaac ever engages in agriculture (Gen 26:12).

betrothal in Nahor; in particular, Boaz makes a point of offering Ruth water that the young men have “drawn” (שאב) (Ruth 2:9), recalling Rebekah’s provision of water to Abraham’s servant and animals, water that she, too, had “drawn” (שאב) (Gen 24:19, 20).²⁵ When Ruth returns home after gleaning, Naomi blesses Boaz, “May he be blessed by the Lord, who has not forsaken his loyalty [ברוך הוא ליהוה אשר לא עזב חסדו] with the living or the dead” (Ruth 2:20), partially replicating the words of Abraham’s servant upon encountering Rebekah, “May the Lord . . . be blessed, who has not forsaken his loyalty [ברוך יהוה ... אשר לא עזב חסדו] or his faithfulness with my master” (Gen 24:27).²⁶

In Ruth 3, Boaz’s “trembling” (חרד) (v. 8) followed by the question “who?” (מי) (v. 9), and Naomi’s somewhat mysterious question “Who are you, my daughter?” (מי־את בתִּי) (v. 16), all suggest a connection with Isaac’s questioning of Jacob, “Who are you, my son?” (מי אתה בְּנִי) (Gen 27:18), and his later “trembling” (חרד) and asking another “who?” (מי) question (27:32, 33). One also observes the importance played by Jacob’s and Ruth’s clothing (Gen 27:15; Ruth 3:3) and smell (Gen 27:27; Ruth 3:3).²⁷

Taken one by one, many of these parallels could potentially be attributed to accidental verbal correspondence.²⁸ So on what basis can we say that these parallels are genuine allusions? Richard B. Hays, in his study of OT echoes in Paul’s writings, offers various criteria for testing whether a suspected echo is in fact a real connection; four of those criteria can be applied to the present case.²⁹ First, Ruth’s audience had the patriarchal stories available to them and ought to have known them in detail, so the original audience could have detected allusions to them. Second, some of the proposed allusions are to important and memorable episodes in Genesis, especially the famines and Rebekah’s betrothal to Isaac.³⁰ Third, there is a high concentration of potential allusions to the Isaac narratives

²⁵ In his analysis of this scene in Ruth, Alter draws attention to the role played by the drawing of water, connecting it to the drawing of water in the betrothal scenes of Genesis (59). It may seem fanciful to detect an echo to Genesis 24 in the notice that the drinking water was “drawn,” especially since most potable water in the Levant would have been acquired by “drawing” (a point made by an editor). But if the fact was obvious to the first readers, why mention it at all, especially in a narrative style as spare as Ruth’s? The Hebrew verb שאב “draw” occurs only nineteen times in the Bible, and eight of those mentions—the only ones in Genesis—are in Genesis 24. There are four additional instances of the word prior to Ruth in its current canonical position (Deut 29:11; Josh 9:21, 23, 27), all of which are used in a formulaic way to designate the work done by a servant. Given how unusual it is in OT narrative to mention that water has been drawn (cf. the water offered in Gen 18:4; 21:14; 43:24), the mention in these two narratives merits attention.

²⁶ See comments in Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 43. The RSV and its subsequent revisions (ESV, NRSV, NRSVUE) obscure the similarity of Ruth 2:20 to Genesis 24:27 by making “his kindness” the subject of “has not forsaken” in Ruth 2:20, rather than translating “who has not forsaken his kindness.” Both renderings are grammatically possible, but every other major English version chooses the latter rendering, which reflects the underlying parallels in the Hebrew.

²⁷ Jones, 658–61, notes the verbal similarities but not the role played by clothes and smells.

²⁸ For example, the basic structure of the famine announcement in Ruth 1:1 is seen throughout ancient Near Eastern languages, and it is possible, though not likely, that the author of Ruth is simply using that standard expression without intending a connection to Genesis. See Michael C. Lyons, “Famine: Textual Evidence from Late Bronze–Early Iron Age Eastern Mediterranean Cultures” (PhD diss., Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, 2018), 165n75.

²⁹ *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, 1st ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 29–32.

³⁰ This criterion is especially subjective and, taken by itself, it might give little support to many of the echoes suggested in the preceding text. But there is no reason to think that an author might not allude to a less familiar text in Scripture; the point of the criterion is only that such an allusion is less likely to be detected by readers, so an author may be somewhat less likely to make it.

in Ruth, increasing the likelihood that any one of them is genuine.³¹ Fourth, there is a high degree of what Hays calls “thematic coherence” between the Isaac stories and the story of Ruth.³²

The final point is especially critical, and another way of saying it is that the proof of the pudding is in the eating. If we familiarize ourselves with the Isaac stories—the particularities of the wording, the movement of the plot, the interrelations of the themes—and then bring that familiarity with us to the Book of Ruth, does it enrich our reading? Does it reinforce what we could have known independently of the Isaac stories, while also helping us notice things we might otherwise have missed? If so, there is good reason to think that the connections are genuine, that the author of Ruth really did have the Isaac stories in mind while writing.³³

How, then, can the stories of Isaac enrich our reading of Ruth? That is the question that the rest of this article answers. In short, I argue that Isaac is a figure whose significance lies especially in his election as heir to the covenant that the Lord made with his father Abraham. Although Isaac was not himself the “father” of the Israelites, his son would be, making his own election and protection major concerns in the patriarchal narratives, which tell the story of the Lord’s commitment to his covenant with Abraham and the subsequent birth of the nation. Elimelech is of less account even than Isaac, but the author of Ruth, by connecting Elimelech’s story with Isaac’s, invites the reader to see that the elect covenant line passes through Elimelech’s family and on to King David.³⁴ I focus attention on connections to the Isaac narratives, and Isaac’s famine in particular, not because these are the only allusions in Ruth to other Scripture, but rather because previous interpreters have tended to note these connections only in passing, if they notice them at all, while giving more attention to other inner-biblical allusions in Ruth. Here I redress that balance.

The structure of the rest of this article is as follows. I first examine the patriarchal famines in their original context, observing how they contribute to the narrative arc of Genesis and noting the central themes. Next, I evaluate of the Book of Ruth itself, in which key elements of the patriarchal famine stories—offspring and land, divine presence and blessing, covenant and loyalty—are repeated in Ruth with meaningful variation. My analysis culminates in the claim that the Book of Ruth is the story of the Lord’s election of the covenant heir, David, and his loyalty to David’s line during the time of

³¹ Relevant here is Jeffery M. Leonard’s argument that “[t]he accumulation of shared language suggests a stronger connection than does a single shared term or phrase.” “Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusions: Psalm 78 as a Test Case,” *JBL* 127, no. 2 (2008): 253. The large number of verbal parallels between Ruth and the Isaac stories, some of them phrases (see Leonard, 252), makes it unlikely that they are all accidents.

³² *Ibid.*, 30.

³³ By “genuine” I do not necessarily mean “intentional.” It is quite possible that because the author of Ruth was intimately familiar with the patriarchal narratives, some of the echoes were not part of the (human) author’s conscious craftsmanship. Hence, like Hays (29), I will not carefully distinguish between “allusion” (which is intended by the author) and “echo” (which may not be intended), contenting myself with the more modest claim that the Book of Ruth strongly suggests the influence of the Isaac stories: in thematic and plot development, and often in the actual wording.

³⁴ My conclusion is in full agreement with that of Oswald Loretz: “The poet, then, relates the intervention of God to create an heir. In this account of the early history of the royal Davidic house, the poet indicates specifically the fact of divine election.” “The Theme of the Ruth Story,” *CBQ* 22, no. 4 (October 1960), 398. Loretz makes his argument without reference to the allusions in Ruth to patriarchal narratives; in this article I argue that the echoes of the Isaac story in Ruth confirm the conclusion that Loretz has reached on other grounds.

Elimelech, Naomi, and Ruth. I conclude with a reflection on the kind of scriptural reading exemplified here, reading that is sensitive to the web of connections that unify the biblical narratives.

The Patriarchal Famine Narratives

Genesis is a book of covenants: God's covenant with Noah and his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not to mention various non-divine covenants. And it is a book of famines: one in the life of Abraham, another in the time of Isaac, and a third that changes the fortunes of Jacob and his sons, especially Joseph. To understand Genesis, a reader must understand the role of famines in the narrative, and how those famines relate to the covenant. In the following subsections, the famines of Abraham and Isaac will be considered in relation to the covenant promises. The first of these famines establishes a pattern that will be repeated, with some variation, in the second.³⁵ Those famines, and especially the second, then shape our understanding of the famine in Ruth. The narrative (and historical) relationship between famine and covenant is this: the famine and forced sojourn threaten the fulfillment of the covenant promises, and the deliverance and blessing function as a confirmation of those promises in the face of the worst possible odds.

Abram

The first famine in Genesis comes halfway through chapter 12. In the first half of the chapter, the Lord has called Abram out of Haran and promised to make him a great nation, make his name great, and bless (ברך) him so that he himself will be a blessing (בְּרָכָה) (vv. 1–3).³⁶ When Abram arrives in the land of Canaan, the Lord appears to him and makes the promise of offspring and land explicit: “to your offspring [וְאֶרֶץ] I will give this land [אֶרֶץ]” (v. 7).

It is right on the heels of God's promise to Abram—first of nationhood, a great name, and blessing, then of offspring and the land—that trouble comes: “and there was a famine in the land [וַיְהִי] [רָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ]” (Gen 12:10). In the ancient world, famine was one of the worst disasters that could strike.³⁷ Although the property Abram brought along from Haran might provide some insurance against starvation (v. 5), a long famine could impoverish even a rich family (45:11), and a longer famine could

³⁵ Duane A. Garrett compares the three episodes in which Abraham and Isaac pass off their wives as their sisters and suggests the following repeated cycle of events: Migration, Deception, Abduction, Deliverance, Confrontation, Conclusion. *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2000), 129, 130. My interest here is in the two famine stories and their role in the covenant narrative, so I highlight different components of the story, but my analysis basically agrees with Garrett's that “the dominant concern” of these sojourn stories is “the survival of the race in the face of a . . . threat” (131).

³⁶ The promise of a great name ties the story of Abram with the story of Babylon (Gen 11): the proud are abased (“we will make for ourselves a name” [11:4]), and the humble are lifted up (“I will make your name great” [12:2]). This link having been established in Genesis 12, the promise of a great name is not restated directly in subsequent repetitions of the Abrahamic promises in Genesis, though it is no doubt implied in the promise to make Abraham and his descendants into a great nation (e.g., 46:3). In the discussion to follow, I will focus on the repeated promises of offspring, land, and blessing; the promise of a name will be taken up again at the end of this article.

³⁷ “Along with pestilence and warfare, famine is one of the classical triad of catastrophes.” Peter H. W. Lau and Gregory Goswell, *Unceasing Kindness: A Biblical Theology of Ruth*, NSBT 41 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2016), 71.

kill (45:7). In this case, the famine was severe enough to drive Abram and his dependents out of Canaan into Egypt (12:10).

This departure from Canaan presents the first challenge to the Lord's promises to Abram: he is no longer in the land that was promised to him and his (yet-to-be-born) offspring. Given the possibility that any children born and raised in Egypt might stay there, the threat is significant. As Abram and Sarai prepare to enter Egypt, Abram becomes aware of a more immediate threat: he might be killed, and Sarai would become the wife of an Egyptian, definitively cutting off the possibility of offspring who could become a great nation in the land of Canaan. Abram's plan to counter this threat leads to Pharaoh's nearly adding Sarai to his harem. This, too, is a threat to the promise: if Pharaoh should take Sarai as his wife, she would be defiled and could no longer return to Abram and bear him a child. Finally, Abram's calling to be a blessing to all the families of the earth is called into question when God brings plagues on Pharaoh's household on Abram's account.³⁸

Nevertheless, through God's intervention, Pharaoh sends Sarai back to Abram and expels them from Egypt, along with considerable wealth that Abram acquired while Sarai was in Pharaoh's household (Gen 12:16, 20; 13:2). Abram's sojourn in Egypt and his eventual departure demonstrate God's faithfulness to the promises given at the beginning of chapter 12: Abram is still alive, his wife has been given back to him with her honor intact, he is returning to the land of promise, and he takes with him great wealth.

This narrative sequence of promise, famine, blessing, and deliverance serves two functions in the nascent patriarchal narratives. First, it establishes God's commitment to fulfilling his promises in the face of obstacles; by juxtaposing the famine with God's promise, God's loyalty to that promise is put on display.³⁹ Second, it establishes Abram as a historical archetype of the nation that descends from him. Abram is the first to receive the promises that guarantee Israel's founding, the promises that Israel itself will inherit; thus, Abram's experience of God's faithfulness to those promises establishes a pattern that will be repeated with variation and elaboration in the lives of his immediate descendants and in the history of Israel, a repetition that confirms the election of Abram's descendants.

Isaac

Between Abram's famine and the famine experienced by Isaac in Genesis 26, the Lord repeats his promises to Abram (renamed "Abraham" in 17:5) several times, and along the way the promises develop in a handful of ways:⁴⁰ in particular, the Lord incorporates those promises into a solemn covenant (ch. 15); he marks the covenant with the sign of circumcision (17:1–14); and he specifies the

³⁸ On the other hand, Pharaoh very nearly dishonors—unwittingly—Abram's family, making Pharaoh liable to God's curse (Gen 12:3), which is also an integral part of the blessing promise.

³⁹ Similarly, Lau and Goswell observe that "[t]he common thread [of the sojourn narratives in Gen 12, 20, and 26] is a threat to the covenant" (72), but apart from noting that Elimelech should not have left the covenant land, they do not trace this thread through Ruth.

⁴⁰ Here I skip over the repetition of the land and offspring promise after Lot and Abram divide (Gen 13:14–17), as well as the reconfirmation of promises after Abraham's offering of Isaac on the mountain at Moriah, where God repeats the promise of numerous offspring and says again that the nations will be blessed on account of Abraham's offspring (22:15–18).

heir of the covenant, Isaac, a son as yet unborn, a son whose conception is, in fact, impossible (17:17–19). But it is even more impossible for God to break his promise, and the impossible son is born (21:1–3). Between Genesis 21 (Isaac’s birth) and Genesis 26 (Isaac’s famine), Isaac is nearly sacrificed (ch. 22), his mother dies (ch. 23), he marries Rebekah (ch. 24), his father dies (25:1–11), and two sons are born to him and grow up (25:19–28). Nevertheless, at the end of Genesis 25, Isaac has still not yet received any direct word from the Lord about the promises.

Then chapter 26 opens with the words, “And there was a famine in the land, besides the previous famine which happened in the days of Abraham” (v. 1). As Abraham had done during that first famine, Isaac now leaves the place he is living, probably Beer-Lahai-Roi (25:11), to find relief; but unlike Abraham, Isaac does not leave the boundaries of Canaan, instead going only as far as the Philistine town of Gerar. It is there that the Lord appears and speaks to him directly for the first time. The Lord begins by telling him not to go to Egypt, and then instructs him to “dwell [שכן] in the land which I say to you” (26:2). Until the Lord gives further direction, however, Isaac is to “live temporarily [גור] in this land” (26:3), the region of Gerar.

It is in connection to the command to sojourn in Gerar during the famine that the Lord explicitly extends the Abrahamic Covenant promises to Isaac: “Live temporarily in this land, and I will be with you, and I will bless you” (Gen 26:3). This promised blessing is unpacked in terms of the promises previously given to Abraham:⁴¹ offspring as numerous as the stars, who, along with Isaac, will inherit “all these lands” and bring blessing to all the nations (26:3, 4).

God’s promises to Isaac are well timed, because a famine that would drive Isaac among the Philistines and make him contemplate leaving for Egypt must be severe. Once Isaac receives the promise and instructions from God to sojourn in Gerar, he faces threats like those faced by his father Abraham during the earlier famine: in addition to the threat to life and property due to the famine itself, there is the very real possibility that Isaac could be killed and Rebekah taken as wife by one of the men of Gerar (26:7, 10). If this should happen, the family of promise would lose its Abrahamic integrity; even if Jacob and Esau survived, they may be incorporated into Philistia.⁴² And there is the further risk that Isaac himself might assimilate to the Philistines by settling permanently in their land, taking Philistine daughters-in-law, and worshiping the Philistine gods.

Isaac’s plan for self-protection is to use his father’s strategy of claiming that his wife is his sister. Providentially, Abimelech discovers the ruse—early in Isaac’s sojourn, it seems—and knowing now that Rebekah is Isaac’s wife, he guarantees their safety, threatening death to anyone who touches Isaac or his wife (26:11). Under the king’s protection, and clearly under the Lord’s, Isaac sows grain in Gerar and reaps one hundredfold (26:12). This is the first time that a patriarch works a field. Though neither Isaac nor his descendants take up agriculture as a permanent living prior to the conquest period (46:34), Isaac’s farming in Gerar suggests a new relationship to the land of Canaan, a preview of the

⁴¹ Specifically, the promise to bless Isaac is followed by the blessings themselves, introduced by כִּי “for,” suggesting that the clause “to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands” answers the question, “How will this blessing be known?”

⁴² The marriages of Isaac and Jacob to non-Canaanite brides depended, at least partially, on the intervention of their parents (Gen 24:1–9; 27:46–28:5).

settled existence that his offspring will one day enjoy there. In addition, his harvest is extraordinary, especially for a time of famine. By the time Isaac leaves Gerar, he has become quite wealthy, owing to God's blessing (26:12, 13).

Isaac leaves Gerar with his family intact, his religion undefiled, his identity uncompromised, and his wealth greater than when he came. He has also managed to stay within the territory of Canaan for the famine's duration. The famine and the forced sojourn, far from hurting Isaac and his family, have been the occasion both for their enrichment and for the Lord to establish the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant with Isaac directly. The promises of the covenant are given to Isaac as the famine begins, and the Lord makes good on those promises in the face of serious threats. It is by means of the famine and sojourn that God acts to publicly demonstrate Isaac's election as heir to the covenant. Isaac's election as covenant heir is demonstrated not just by the events of the famine and sojourn considered in themselves, but also by the way in which those events are depicted as a reenactment of Abraham's sojourn in Egypt, an event that provided initial confirmation of his own election by God. Isaac's experiences strongly resemble his father's, with variation appropriate to separate historical events.

One difference, however, should be noted, a difference related to the details of the Lord's oath to Isaac. God gives Isaac a promise that he never gave Abraham, nor had he given to anyone else up to this point in Genesis: "I will be with you" (Gen 26:3). Furthermore, God's promised presence with Isaac is directly tied to the promised blessing—"I will be with you, and I will bless you" (v. 3)—suggesting that the blessing depends crucially on God's presence with Isaac.⁴³ This pairing of God's presence and blessing bookends Isaac's sojourn in Gerar. After Isaac has left the valley of Gerar and settled in Beersheba, the Lord appears to him again and says, "I am the God of Abraham your father. Do not fear, for I am with you, and I will bless you" (v. 24), followed by a shortened version of the promises: the Lord will multiply his offspring.⁴⁴ The explicit pairing of God's presence and blessing shows up in Ruth, as well, where the two are again connected to the gift of offspring.

Ruth and Isaac: The Connection Explored

In the first section, I introduced the verbal connections between Ruth and the Isaac narratives, arguing that those parallels should be understood as instructions to the reader to think back to those earlier stories and read Ruth in their light. In particular, the Book of Ruth has strong echoes of the

⁴³ The narrator never states directly that the Lord was with Abraham (although Abimelech observes to Abraham, "God is with you in all that you are doing" [Gen 21:22]). The narrator does, however, say that God (not the Lord) "was with" Ishmael (v. 20), but there is no promise to Ishmael of God's presence, and the notice that God was with Ishmael is not directly connected to blessing.

⁴⁴ This time there is no mention of the land, perhaps because Isaac is once again "home" in Beersheba in the Negeb, where Abraham seems to have settled after himself leaving Gerar (Gen 21:14, 31–33; 22:19), and where Isaac likely grew up. Prior to his marriage to Rebekah, Isaac lived for a time in Beer-lahai-roi (24:62), and after Abraham's death Isaac returned there to live (25:11). However, Beer-lahai-roi was most likely to the southwest in the direction of Egypt (see 16:7, 14), on the way to Shur. It is associated with Hagar's flight from Sarai, a flight which probably would have taken Hagar toward her homeland of Egypt. Isaac's ultimate rejection of Beer-lahai-roi in favor of Beersheba suggests a recentering of the patriarchal family in the land of promise.

Isaac famine narrative, a narrative intimately tied up with Isaac's status as heir to the covenant, as I argued in the previous section. In the following subsections, the thematic concerns introduced in the previous section will be used as a framework for understanding Ruth. Those themes are the threat to *offspring* and *land*; the connection between *God's presence* and *blessing*; and the *loyalty* of the Lord and his people to the *covenant*. The way that these patriarchal themes—especially prominent in the famine stories—give shape to Ruth supports the view that a central concern of the story of Ruth is the Lord's election of an heir to the covenant promises and the Lord's faithfulness to those promises.

Offspring and Land: Threatened and Restored

As we have already seen, the introduction of Ruth bears a striking resemblance to the story of Isaac in Gerar: a famine in the land, a man sojourning among foreigners with his wife and two sons, then a return back to the land. But the differences are just as striking, differences related especially to land and offspring. Whereas the Lord appeared to Isaac in Gerar and gave him the patriarchal promises of offspring who would possess the land of Canaan (Gen 26:2–5), there is no word from the Lord for Elimelech or his family, no promises of either land or offspring. Furthermore, although Elimelech is like Isaac in leaving behind his previous home and land, he is unlike Isaac in that he has abandoned the promised land.⁴⁵ Even more ominously, Elimelech dies in Moab (Ruth 1:3), leaving his family vulnerable to the threats of poverty, hunger, and assimilation; Isaac, though he feared that he would die in Gerar (Gen 26:7), nevertheless survived his sojourn.

After his death, Elimelech's sons take the next step to assimilation, doing the thing that both Abraham and Isaac feared for their own sons: marrying foreign wives, and Moabite wives at that (Gen 24:2–4; 26:34, 35; 28:1; Ruth 1:4; cf. Deut 23:3, 4). If such matches produce sons, it seems unlikely that these heirs of Elimelech will worship the Lord or return to Judah to settle on Elimelech's ancestral land.⁴⁶ But Mahlon and Chilion do not have sons; like their father, they die in Moab, thus wiping out any chance that Elimelech could have heirs who would carry on his name and live on the land that had belonged to him in Judah. And with Elimelech dead and Naomi too old to remarry, there is now no hope even of substitute sons (Ruth 1:12, 13).⁴⁷ In contrast, both of Isaac's sons survived the sojourn, and at the end of Genesis 26, although one son has married Canaanites, the son marked from the womb for greatness remains unmarried.

⁴⁵ Lau and Goswell, 73–79.

⁴⁶ We should recall Abraham's insistence that his servant not take Isaac out of the land of Canaan to marry (24:6). Abraham no doubt feared that neither Isaac nor Isaac's sons would ever come back to the land of promise. Nahum M. Sarna remarks that such a "desert[ion of] the land" for the sake of marriage would be tantamount to "renouncing God's promises." *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society: 1989), 163. Recall, too, that it was only with great difficulty that Jacob managed to bring his family—a family founded outside the boundaries of Canaan—back to the land of promise (Gen 31).

⁴⁷ Robertson is thus correct that "[i]t is essential to the story [of Ruth] . . . that the family should be plunged into dire distress—the direr the better" (209).

In Genesis 26, Isaac's famine and sojourn had raised two questions: Is Isaac really the chosen heir to the covenant promises?⁴⁸ If so, will God be faithful to those promises? By the end of the chapter, the answer to both questions is clear: yes. The parallels between the Book of Ruth and the Genesis famine stories suggest that the same questions should be asked of Elimelech's famine and sojourn: Is Elimelech in any sense an heir to the patriarchal covenant promises? If so, will God be faithful to those promises? At the end of chapter 1, it appears that the answer to one or the other of those questions must be no. Nearly everything Abraham and Isaac feared for themselves and their families has happened to Elimelech and his own family: Elimelech is dead; his sons have married foreign brides and then died sonless; his widow is impoverished and returns to Judah incapable of maintaining her husband's ancestral land. It thus appears to be the case that Elimelech has no claim on the patriarchal promises; as an Israelite he is part of the promised offspring, but he is not a personal and direct heir to the promise of multiplied offspring living in the promised land. His own family can go extinct without threatening God's faithfulness.

But if we conclude that the patriarchal promises have no direct bearing on Elimelech's personal story, why would echoes of the Isaac narratives, and especially Genesis 26, be so prominent in Ruth? Asking this question sets the reader up to understand the significance of what happens after chapter 1, in Ruth 2–4. The rest of Ruth recounts the unexpected, providential reversal of chapter 1's tragedies: through the loyal kindness of two people—Ruth, a Gentile convert, and Boaz, the family redeemer—Elimelech's land is secured, and a substitute son is born to live on that land and care for Elimelech's widow and daughter-in-law. This astonishing reversal should make the reader revisit his initial judgments: by the end of the book, it appears that the famine and sojourn are in fact serving the same function as in the patriarchal famine stories, proving God's faithfulness to the covenant promises in the face of humanly insurmountable difficulties. But if that is true, it raises again the question of Elimelech's relation to the patriarchal promises, a question I will take up when I return to the role of the covenant in Ruth. But first we will consider God's presence in Ruth in relation to blessing.

Presence and Blessing: Moving the Story Along

While the Lord's presence and blessing frame and pervade Isaac's sojourn in Gerar, the Lord seems strangely absent from most of Ruth's story: although the Lord's name "YHWH" (יהוה) appears eighteen times, "God" (אֱלֹהִים) three times,⁴⁹ and "Shaddai" (שַׁדַּי) twice, it is not the narrator but characters in the story who invoke God's name and attribute various actions to him. Not until the final scene of the story does the narrator himself say directly that the Lord has acted.⁵⁰ On the other hand, blessings play a major role in Ruth. Indeed, each major scene contains a blessing, for a total of

⁴⁸ Isaac's status as the covenant heir was already established in Genesis 17:19, but it is the nature of biblical narrative that what has been declared with certainty may still appear uncertain to characters in the story, and readers participate in that sense of uncertainty.

⁴⁹ אֱלֹהִים "god(s), God" actually occurs four times, but in Ruth 1:15 it refers to Moabite gods.

⁵⁰ For comparison, the Lord's name (יהוה) appears seven times in Genesis 26—a single chapter—and the narrator directly attributes five actions to him: he "appears" twice (vv. 2, 24), he "speaks" twice (vv. 2, 24) and he "blesses" once (v. 12). "God" (אֱלֹהִים) occurs once in Genesis 26, as well (v. 24).

seven separate blessing episodes. It may seem that in Ruth, unlike in Genesis 26, blessing depends not on the Lord's presence but instead on the goodwill of people.⁵¹ Yet, as I argue in this section, one of the functions of the blessings in Ruth is to draw the reader's attention to God's presence, partially hidden from view until the very end.

In each of Ruth's five major scenes, at least one character blesses someone else.⁵² All of these blessings take one of two basic forms: either a clause headed by a jussive verb expressing a wish or desire, with the Lord (יהוה) as the subject (1:8, 9; 2:4, 12; 4:11);⁵³ or a verbless (or copulative) clause with בָּרוּךְ/בְּרוּכָה (Qal passive participle of בָּרַךְ "bless") as the predicate and the person blessed as the subject (2:19, 20; 3:10; 4:14). Although the second pattern necessarily contains the word בָּרַךְ "bless," the first may or may not.⁵⁴ The blessings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Blessing Episodes in the Book of Ruth

Reference	Person Blessing	Person Blessed	Blessing
1:8, 9	Naomi	Orpah and Ruth	the Lord's loyal kindness (חֶסֶד); security in a new home with a new husband
2:4	Boaz/laborers	laborers/Boaz	the Lord's presence and blessing (בָּרַךְ)
2:12	Boaz	Ruth	repayment and a full reward
2:19, 20	Naomi	Boaz	unspecified
3:10	Boaz	Ruth	unspecified
4:11, 12	villagers & elders	Ruth and Boaz	offspring (זָרַע) for Ruth; a name for Boaz
4:14	women	the Lord (& Ruth's son)	a name for the offspring

Blessings play a critical role in structuring the plot. Not only do blessings appear in every scene, but several of the blessings specifically anticipate later events. The Lord's loyal kindness (חֶסֶד) that Naomi asks for Ruth in 1:8–9 arrives in the form of the loyal kindness shown by Boaz in later chapters (see especially 2:19–20 for Naomi's characterization of Boaz's actions in this way). The new home and

⁵¹ Vellas, 204, 205.

⁵² I divide Ruth as follows: Introduction: Moab (1:1–5); Scene 1: Return to Bethlehem (1:6–22); Scene 2: Home-Field-Home (2:1–23); Scene 3: Home-Threshing Floor-Home (3:1–18); Scene 4: City Gate (4:1–12); Scene 5: Birth (4:13–17); Conclusion: Genealogy (4:18–22). This outline is a fairly standard analysis based on physical settings and climactic action. My scenes 4 and 5 are often regarded as a single scene, as in Stephen Bertman's four-scene analysis. "Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth," *JBL* 84, no. 2 (June 1965), 165–68.

⁵³ Note that jussive verbs are often formally identical to the imperfect conjugation; for discussion, see Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, rev. ed., Subsidia Biblica 27 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2006), §46.a, b; §114.g–l. Note, too, the following variations. The first half of the blessing exchange in Ruth 2:4, "The Lord be with you" (יְהוָה עִמָּכֶם) is a verbless clause but is clearly volitive in meaning (see *ibid.*, §163.b). Ruth 4:12, a continuation of a blessing which begins in verse 11 with "may the Lord give" (יִתֵּן יְהוָה), has "your house" as the subject of the jussive verb "be" (יִהְיֶה בֵּיתְךָ). Similarly, the blessing in 4:14 begins with "blessed be" (following the second formula type discussed above) but continues with a second clause making "his name" the subject of the jussive verb "be called" (יִקְרָא שְׁמוֹ). For further discussion of the blessing in 4:14, see footnote 63.

⁵⁴ The archetypal blessing of Genesis 48:20, for example, does not have the word בָּרַךְ "bless": "May God establish you like Ephraim and like Manasseh (וְכַמְנַשֶּׁה וְכַמְנַשֶּׁה). The seven blessings identified in Table 1 are uncontroversial among interpreters; see, among others, Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, li, 11, 31, 43, 61, 62, 83–86, 88, 89.

husband, also part of the blessing in 1:8–9, are provided at the resolution in 4:13.⁵⁵ When Boaz blesses Ruth in 2:12, he considers her worthy of a full reward in part because she has come under the Lord's wings; when Ruth approaches Boaz in chapter 3, she asks him to spread his wings over her (3:9), and she receives her full reward in her marriage and the birth of a son (4:13). The offspring anticipated in the blessing of 4:11–12 is born in the very next verse.

In fact, the blessings distributed throughout Ruth serve the same plot function as the promises to Isaac at the start and end of his famine narrative. Recall that there are exactly seven blessing episodes in Ruth, which is likely no accident. The number *seven* (שֶׁבַע) and the verb *swear* (שָׁבַע) share the same consonants.⁵⁶ It is reasonable to suppose that the author of Ruth wishes to subtly reinforce the narrative connection between the sworn oath of Gerar and the blessings of Ruth by relating exactly seven blessing episodes. Thus, at the beginning of Isaac's sojourn, the Lord promises to "bless" (בָּרַךְ) him, and that blessing is then spelled out in terms of offspring and land, the contents of God's "sworn oath" to Abraham (Gen 26:3, 4). God's protection of Isaac and his family in Gerar, Isaac's marvelous productivity as a farmer, and his safe return to Beersheba are all anticipated by that initial promise of blessing. Likewise, the blessings in the Book of Ruth reveal to the reader that the crucial events of the story are part of a design shaped by intention—God's intention—rather than chance, moving towards a good end.⁵⁷

Not only do the blessings in Ruth give shape and direction within the story, but they also reach beyond the scope of the immediate narrative, anticipating events yet to come. In particular, the blessings of chapter 4 invoke the Lord to bestow on Boaz enduring fame in Bethlehem (vv. 11, 12) and to make Ruth and Boaz's offspring into a great house with national fame (vv. 11, 12, 14). These blessings foreshadow the story's continuation in 1 & 2 Samuel, as the Lord builds a house for Ruth and Boaz's descendant David, making him great in Israel.⁵⁸ Thus the blessings of Ruth work like the

⁵⁵ Even if Naomi's blessing in 1:8–9 is ironic (as Linafelt suggests, 10) or insincere and aborted (as Schipper argues, 91, 103), it nevertheless has the form of a standard blessing, and it sets up an expectation for what will follow in the story. Similarly, Isaac did not intend to give Jacob the firstborn's blessing (Gen 27:23), but once given, it was irrevocable (27:33) and, under God's sovereignty, gave definitive shape to Jacob's future and that of his descendants.

⁵⁶ The similarity between *seven* and *swear* was not lost on the patriarchs: the name "Beersheba" (בְּאֵר שָׁבַע) puns on these two words, "well of seven/swearing" (Gen 21:22–31), and the entire narrative works the pun out in detail.

⁵⁷ This conclusion is not contradicted by Ruth 2:3, which says that Ruth came upon Boaz's field by chance: וַיִּקְרַח מִקְרָהּ ("her happenstance happened"). Here the reader is invited to share in the perspective of Ruth, who is guided to this particular field neither by the advice of others nor by her own intention. Fredric W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, WBC 9 (Dallas: Word, 1996), 104–6. In the larger perspective of the narrative, the expression is ironic, inviting the reader to contrast his own more extensive knowledge of the situation with the character's less complete knowledge. Hubbard 141. Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky note that the verb קרה "to happen" is used for divine action in Genesis 24:12 and 27:20 (both in narratives connected to Isaac), whereas the related noun מִקְרָה "happenstance" is used for chance in contrast to divine action in 1 Samuel 6:9 (in a speech given by Philistine priests and diviners) (30, 31). Schipper dismisses the relevance of the examples in Genesis because God is the explicit subject of the verb (117). If, however, I am correct that the story of Ruth invites the reader to be thinking of the Isaac narratives, the patriarchal background is much more relevant to understanding this expression than how "chance" is understood by Philistine priests.

⁵⁸ "How fully this blessing [in Ruth 4:11] was fulfilled is evident from the family genealogy, leading to David." Loretz, 394. It is not necessary to my argument that Ruth was originally situated in the Hebrew canon between Judges and 1 Samuel, as it is in the Septuagint, though such an argument is made by Campbell, 33–36, and extended with some force by Linafelt, xvii–xxv. Fischer is surely right that "[t]he book evidently wants to fill the gap between the Book of Judges

promises of blessing in the story of Isaac's sojourn, which, at the beginning and end of the narrative, look forward to the events that will unfold throughout the rest of Genesis and beyond, especially the numerical growth of Isaac's offspring.

Yet another function of the blessings in Ruth is to look backward to previous biblical narratives, integrating Ruth into a chain of historical events, especially the patriarchal histories.⁵⁹ The blessing of 4:11–12, with its references to Rachel and Leah, to Tamar and Perez, is often discussed in this regard, and there is no need to repeat that discussion here. Interpreters have also observed how Naomi's blessing of Boaz in 2:20 echoes Abraham's servant's blessing of the Lord after meeting Rebekah (Gen 24:27);⁶⁰ the significance of that connection is discussed in the next subsection, where the matter of loyal kindness (ṭṣṭḥ) is taken up.

Of particular interest here is the exchange between Boaz and his laborers, "the Lord be with you . . . the Lord bless you" (Ruth 2:4). There is good reason to think that in this exchange the reader is meant to recall the same pairing of the Lord's presence and blessing in relation to Isaac in Gerar; this is especially the case given the fact that the close pairing of the Lord's presence and blessing, in that order, is found nowhere else in Scripture. This echo of the Isaac story occurs at a key juncture in the story: Naomi has earlier blessed Ruth in the hope that the Lord will show her his loyal kindness, giving her security in the home of a new husband (1:8, 9), but up to this point in the narrative, nothing hopeful has happened in that regard. Now, at the start of chapter 2, Ruth is about to encounter the Lord's loyal kindness in the person of Naomi's redeemer, who will turn out to be Ruth's new husband. It is here that the Lord's presence and blessing are invoked as greetings, almost as though the theme song of the Gerar episode is cued in the background as the reader watches Naomi's blessing of Ruth begin its slow fulfillment. This echo, at this point in the story, puts the reader on notice that all the blessings spoken in the story, from the first to the last chapter, depend crucially upon the Lord's presence with those so blessed, just as Isaac's protection and prosperity in Gerar were evidence that the Lord was with him and was blessing him.⁶¹

This complex pattern of relations between blessing and fulfillment, and between blessing and history, culminates in Ruth 4:13, the climax of the narrative, where Ruth receives the hoped-for husband and the hoped-for son. The marriage of Ruth and birth of a son are the events to which the blessings—in fact, the entire narrative—have been moving, and it is at this point that the narrator

and the Book of Samuel" (141), regardless of its placement in various canonical orderings (which may have depended on time of composition, length, thematic concerns, liturgical usage, or any number of other reasons now lost to us).

⁵⁹ Observe, too, that only Israelites speak blessings in the Book of Ruth, but the recipients of these blessings are both Israelites and Gentiles. This is the pattern suggested by the Lord's first promise to Abram, "you will be a blessing . . . and in you all the clans of the earth will be blessed" (Gen 12:2, 3): Abraham and his descendants are a spring of blessing that flows out to the nations.

⁶⁰ Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 43.

⁶¹ Campbell, 93, discusses Boaz's greeting in relation to the similar greeting found in Psalm 129:8 and the grammar of Judges 6:12 but does not notice the connection between presence and blessing or the allusion to Isaac in Gerar. Hubbard, 144, observes that Boaz's greeting "affirmed the presence of Yahweh in this scene," though without detecting an echo of Genesis 26:3 or directly connecting the Lord's presence with his blessing.

throws off his reticence and directly attributes action to the Lord: “the Lord gave her conception.”⁶² Read in light of the exchange of blessings in 2:4, this assertion confirms the Lord’s work in all the circumstances leading up to and following the conception, but it also picks out the conception of a son as the high point of the narrative. These climactic events are followed by the climactic blessing, this one directed as praise to the Lord and focused on the future greatness of the newborn son: “may his name be called [Niphal jussive of קרא ‘call’ in Israel] (4:14).⁶³ The fulfillment of the previous blessings, mediated by the Lord’s (mostly hidden) presence, makes it certain that this blessing, too, will be realized, and the notice that the son was David’s grandfather (4:17), followed by a genealogy leading to David (4:18–22), leaves the reader in no doubt.

Covenant and Loyal Kindness: The Patriarchal Narrative Continued

The preceding themes—seed and land, divine presence and blessing—are bound together in the patriarchal stories by the covenant, specifically the Lord’s covenant with Abraham. It might seem odd, then, that the word *covenant* (בְּרִית) never occurs in the Book of Ruth. Is it perhaps the case that God’s promises and blessing and presence are operating in Ruth outside the realm of covenant? Has the covenant receded in importance or even become inoperative at this stage in redemptive history? There are two reasons that these questions can be answered with a definite no.

First, as I have argued up to this point, the author of Ruth intends that the story be read in light of the patriarchal stories, especially the story of Isaac in Gerar, which it resembles in several ways. If we compare Ruth to the Isaac story, we notice that the word *covenant* (בְּרִית) never occurs in Genesis 26, either. But does this mean that Isaac is not party to the covenant, or that the covenant is no longer important? Certainly not. The wording of 26:3, “mak[ing] firm the oath I swore to Abraham,” evokes the covenant, and the promises of chapter 26 are the promises associated with the covenant that God had said he would confirm with Isaac (Gen 17:6–8, 19, 21). It is not just Genesis 26 where the covenant is not mentioned by name: after chapter 17, the word *covenant* (בְּרִית) is never again used in Genesis in reference to God’s promises to the patriarchs, even though the continuation of the covenant and its

⁶² “It is of the utmost importance to note that in iv 13, where the unravelling of the story takes place, Yahweh is mentioned for the first and only time in a direct way as the subject of a verb.” W. S. Prinsloo, “The Theology of the Book of Ruth,” *Vetus Testamentum* 30, no. 3 (1980), 339. “[In this last chapter], YHWH himself emerges from his hidden place in the narrative. It is, indeed, his part in the closing scene that ties the whole story together.” Bovell, 188. We should also observe that Sarah’s conception of Isaac (Gen 21:1, 2), Rebekah’s of Jacob and Esau (25:21), Leah’s of Reuben and Issachar (29:31, 32; 30:17, 18), and Rachel’s of Joseph (30:23, 23) are all attributed to the Lord’s intervention, though of no one else in the OT is it said so directly that the Lord “gave her conception.” Thanks to Layton Talbert for drawing my attention to Genesis 25:21 in particular.

⁶³ The blessing of Ruth 4:14 is in fact a dual blessing: “blessed be the Lord” (בָּרוּךְ יְהוָה) is followed by a jussive verb whose subject is “his name” (וְיִקְרָא שְׁמוֹ), referring most likely to Naomi’s grandson, the offspring (see arguments in Schipper, 179). The closest grammatical parallel in the OT is Noah’s blessing of Shem in Genesis 9:26, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem, and may Canaan be a slave to him” (בָּרוּךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי שֵׁם וְיִהְיֶה כְנַעַן עֶבֶד לָמוֹ). In both cases, “blessed be the Lord” is followed by a jussive verb with a subject containing a suffixed 3ms pronoun whose antecedent is not the Lord but someone blessed by the Lord. It might be significant that both blessings involve שֵׁם “Shem/name.” Furthermore, just as the blessing of Ruth 4:14 is concerned ultimately with God’s election of David, so too Genesis 9:26 is, according to Gordon J. Wenham, “the first intimation that the line of God’s election blessing is going through Shem.” *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1 (Dallas: Word, 1987), 202.

promises is one of the primary concerns of chapters 18–50. (The reference in Exodus 2:24 to God’s “covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob” clears away any doubt about the recipients of the covenant.) But once the covenant is established, its promises specified, and its sign commanded, there is no longer any need to use the word “covenant” in the Genesis narrative: simply mentioning the sign or the promises is enough to evoke the covenant itself. So then in Ruth, the centrality of land, offspring, blessing, and God’s presence, the things promised in the covenant, is meant to bring the covenant itself to the reader’s mind, and all the more so because the story of Ruth begins with allusions to the patriarchal famine stories.

A second reason to think that the covenant is lurking behind the scenes in Ruth is the role played by loyal kindness (דָּוָה) in Ruth. Although the meaning of the term דָּוָה is not restricted to *covenant* loyalty, it is nevertheless a term which frequently occurs in contexts in which covenants are under discussion or in the background.⁶⁴ The term is used three times in Ruth, twice in relation to Ruth, and once in relation to Boaz. In Ruth 1, Naomi blesses her daughters-in-law with the prayer that the Lord will act in loyal kindness (דָּוָה) toward them, just as they acted toward their husbands and toward Naomi (1:8). This request for the Lord’s loyal kindness to Ruth and Orpah is remarkable: nowhere else in the historical books (with a single possible exception) is the Lord’s loyal kindness associated directly with a Gentile.⁶⁵ Although Orpah passes out of the story, the rest of the narrative can be read as the unfolding of this wish that the Lord act in loyal kindness toward Ruth, the kind of loyalty that the Lord elsewhere shows only to members of his covenant.⁶⁶

In chapter 2 there is an even clearer connection between loyal kindness and the covenant. When Boaz has shown kindness to Ruth, Naomi blesses him (Ruth 2:20), exclaiming that he—and perhaps the Lord⁶⁷—has not forsaken loyal kindness with the living or the dead. As already noted, this blessing is an adaptation of the blessing with which Abraham’s servant blesses the Lord upon the success of his mission to find Isaac a wife (Gen 24:27). The servant invokes the Lord’s loyal kindness and faithfulness specifically in relation to the Lord’s covenant with Abraham, because the success of the covenant promises depends on the covenant heir’s finding an appropriate bride who could be mother to the next covenant heir. It is no coincidence that in the Ruth story, Naomi’s blessing, which recalls

⁶⁴ See David A. Baer and Robert P. Gordon, “דָּוָה,” *NIDOTTE*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2:211–18.

⁶⁵ That one (possible) exception is 2 Samuel 15:20, where David blesses Ittai the Gittite with “loyal kindness and faithfulness” (דָּוָה וְאֵמֶת) in a situation that strongly resembles the present context, in which a Gentile has left his own land and people and attached himself to an Israelite. The MT of 2 Samuel 15:20 lacks an explicit reference to the Lord as the one showing loyal kindness, but the LXX suggests a text in which the Lord is the subject. For discussion see Hubbard, 108n18. Lau and Goswell, 33, observe that “[e]ven without textual repair . . . the reference must be to *divine* kindness” (emphasis original).

⁶⁶ Later, in Ruth 3, Boaz praises two acts of loyal kindness on Ruth’s part: her journey to Judah with Naomi and her determination to abandon better marriage prospects so as to marry a kinsman of her dead husband and thus secure his property and offspring (3:10). This instance of דָּוָה will not be discussed here.

⁶⁷ Basil A. Rebera’s arguments that Boaz is Naomi’s intended referent are, in my view, unassailable. “Yahweh or Boaz? Ruth 2.20 Reconsidered,” *The Bible Translator* 36, no. 3 (1985), 317–27. Nevertheless, the allusion to Genesis 24:27 suggests that the author wishes the reader to contemplate the grammatical ambiguity and think of the Lord’s loyal kindness in addition to or behind Boaz’s.

the successful mission to find a bride for Isaac, comes just before the betrothal scene of Ruth and Boaz. This juxtaposition suggests that the narrator—though not necessarily Naomi—intends to connect the loyal kindness in Naomi’s blessing to the patriarchal seed promise to which the Lord was loyal when he provided Isaac with a wife.⁶⁸

If it is true, though, that the Book of Ruth is concerned with God’s loyalty to the Abrahamic Covenant, it is not obvious how Elimelech and his family relate to that covenant (an issue first raised at the end of the discussion of offspring and land). Although every Israelite participated in the promises guaranteed in the Abrahamic Covenant by virtue of being part of a community formed by that covenant—a great nation living in the land of promise—the Abrahamic Covenant did not guarantee that every particular Israelite would have offspring that would live in the land.⁶⁹ Thus, it was possible that Elimelech’s family line could go extinct without threatening the covenant in any way.

However, I suggest that there are two ways in which the narrator intends to tie Elimelech’s family with the Abrahamic promises. First, the near extinction of Elimelech’s family line and its providential rescue is the story of Israel itself during the time of the Judges.⁷⁰ The timeframe of the story—the days that the Judges judged (Ruth 1:1)—taken together with the meaning of Elimelech’s name—“my God is king”—suggests that Elimelech was a representative of the nation in its apostasy, near destruction, and redemption. If that is true, then the story is, at least in part, about the Lord’s faithfulness to the Abrahamic Covenant in relation to the entire nation of Israel. The Lord’s restoration of Elimelech’s land and family is a sign that the Lord will also preserve the nation of Israel in spite of its present unfaithfulness.⁷¹

But Elimelech is not presented in Ruth merely as a representative or proxy for the nation. I suggest that the Ruth story shows that the Lord’s loyal kindness rested on Elimelech and his offspring in direct relation to the Abrahamic Covenant, just as the Lord showed himself loyal to Isaac, the first heir born into the Abrahamic Covenant. This claim will be explored in the next section.

⁶⁸ Robert D. Bell observes that the Lord’s **יְהוָה** is on display in chapter 4 as well, even though the term itself is not used. *The Theological Messages of the Old Testament Books* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2010), 128. Linafelt, 11, observes that **יְהוָה** “is a key word in the book Ruth not by frequency of occurrence but by its occurrence in particularly crucial passages.”

⁶⁹ For expositional purposes, I gloss over the role played by the Mosaic Covenant in administering the Abrahamic promises in relation to the Israelite nation and the individuals comprising that nation. For discussion of the relation between the promise covenants and the administrative covenants, see Thomas Edward McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985).

⁷⁰ So Fee and Stuart, 79. Taking a slightly different (but perhaps reinforcing) perspective, Leithart argues that “Naomi is a picture of Israel” (119).

⁷¹ Fisch, 432, sees in the structure of Ruth the pattern of “exile and restoration so basic to the whole body of the Old Testament narrative.”

Synthesis: Ruth's Offspring as Elect Covenant Heir

A proper understanding of Ruth must account not only for the introduction, which links the story to the patriarchal famine stories and focuses on the threat to the covenant promises, but also for the epilogue, which comprises a patriarch-like genealogy tracing the line of Perez through the son of Boaz to King David.⁷² The heading of the genealogy in Ruth 4:18–22, “these are the generations,” follows the pattern of the genealogies in Genesis, genealogies that propel the redemptive-historical narrative of Genesis forward from Adam to elect Abraham, then on to Isaac, Jacob, and his sons. Like the genealogies in Genesis, the genealogy in Ruth is identifying the line of the elect, the heir to God’s covenant.

Who is that heir? King David himself. The first readers of Ruth, who lived during or after the time of David, would have known that David, like the patriarchs, was the recipient of a covenant with the Lord.⁷³ But the Davidic Covenant is not strictly speaking a brand-new covenant: it is a regal amplification of the Abrahamic Covenant.⁷⁴ The Lord promises to make David’s name great (2 Sam 7:9), just as he originally promised to Abraham (Gen 12:2).⁷⁵ Just as Abraham’s descendants are promised the land of Canaan (Gen 12:7), the nation under David is promised a place where they will be planted (2 Sam 7:10). And just as the Abrahamic promises are connected with offspring (Gen 12:7), so too the Lord’s promise to David concerns his offspring (2 Sam 7:12–15). All of these—a name, a place, offspring—are major concerns of the patriarchal narratives, and as we have seen, of Ruth, as well. The covenant with David also makes explicit mention of the Lord’s presence with David (2 Sam 7:9; cf. Gen 26:3, 24)⁷⁶ and the Lord’s loyal kindness (2 Sam 7:15), both of which were also prominent

⁷² The *toledoth* formula which introduces the genealogy in Ruth 4:18 (“(and) these are the generations of” [אֵלֶּה(ו) (תּוֹלְדוֹת)]) occurs ten times in Genesis (2:4; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2), where it serves as a key structural element for moving from the primeval history, through the patriarchs, on to the sons of Israel; it then occurs once in Numbers 3:1, and once again in 1 Chronicles 1:29. None of these genealogies goes further than the sons of Aaron, so chronologically, the genealogy in Ruth bridges the gap between Judah and David, signaling that Ruth should be read as a continuation of the covenant story that leaves off at the end of Genesis. Irmtraud Fischer writes, “[W]ith the genealogy of Perez, the Book of Ruth continues the Genesis narrative from Gen 38 without a break” (142). See, too, Harold Fisch, who remarks, “There are delicate but insistent signs throughout the book [of Ruth] pointing to a continuing covenant history beginning with the patriarchs and culminating with the royal house of David whose name forms the last word of the text” (435).

⁷³ Note that my argument here is similar, but not identical, to the claim in Gerleman, *Ruth*, referenced by Roland E. Murphey: “Gerleman is correct in seeing a parallel between Ruth and the patriarchal narratives; both have the same theological direction—leading into the primary saving institutions of Israel: the covenant with Israel at Sinai, and the covenant with David.” *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*, FOTL 13 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 87.

⁷⁴ McComiskey writes, “The covenant with David did not abrogate the Abrahamic covenant; it refined it and served as a gracious reaffirmation of the promise” (142). For discussion of the relationship between the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants, see especially 21–30.

⁷⁵ Significantly, it is “in Isaac” that Abraham’s “offspring will be named [Niphal קרא]” (Gen. 21:12), as noted by Lortetz, 395n14. In that connection, observe the blessing in Ruth 4:14, which wishes for Naomi’s grandson, “may his name be called [also Niphal of קרא] in Israel.”

⁷⁶ In fact, as Jeremy Farmer has pointed out to me, the presence of the Lord is a crucial component of the Davidic Covenant, inasmuch as the occasion for the covenant is David’s desire to build the temple, God’s dwelling place with his people.

elements in the Ruth story.⁷⁷ And in David's response to the Lord, he characterizes all that God has promised him as God's "blessing" on his house (2 Sam 7:29). Thus, David is the kingly heir to God's covenant with Abraham, and his status as the elect son demonstrates that his father and grandfather and great-grandfathers, all the way back to Perez, were part of the line of elect heirs, as well.

So what role does the Book of Ruth play in relation to David and the covenant? The characters in the story itself—the historical Elimelech and Naomi and Ruth and Boaz—could not have known that they were playing a part in a series of events that would culminate in the birth of an heir to the Lord's promises to Abraham. Ruth is a retrospective story, written from the perspective of people who already know that David is the elect covenant heir, and it shows how the Lord preserved the line of elect heirs during a period of national and personal crisis on par with the crises that Abraham and Isaac themselves faced, crises that threatened the very continuation of the elect covenant family. The story of Ruth demonstrates the Lord's faithfulness to the Abrahamic Covenant even when the heirs to that covenant did not realize their personal role in transmitting it to the following generations.

By placing his story alongside the Isaac famine narrative, the narrator invites the reader to affirm the Lord's astonishing preservation of the covenant seed, almost literally bringing life from death. Just as the famine stories in Genesis confirm the Lord's election of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, so too this story of a family line dying and rising again in another Judean famine is meant to confirm the Lord's election of that family to receive his covenant promises. The choice of Isaac, in particular, as the background for the story of Ruth is especially fitting: Isaac is remarkable for his passivity and general lack of action, but his son was Israel, his grandsons the tribal heads. No Isaac, no Israel.⁷⁸ So too with Elimelech's family, whose greatness lies ultimately in God's election and providential preservation for the sake of Israel's future king, David.

Conclusion

The approach to reading Ruth offered in this article may raise the question: How could so many readers have missed multiple echoes of the Isaac narratives, echoes that I have claimed to be a crucial component of Ruth's interpretation? Part of the answer lies in an observation by Richard Hays, remarking on the reason that so many allusions to the OT in the letters of Paul have been overlooked in the history of the church: "Gentile Christian readers at a very early date lost Paul's sense of urgency about relating the gospel to God's dealings with Israel and, slightly later, began reading Paul's letters

⁷⁷ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld notes that "although the term 'loyalty' [לְחֵסֶד] is used in the history with reference to the Davidic tradition, the word 'covenant' is restricted to occasions in which we find reference to whole people and the law, not just reference to the royal line." *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective*, Overtures to Biblical Theology 16 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 63. Thus, if Ruth is meant to evoke the Davidic Covenant, as I claim it does, one expects the word *loyal kindness* (לְחֵסֶד), but it would actually be surprising to find the word *covenant* (בְּרִית) in the book. See also Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Heseḏ in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 17 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), 143.

⁷⁸ Alter observes that Isaac and Rebekah are "the first man and wife born into the covenant God has made with Abraham and his seed," and so they "provide certain paradigmatic traits for the future historical destiny of Israel." Alter goes on to say, "The alignment of Ruth's story with the Pentateuchal betrothal type-scene becomes an intimation of her portentous future as progenitrix of the divinely chosen house of David" (60).

within the interpretive matrix of the New Testament canon.”⁷⁹ The same can be said for Gentile Christian readers of the OT: perhaps we have been too quick to look for the NT relevance of OT stories, losing the urgency felt by the authors of those OT narratives to relate their histories to even earlier narratives in Scripture. In his essay on the web of connections between Ruth and other OT narratives, Peter Leithart speaks of “internal typologies *within* the Old Testament” (emphasis mine) and continues: “By refusing to ‘jump to Jesus’ and by treating the elaborately woven texture of the Old Testament with serious delight, Christians curb the habit of skimming the surface” of the OT.⁸⁰ While Leithart speaks of “serious delight,” Hays speaks of the “satisfaction” that a reader experiences when an echo of Scripture in Paul (and in our case, in Ruth) resonates for him.⁸¹ This is, after all, what the author must have intended: not an ironclad proof that he was alluding to this or that earlier Scripture, but the poignancy felt by a reader who, like the author, has read and loved and learned by heart the earlier narratives.

Such a reader must not, of course, stay in the OT: in fact, he finds that the OT is a broad highway to Jesus, rather than a series of springboards. Such a reader does indeed look for the NT relevance of OT, but he finds that the care he has taken in the OT enriches rather than diminishes the New.

⁷⁹ Hays, 31.

⁸⁰ “When Gentile Meets Jew: A Christian Reading of Ruth & the Hebrew Scriptures,” *Touchstone*, May 2009, 24.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

“The Mirror of the Prince”: Machiavelli, Erasmus, and Luther on Guidance for the Ruler

by Mark Sidwell¹

One challenge to discerning a Christian worldview is the scope of the task.² Although a Christian should consider every legitimate human activity in light of God’s revelation, analyzing a God-ordained institution such as human government is daunting because of the complexity of the subject. One aspect of discerning a biblical approach to government is measuring the character of rulers and the ethical framework they follow. Past writers have tried to instruct rulers about the path they should follow to achieve “success.” Some of these writers attempted to provide a Christian foundation for ethical rule, while others offered pragmatic approaches where ethics take the back seat. Such works may not provide a comprehensive biblical philosophy of government, but they perhaps provide a step toward considering this issue.

Political theory is a broad topic with a long history. In classical times Polybius devoted a section of his *Histories* to describing the constitution of the Roman Republic. During the Enlightenment Montesquieu wrote his *Spirit of Laws*, advocating the separation of powers in government, based on what he thought he observed in the British system. Some works of political theory are more narrowly, even individually, focused. Robert Kolb describes the genre of the “mirror of the prince,” a description of the good ruler and a guide to his behavior.³ Kolb classifies as belonging to this genre three roughly contemporary works by Machiavelli, Erasmus, and Luther. These men all wrote at the same time on the same topic. At times their treatment is similar. Yet frequently their approaches vary widely.

The Three Authors

Before looking more closely at these works, we should consider the background of the authors. Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) was born in Florence, often considered the birthplace of the Renaissance. The city faced tensions between its traditional republican form of government and the

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² I would like to thank Dale Johnson and John Matzko for reading this article and providing helpful comments and suggestions.

³ Robert Kolb, “Luther on Peasants and Princes,” *Lutheran Quarterly*, New Series, 23 (2009): 137. This genre, often referred to under its Latin equivalent (*speculum principum*), has its roots in the Middle Ages but harks back to ancient works such as Xenophon’s *Education of Cyrus* and Seneca’s *On Clemency*, written for the Emperor Nero. The appeal of such works to humanist writers of the Renaissance would be natural in their appeal to ancient models. Tangentially, John Calvin’s first published work was a commentary on Seneca’s essay. For a survey of this genre and its contributing authors, see Lester K. Born, “Introduction,” in Desiderius Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, trans. Lester K. Born (1936; reprint, New York: Octagon, 1965), 99–124.

growing power of the wealthy Medici family, who translated their wealth from the banking trade into political dominance. When the Florentines expelled the Medici in 1494 to reestablish their republic, Machiavelli served the new government in various roles. Among his efforts was an attempt to organize a Florentine militia to reduce the republic's dependence on the mercenaries who were the mainstay of political power in Renaissance Italy. Unfortunately, when the Medici regained power in 1512, Machiavelli found himself ousted from position, banished, tortured, and placed under house arrest. Machiavelli spent his last years dedicating himself to writing and travel, mending his fences with the Medici to the point that they patronized some of his writing efforts. In other words, Machiavelli was a professional politician with practical experience, not simply a theorist.⁴

Machiavelli has been called the “father of modern political science.”⁵ In addition to *The Prince*, the greatest source of his fame, Machiavelli also wrote other works relating to political theory. His *Discourses on Livy* offered a commentary on the patterns that Machiavelli thought the Roman historian had provided for government. In addition, he wrote *The Art of War* and *Discourse on Reforming the Government of Florence*. His multivolume history of Florence included political analysis of the city's government and diplomacy, although opinions vary about the literary quality of that history.⁶

Desiderius Erasmus (1469?–1536) was born in Rotterdam, but he is better known as a cosmopolitan citizen of Europe. The illegitimate son of a Catholic priest, Erasmus had remarkable natural gifts which he honed, first in a school run by the Brethren of the Common Life and then, after ordination into the church, at the University of Paris. His scholarly achievements won him various teaching posts, including at Cambridge and Oxford. In addition, he made acquaintance with leading scholars of Europe, their common facility in Latin overcoming Erasmus' limitations in languages such as English. Even more than in his teaching, Erasmus made his mark as a prolific writer, and he was perhaps the leading intellectual figure of his day, both through his published works and his voluminous correspondence with contemporary leaders.⁷

⁴ On Machiavelli's life and career, see Sebastian de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell* (New York: Vintage, 1994), which won the Pulitzer Prize; Miles Unger, *Machiavelli: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011); and John M. Najemy, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For this topic in particular, a work of more specific interest is Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli's God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), a study of his religious views that argues that Machiavelli was not anti-religious or anti-Christian.

⁵ See Felix Gilbert, “Political Thought of the Renaissance and Reformation,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 4 (1941): 445–46, 450.

⁶ Stromberg writes, “Machiavelli was not a very good historian; in fact, he was an extremely poor one. (Let anyone who doubts this judgment be condemned to read through all of that endless and formless chronicle of intrigues, his *History of Florence*.)” Paul Conkin and Roland N. Stromberg, *Heritage and Challenge of History* (1971; reprint, Arlington Heights, IL: Forum, 1989), 33. For a less critical evaluation of Machiavelli's history of Florence, see John Burrow, *A History of Histories* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 270–75.

⁷ On the life and career of Erasmus, a well-regarded recent study is Christine Christ von-Wedel, *Erasmus of Rotterdam: Advocate of a New Christianity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013). Still of value are older works on Erasmus, notably Johan Huizinga, *Erasmus of Rotterdam* (1912; reprint, London: Phaidon, 1952), also reprinted as *Erasmus and the Age of Reformation*; and Roland H. Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969). On the political ideas of Erasmus, see James D. Tracy, *The Politics of Erasmus: A Pacifist Intellectual and His Political Milieu* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978); and Hans Trapman, Jan van Herwaarden, and Adrie van der Laan, eds., *Erasmus Politicus: Erasmus and Political Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

Erasmus has been called “the prince of the humanists” and the leading example of “Christian humanism,” labels that require some clarification. The idea of Renaissance humanism bears little relation to the modern atheistic “humanism,” except perhaps in that Renaissance thinkers also asserted human worth and emphasized human achievement. Rather, Renaissance humanism was an approach to learning distinguished by its sources and method. Scholars of this era often used the phrase *ad fontes* (“to the fountainhead,” or “to the sources”) to describe both their sources and their methodology. The sources were the writings of the ancients, the literature of the Greeks and the Romans. The methodology was to recover manuscripts of this ancient literature and to study them by the grammatical-historical method. Renaissance humanism focused on the meaning and message of the various texts as a source of wisdom for contemporary readers. Christian humanists, such as Erasmus, looked to the Scriptures (and also Patristic literature) as the guide for religious reform. With this goal in mind, Erasmus published numerous writings on the biblical text. Famously, he edited the first published edition of the Greek NT paired with his own fresh Latin translation. This work in particular shaped not only Renaissance scholarship but also the teaching and theology of the Protestant reformers.⁸

The best known of this trio is Martin Luther (1483–1546), who launched the Protestant Reformation. Events from Luther’s life such as the posting of the Ninety-five Theses (1517), the Diet of Worms (1521), and the publishing of the German NT (1522) are major milestones in the early history of the Reformation. Thanks to Luther’s loquaciousness and muscular style, we know much of his personal story, from law student to Augustinian monk, to priest and university professor, to reformer. Luther provides details not only of the events of his life but equally a view into his interior life. In scholarship Luther was the equal of his contemporaries Machiavelli and Erasmus, producing treatises, sermons, commentaries, and other works that centered on his theological concerns but also touched on his reflections on social, cultural, and political issues.⁹

Writers have commonly discussed Luther’s mark on political theory under his theology of the two kingdoms. The roots of his political ideas appear to emerge from Luther’s theological concept of the Christian as *simul justus et peccator*, that the believer is simultaneously justified and a sinner. According to Luther, the believer is a citizen of two kingdoms established by God, the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of this world. As a *justified person*, the believer is a citizen of heaven, and the world has no claim on him; as a *sinner*, however, the believer is a member of a state that exists to limit and regulate

⁸ Historians often distinguish the southern from the northern Renaissance. The south (primarily Italy) was where the Renaissance began and was characterized by a focus on the visual arts (e.g., the painting and sculpture of Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, etc.). The Renaissance in northern Europe was more literary in focus as shown by the work of writers such as Erasmus, with the spread of their work fueled by the development of movable-type printing in that region. Of course, these characteristics are not mutually exclusive; there was literary achievement in the south, and notable works of art emerged from the north. One question worth considering is whether the difference in region plays any part in the contrast between Machiavelli in the south and Erasmus and Luther in the north.

⁹ There is an enormous literature on Martin Luther. Among the more helpful overviews are Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (1950; reprint, New York: Meridian, 1995), still a first-rate introduction after so many years; Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New York: Image, 1992); and James M. Kittelson and Hans H. Wiersma, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016).

sin. Neither kingdom has authority in the other realm, the state having no authority in God's kingdom, and the believer having no authority (i.e., inherently, as a believer) to rule in the earthly kingdom. However, God rules over both kingdoms, and the Christian has duties to both kingdoms that must be followed, despite tensions and difficulties. There is no "Christian state," for the state exists to regulate the sinful.¹⁰ The summary of Luther's views as expressed in the two-kingdoms concept is helpful in understanding his ideas, but there has also been some controversy over his approach. Notably, some critics have charged Luther with fostering a political passivity that hampered the response of German Lutherans to tyrannical regimes such as that of the Nazis.¹¹ Others, however, have argued that such criticism misrepresents Luther's ideas and that he by no means abdicated a Christian's responsibility to challenge wrongdoing in the political realm.¹²

The three works to be considered here, all solid and revealing examples of the "mirror" genre, are *The Prince* by Machiavelli, *The Education of a Christian Prince* by Erasmus, and a commentary on Psalm 101 by Luther, what Luther's editor calls the reformer's picture of "the pious prince."¹³ Machiavelli wrote his work around 1513, after his dismissal from office in Florence by the Medici, although *The Prince* was not actually published until 1532. Erasmus addressed his work in 1515 or early 1516 to the Habsburg Prince Charles, heir to the Spanish throne and soon to be Emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire, as part of Erasmus' introduction to the imperial court.¹⁴ The occasion behind Luther's commentary is less certain. Internal evidence indicates Luther gave the original lecture around 1533.¹⁵ Kolb suggests Luther lectured on Psalm 101 following the elevation of Johann Friedrich the Elder as Elector of Saxony in 1532.¹⁶

Comparing the Contents

The focus here is not so much the substance of the views of these three men but on the method they followed. Helpful topics for comparing these works are their (1) purpose, (2) sources, (3) use of historical examples, (4) treatment of religion, and (5) description of the behavior of the prince. Making such comparisons, however, requires considering a preliminary question. Erasmus and Luther were

¹⁰ For an introduction to and overview of Luther's view of the two kingdoms, see Paul Althaus, "The Two Kingdoms and the Two Governments," chapter 4 in *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1972), 43–82; also note chapter 8, "The State," 112–54. Although generally used in relation to Luther's political teaching, the concept of the two kingdoms is by no means limited to Luther or Lutheran theology.

¹¹ One such critic was William Shirer, journalist and author of the best-selling *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1960). Such criticism of Luther has even been called "the Shirer thesis."

¹² See, e.g., Uwe Siemon-Netto, *The Fabricated Luther: Refuting Nazi Connections and Other Modern Myths*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007), which answers the Shirer thesis and other criticisms; and also John Warwick Montgomery, "Shirer's Re-Hitlerizing of Luther," *The Christian Century*, Dec. 12, 1962, 1510–12.

¹³ Martin Luther, "Psalm 101," trans. Alfred von Rohr Sauer, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 13, *Selected Psalms II*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 146n1.

¹⁴ Lester K. Born, "Erasmus on Political Ethics: The *Institutio Principis Christiani*," *Political Science Quarterly* 43 (1928): 520–21.

¹⁵ Luther, "Psalm 101," 149n11.

¹⁶ Kolb, 139.

what they appeared to be on the surface—men who sought to instruct princes on the proper conduct of rulers—but it has been debated whether Machiavelli actually believed the things he wrote. As far back as Spinoza and Rousseau, scholars have argued that Machiavelli intended *The Prince* as a satire rather than a genuine description of politics.¹⁷ Garrett Mattingly notes how the amoral autocracy described in *The Prince* contradicts Machiavelli's political theory in his other writings, in which he was overtly pro-republican. Machiavelli's own character as a conscientious administrator during his political career likewise clashes with the advice presented in *The Prince*. In short, Mattingly says *The Prince* reads like a parody of "the handbook of advice to princes."¹⁸ Mary Deitz offers a variant on the satirical interpretation. She regards *The Prince* as a trap for the Medici, giving advice that if followed would discredit them and their regime and thus would promote the republicanism that Machiavelli cherished. According to these interpretations, the work ultimately subverts those who would embrace its ideas. Machiavelli is in fact highly moral, attempting to promote republicanism as a good.¹⁹

Purpose

For Erasmus and Luther, the purpose of their treatises was more straightforward. Erasmus himself contrasted his work with the subtle satire of his *Praise of Folly*, telling Martin Dorp, "In my *Education of a Prince*, I openly offer advice as to the type of training a prince should receive."²⁰ Luther's purpose was more incidental, drawn from the writing he happened to be explaining. He said Psalm 101 presented "a particular lesson for those high ranks in which one must maintain a court and court personnel," with verses 2–4 showing how the king rules his kingdom spiritually and verses 5–8 how he rules "in secular affairs."²¹ Unlike Machiavelli and Erasmus, who presented their advice to rulers as part of their hopes for service, Luther appeared almost reluctant to involve himself in politics: "For I have not been at court, neither have I any desire to be there; may God continue to spare me from it."²²

Sources

All three men wrote within the context of Renaissance thought, with its stress on classical learning. Admittedly, Machiavelli cited few classical authors directly, but the historical examples he used showed

¹⁷ Garrett Mattingly, "Machiavelli's *Prince*: Political Science or Political Satire?," *The American Scholar* 27 (1958): 489.

¹⁸ Ibid., 483–86.

¹⁹ Mary Deitz, "Trapping the Prince: Machiavelli and the Politics of Deception," *American Political Science Review* 80 (1986): 777–99. Deitz's interpretation is debated further in John Langton and Mary G. Deitz, "Machiavelli's Paradox: Trapping or Teaching the Prince," *American Political Science Review* 81 (1987): 1277–88. Langton, by contrast, argues that Machiavelli sought to teach the prince, rather than trap him, so that the state would ultimately be transformed into a republic. Another way to explain *The Prince* in light of Machiavelli's professed republican views is to see it as only an "emergency measure" until republican government can be restored. See Gilbert, 449.

²⁰ Erasmus to Martin Dorp, 1515, in *Erasmus and His Age: Selected Letters of Desiderius Erasmus*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, trans. Marcus A. Haworth (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 84–85.

²¹ Luther, "Psalm 101," 147, 166.

²² Ibid., 149.

a familiarity with classical learning.²³ Erasmus, as Born notes, “reinforced his ideas by constant references to classical antiquity in true humanist fashion,”²⁴ filling his work with quotations from Plato, Plutarch, Seneca, Cicero, and other ancient writers.²⁵ Although Luther had limited use for the humanist approach, he also made constant use of ancient authors, drawing from Terence, Ovid, Cicero, and other writers. Part of the explanation may be Luther’s view of government, reflected in his two-kingdoms theology, as being necessary to control the wicked: “the world must be ruled, if men are not to become wild beasts.”²⁶ There is a “spiritual government” that “should direct the people vertically toward God,” but “the secular government should direct the people horizontally toward one another.”²⁷ Because God has given government to restrain all people, not just Christians, those who would govern would do well to read “heathen books and writings” such as Homer, Virgil, Demosthenes, Cicero, and Livy, writers who understood humans in their horizontal situation and could offer useful counsel.²⁸ Erasmus and Luther agreed in the value of one ancient writer in particular, Aesop. Erasmus made a special point of recommending Aesop’s fables as suitable fare for educating the young prince. Luther also commended Aesop, saying there was “no finer book on worldly heathen wisdom” and citing one of the fables in his commentary.²⁹

Use of Historical Examples

All three men used examples from history, both positive and negative. Perhaps because their works were more didactic, Erasmus and Luther gave fewer specific historical examples. Erasmus, for instance, contrasted Solomon and Midas in their respective wisdom and foolishness when asked what each desired most.³⁰ On the whole, however, Erasmus usually cited proverbial wisdom rather than concrete illustrations. One figure who did appear in several places in Erasmus’ work was Alexander the Great,³¹ perhaps because Erasmus saw a parallel between the prince-heirs and emperors Alexander and Charles. Luther used even fewer historical examples than Erasmus. He noted the beloved Duke Frederick the Wise as embodying many virtues of the ruler, praised the example of Emperor Frederick III as an efficient ruler, and dismissed the otherwise commendable Emperor Sigismund as “too small for the things of his day.”³² Because he was lecturing on a psalm ascribed to David, Luther made many

²³ He did include one quotation from Virgil. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. W. K. Marriott (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1908), 130.

²⁴ “Erasmus on Political Ethics,” 524.

²⁵ For a listing and discussion of classical citations in Erasmus, see Born, “Introduction” to *The Education of a Christian Prince*, 94–98.

²⁶ Luther, “Psalm 101,” 164.

²⁷ Ibid., 197.

²⁸ Ibid., 199.

²⁹ Erasmus, *Education of a Christian Prince*, 146–47. Luther, “Psalm 101,” 200, 209. Luther’s editor says the reformer actually began his own translation of Aesop a few years before this lecture but never finished it (200n55).

³⁰ Erasmus, *Education of a Christian Prince*, 185–86.

³¹ Ibid., 134–35, 201–2, 246–47.

³² Luther, “Psalm 101,” 158–59, 172, 173.

references to the king of Israel and his times. “Whoever is able,” said Luther, “let him be a David and follow his example as far as he can.”³³

By comparison, Machiavelli argued pragmatically from history, not from transcendent principle, to support his position, using many examples about how a prince should act. He named figures from ancient history who embodied the success of the prince, such as Alexander the Great in both his conquest and ensuing rule of the Persian Empire.³⁴ He offered an extended discussion of the comparative careers of successful leaders such as Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus, Hiero of Syracuse, and even Moses.³⁵ Machiavelli did not neglect more contemporary notables. He highlighted the failures in Italy of Louis XII of France, the checkered career of Francesco Sforza of Milan, and the general shrewdness of Pope Julius II.³⁶ He devoted his most concentrated attention to Cesare Borgia, son of Pope Alexander VI, dealing with Cesare’s dependence on his father for success.³⁷

Treatment of Religion

It is not surprising that Erasmus the Christian humanist and Luther the Protestant reformer differed in their approach to religion from Machiavelli, the pragmatic political schemer. Machiavelli tried to avoid dealing directly with religion. Although he cited Moses as an example of success, Machiavelli called him “a mere executor of the will of God,” unlike his secular examples.³⁸ Likewise he excluded ecclesiastical principalities from discussion because it would be “presumptuous” to discuss that which was “exalted and maintained by God.”³⁹ As for the prince himself being religious, “There is nothing more necessary to *appear* to have than this . . . quality.”⁴⁰ Erasmus, by contrast, said of the prince, “He should be taught that the teachings of Christ apply to no one more than to the prince.” The ruler should be “truly Christian” by embracing and emulating Christ.⁴¹ Just like any other Christian, the prince had to take up his cross to follow Christ, and the prince’s cross was to “follow the right, do violence to no one, plunder no one, sell no public office, be corrupted by no bribes.”⁴² Erasmus, says Phillips, “wrote not as a politician, but as a moralist,”⁴³ citing the Bible, notably the commands for a king found in Deuteronomy 17,⁴⁴ to bind the behavior of the ruler. Luther, as one might expect in a commentary, directly appealed to scriptural authority with a view to applying it to

³³ Luther, “Psalm 101,” 192.

³⁴ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 29–32.

³⁵ Ibid., 42–45.

³⁶ See, respectively, ibid., 22–26 (Louis XII), 50, 96–97, 111 (Francesco Sforza), and 57, 89–90, 124, 200–1 (Julius II).

³⁷ Ibid., 50–59, 215–23.

³⁸ Ibid., 42.

³⁹ Ibid., 87.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 140 (emphasis added).

⁴¹ Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, 148, 153.

⁴² Ibid., 154.

⁴³ Margaret Mann Phillips, *Erasmus and the Northern Renaissance* (New York: Collier, 1965), 129. See also this entire chapter of Phillips’ book: “Erasmus on Political Government,” 125–46.

⁴⁴ Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, 167.

human situations. The prince “rules his kingdom discreetly and uprightly and keeps it close to the Word of God.”⁴⁵ However, although a prince should practice “mercy and justice,” Luther did not mean divine mercy and justice but human rewards and punishments. Mercy without punishment fostered wickedness and punishment without mercy became tyranny.⁴⁶

Description of the Behavior of the Prince

Finally, the descriptions of the behavior of the prince reveal the nature of these works and the clearest contrasts among them. Here the reader finds many of those pungent “Machiavellian” comments that gave *The Prince* its reputation as an expression of *realpolitik*. Machiavelli advised the prince to inflict all the injuries on his opponents at once on taking power “so as not to have to repeat them daily.”⁴⁷ Luther gave counsel for the beginning of a reign of a different moral character: a good ruler will crush vice early in his reign before it can take root.⁴⁸ Machiavelli devoted a chapter to discussing why “a wise lord cannot . . . keep faith,” because others “will not keep faith with you.”⁴⁹ By contrast, Erasmus devoted a chapter of his book to how the prince should strive to keep faith as far as possible.⁵⁰ To Machiavelli a ruler, rather than pursue virtue, should measure his vices so that they do not cost him his state: “It is unnecessary for a prince to have all the good qualities I have enumerated but it is very necessary to *appear* to have them.”⁵¹ Erasmus said rather that “there can be no good prince who is not also a good man,” that being a ruler required “kingly qualities of wisdom, justice, moderation, foresight, and zeal for the public welfare.”⁵² Luther did not expect perfection in a prince, but he did expect sincere goodwill, arguing that a key to David’s greatness was not that he never sinned but that he repented, unlike kings such as Saul who covered up their wrongdoing.⁵³ Machiavelli said that it was better that a ruler desire to be feared than loved, for “fear preserves you by a dread of punishment which never fails.”⁵⁴ Erasmus said of the ruler, “let him love, who would be loved.”⁵⁵ Machiavelli taught that preeminent of all the studies for a ruler was war, and he devoted Chapters 12–14 of *The Prince* to the topic.⁵⁶ Erasmus was nearly a pacifist, and his closing advice to

⁴⁵ Luther, “Psalm 101,” 166.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 152–53.

⁴⁷ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 68.

⁴⁸ Luther, “Psalm 101,” 222.

⁴⁹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 138; see chapter 18, 137–41.

⁵⁰ Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, 238–40.

⁵¹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 118, 139 (emphasis added).

⁵² Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, 189, 140.

⁵³ Luther, “Psalm 101,” 224.

⁵⁴ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 131.

⁵⁵ Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, 206.

⁵⁶ “A prince ought to have no other aim or thought, nor select anything else for his study, than war and its rules and discipline; for this is the sole art that belongs to him who rules.” Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 111.

Prince Charles was that war should be a last resort for the prince and avoided as much as possible.⁵⁷ The princes in Erasmus and Luther closely resembled each other, while Machiavelli's stood in stark contrast.

Evaluation

Machiavelli, Erasmus, and Luther wrote these essays on political theory within a period of twenty years of one another. If Machiavelli was a realist, then Erasmus and Luther were idealists, not naïve optimists hopelessly out of touch with reality but men affirming a high standard for those who would govern. There is no evidence that any of these three read the work of the others, but it is hard to imagine Erasmus or Luther approving of Machiavelli's prince. By contrast, one can imagine Machiavelli's prince viewing the ideal ruler of Erasmus and Luther as unrealistic and ineffective. Conversely, Erasmus viewed anyone who corrupted a prince as "no different from one who has poisoned the public fountain whence all men drink."⁵⁸ Perhaps one might say that Machiavelli portrayed rulers as we often think they really are, but Erasmus and Luther portrayed them more as we would like them to be.

Noting the similarities between Erasmus and Luther on this subject should not blind us to the larger disagreements between these two men. Erasmus initially offered qualified praise of Luther, seeing him as a potential force for reform of the church. Ultimately, however, Erasmus found Luther too rough and too much a danger to the unity of the church. Luther, on the other hand, eventually considered Erasmus too cautious and therefore harmful to the cause of reform. Luther wrote to Johann Oecolampadius that Erasmus

has performed the task to which he was called—he has reinstated the ancient languages, thus defrauding godless learning of their crowds of admirers. Perhaps, like Moses, he will die in the land of Moab, for he is powerless to guide men to those higher studies which lead to divine blessedness. I rejoiced when he ceased expounding the Scriptures; for he was not equal to the task. He has done enough in exposing the evils of the Church, but cannot remedy them, or point the way to the promised land.⁵⁹

Nowhere were their differences more marked than over the issue of free will. Erasmus, responding to the views of the early reformers, wrote *The Freedom of the Will* (1524) offering a more or less semi-Pelagian view of human freedom. In reply Luther wrote *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), asserting an Augustinian view of the total corruption of the human will and the hopelessness of the human

⁵⁷ Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, 249–57. Lester K. Born, "Some Notes on the Political Theories of Erasmus," *The Journal of Modern History* 2 (1930): 231–36, surveys the evidence on Erasmus' opposition to war.

⁵⁸ Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, 134.

⁵⁹ Martin Luther to Johann Oecolampadius, 20 June 1524, *The Letters of Martin Luther*, selected and trans. Margaret A. Currie (London: Macmillan, 1908), 128.

situation apart from divine grace.⁶⁰ This theological difference helps explain the contrast in the agendas of the two men. Erasmus saw education of flawed humans as a means of reform in church and society. Luther saw the regeneration of helpless sinners as the only basis for genuine reform. However much Erasmus and Luther appeared as allies for reform, they had somewhat dissimilar foundations and goals.

To return to the original question: What do these authors teach us about human government in general and counsel to rulers in particular? With Machiavelli, the first inclination is to conclude that he teaches us nothing as it relates to a biblical worldview, except perhaps as he provides examples of flaws in human reasoning. But if we take the suggestion of some interpreters and view *The Prince* as a satire, we need to look more closely. A satire is like a mirror in a different sense than the theme of this article. A mirror reverses the image of the viewer; so to appreciate what a satirical Machiavelli is really saying, we would need to analyze his counsel to the prince through the lens of satire to see what he really means, perhaps finding the opposite of what he says. And to do justice to Machiavelli, it would also be good to study his other works, which are far less cynical in tone, to see what they might offer.

With Erasmus and Luther, who both follow an ethical framework consistent with Christian belief, we should likely consider the authority they offer for their counsel. It is tempting to see Erasmus, the Renaissance humanist, allowing for the authority of human wisdom while Luther, the Protestant reformer, affirms the authority of the Bible alone (with the references to the classics merely as illustrations of his points). Yet both referred to examples of classical learning and both used Scripture as a basis of their counsel. Luther does this obviously by expounding Psalm 101, but Erasmus also uses scriptural passages such as Deuteronomy 17.

Perhaps in considering how these three men influence our concept of a Christian worldview as applied to the ethics of rulers, we should focus on the method by which all three arrive at their conclusions. With this perspective, the emphasis is not so much on the counsel they give (although reading them is profitable) but how they sought to answer the question. Machiavelli used pragmatism as his touchstone: does this advice *work*? Even if we follow the interpretation that *The Prince* is a satire, though we may tease out a more moral view from Machiavelli, we have to admit that satire—although a useful literary device—is not the clearest method for teaching principle.⁶¹ In contrast to this pragmatism, Erasmus and Luther believed in a higher standard, a divine expectation of what is good and evil. They saw the ruler as responsible to an authority above him. They differed in details (although they certainly did not differ with each other as much as they did with Machiavelli). To different extents they used human wisdom and divine revelation. Unquestionably, they agreed that the ruler is responsible to a standard, and both rooted that standard—albeit in differing degrees—in divine revelation. Admittedly, Erasmus did not construct a comprehensive worldview as we use the term

⁶⁰ On their differences over free will, see J. I. Packer, “Luther Against Erasmus,” in *Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer*, vol. 4 (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1999), 101–19.

⁶¹ One should note that although *The Education of a Christian Prince* is a straightforward essay of instruction for the ruler, Erasmus was a master of satire as shown not only in his classic *Praise of Folly* but also throughout his writings. If indeed Machiavelli did write a satire, he did not demonstrate the skill of Erasmus in his satirical works in communicating his genuine message clearly to the reader. When one reads the satire of Erasmus, one knows his meaning.

today and perhaps even Luther really cannot be said to have formed an all-encompassing way of thinking about every aspect of life. The Reformed tradition proceeded more along these lines as shown by the programs of Zwingli in Zurich, Calvin in Geneva, and John Knox in Scotland.⁶² Ultimately, however, both Erasmus and Luther included an appeal to Scripture, the only dependable authority for life.

⁶² Without necessarily accepting all of his analysis, one can see in Niebuhr's discussion of "Christ the Transformer of Culture" something of this Reformed pursuit of a wider worldview. See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), 190–229.

Interpreting the New Covenant in Light of Its Multiplexity, Multitextuality, and Ethnospecificity

Layton Talbert¹

I have had the privilege of teaching a seminary course on NT theology every year for over two decades, and a course on advanced NT theology for almost as long (though less frequently). Mark Saucy's reflection vividly captures my own observation of the field in that time:

It is one of the stunning ironies of academic biblical theology that the entity for which the New Testament corpus is named [viz., the New Covenant] receives so little attention in understanding the New Testament's theology.²

A glance at the index of almost any NT theology text bears out this assessment. Tom Schreiner includes a few references to Jeremiah 31:31–34 but no reference to anything past 31:34³ and no discussion of the New Covenant.⁴ Ditto Frank Thielman,⁵ Donald Guthrie,⁶ and Leon Morris.⁷ I. Howard Marshall includes no reference whatsoever to Jeremiah 31.⁸ This is, to me, nothing short of astonishing.⁹

The New Testament¹⁰ is *named* for the New Covenant because it records—according to Jesus' announcement (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25), Paul's teaching (2 Cor 3:6), and the letter to the Hebrews

¹ 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* (Ross-Shire, Scotland Christian Focus, 2022).

² Mark Saucy, "Israel as a Necessary Theme in Biblical Theology," in *The People, the Land, and the Future of Israel*, ed. Darrell Bock and Mitch Glaser (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 174.

³ This article will discuss the significance of this specific datum, and the fact that there are, of course, many other OT New Covenant passages besides Jeremiah 31.

⁴ *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

⁵ *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

⁶ *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981).

⁷ *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1990).

⁸ *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004).

⁹ Not technically of the NT theology genre, G. K. Beale's *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011) includes several references to the New Covenant and to Jeremiah 31:31–34 but, again, nothing beyond 31:34. Even premillennial NT theology texts (e.g., Ryrie, Ladd, Zuck and Bock) fare little better.

¹⁰ "Testament" derives from *testamentum*, used in the Latin Bible to differentiate the *Vetus Testamentum* from the *Novum Testamentum*, following earlier Greek Bibles which divided into the *Palaia Diatheke* and the *Kainē Diatheke*. In the LXX, *diatheke* translates the Hebrew *berith*. The Latin-based "testament" is an unhelpful designation because in modern western parlance it typically conveys the idea of a will, a connotation which *diatheke* rarely if ever bears. "Old Covenant" and "New Covenant" would be more suitable labels for the two divisions of our Bible—i.e., the "Revelation of God under the Old [Mosaic] Covenant" and the "Revelation of God under the New Covenant."

(8:13; 9:15; 12:24)—the inauguration of that New Covenant.¹¹ Despite ongoing debate among dispensationalists, this seems to have been the prevailing dispensational view at least as far back as Pentecost's *Things to Come*.¹² If the very designation “New Testament” signifies the inauguration of the New Covenant, then the theology of the NT cannot be accurately viewed or adequately explained without reference to the New Covenant. Consequently, to write a book dedicated to NT theology that never discusses the concept, passages, provisions, or theology of the New Covenant—on its own terms and in its original context—seems theologically and hermeneutically myopic.

The New Covenant is God's consummate covenantal arrangement, “the sum of God's story to its end, including the destinies of Israel, the nations, and even the cosmos itself.”¹³ Understanding the New Covenant contextually and exegetically, therefore, is basic to grasping the storyline, the theology, and the very structure of the Bible—let alone NT theology.

It is my contention that *the New Covenant is a multidimensional prophetic covenant [multiplexity] made explicitly with Israel in multiple passages [multitextuality] and consisting of mostly Israel-specific promises [ethnospecificity] that are most satisfactorily interpreted and fulfilled via a dispensational hermeneutic*. On the face of it, this thesis sounds remarkably pedestrian. The accent in this presentation, however, falls primarily on the multiplexity of the New Covenant (and the short-sightedness of treating Jer 31:31–34 as the New Covenant *in toto*), and secondarily on a constellation of specific hermeneutical observations suggesting the weaknesses of a non-dispensational explanation of the New Covenant.

The term *multitextuality* however, raises a preliminary issue that can be addressed here only briefly. Since the term *new covenant* occurs only once in the OT (Jer 31:31), how are we to determine which other passages, if any, also describe the New Covenant.¹⁴ Interestingly, the only covenants actually “named” in the biblical text itself are the “old covenant” (2 Cor 3:14) and the “new covenant” (Jer 31:31; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24). To all the other covenants, theological discussion attaches descriptors suggested by the context (e.g., Abrahamic, Sinaitic/Mosaic, Davidic). The term *covenant* is often absent from passages that are obviously extensions of specific covenants, even though they are not explicitly designated as such. For example, the term *covenant* is never mentioned in the narrative of Abraham until Genesis 15:18, but no one doubts that Genesis

¹¹ I am well aware that some of my dispensational colleagues dispute this assessment of these and other NT statements. Cf. Mike Stallard, ed., *Dispensational Understanding of the New Covenant* (Schaumburg: Regular Baptist, 2012).

¹² In 1958, Dwight Pentecost (*Things to Come* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958], 121–25) outlined three premillennial views: (1) two new covenants, one for Israel and one for the church (Chafer's view), (2) one new covenant for Israel only (Darby's view), and (3) “one new covenant with a two-fold application, one to Israel in the future and one to the church in the present,” which, Pentecost observes, “is more generally held than Darby's view.” View (1) appears to have always been very much a minority view with apparently few to no modern advocates because, given the biblical data, “this view cannot be sustained” (Bruce Compton, “Epilogue: Dispensationalism, the Church, and the New Covenant,” in Stallard, 269).

¹³ Saucy, 174.

¹⁴ E.g., John Masters writes, “I use the term [new covenant], just as the Old Testament does, of a singular text, Jeremiah 31:31–34” (“Foreword,” in Stallard, 20). Even this delineation seems exegetically short-sighted, however, since that covenantal expression flows directly into the divine oath that secures that covenant (31:35–37) which, in turn, flows unbrokenly into additional promises (31:38–40). Hermeneutically, there is no reason not to take 31:31–40 as the initial New Covenant unit. Why stop at 31:34?

12:1–3, 13:14–17, 15:4–5, or 15:7–17 constitute components of the Abrahamic covenant. Likewise, subsequent passages that omit the term *covenant* are rightly understood to be restatements or extensions of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 22:15–18; 26:2–5; 28:13–15, etc.). In short, passages that reiterate covenantal language and/or the same promissory components are rightly adduced as extensions of that same covenant and may even expand on the original covenantal components. That is not to say that the resulting list of New Covenant passages (including the one proposed below) is beyond dispute.¹⁵ Historical and eschatological prophecies are often interwoven into the same passage, so a degree of subjectivity is unavoidable.

The Anticipation of the New Covenant

The designation *new covenant* does not occur until relatively near the chronological close of the OT era (Jer 31:31). Yet Moses intimated the need for a new covenant even before the ink was dry on the old one. Deuteronomy 29:20–29 reads as if Israel’s failure and judgment under the terms of the Sinaitic Covenant are a foregone conclusion. The reference to their future captivity and restoration in 30:1–5 reads just as matter-of-factly. The next statement, however, far exceeds any provisions included in the Sinaitic Covenant: “And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants to love the LORD your God with all your heart and all your soul, that you may live” (Deut 30:6).¹⁶

This is the earliest explicit proleptic reference to a New Covenant provision.¹⁷ The Old Covenant¹⁸ made demands from the outside in; there were no provisions in the Old Covenant for such gracious, internal transformation as this statement describes. It is left to three prophets some seven centuries later, however, to fill out the bulk of the provisions of this New Covenant in detail. Table 1 lists the major extended OT passages on the New Covenant, including the identifying phrase in each.¹⁹

¹⁵ For a further discussion of various models for how to identify New Covenant passages in the OT, see Dave Fredrickson, “Which are the New Covenant Passages in the Bible?” in Stallard, 29–72. For a chart summarizing different identifications of OT New Covenant passages, see Appendix 1 below.

¹⁶ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations reflect the New King James Version. All emphasis in Bible quotations has been added; for the sake of clarity, original italics for supplied words have been removed.

¹⁷ Cf. Jer 32:39–40; Ezek 11:19–20; 36:26–27. See Appendix 2 for a comparative chart of parallel language between Deut 30 and Ezek 36–37.

¹⁸ The Sinaitic or Mosaic Covenant came to be known as the “old” or “first” covenant by way of contrast to the New Covenant and its inauguration announced in passages such as 2 Corinthians 3:14 and Hebrews 8:13.

¹⁹ I urge readers, as I assign my students, to take one hour and read straight through at least these New Covenant passages. Everything I say in this paper hangs on the language of these passages. The more familiar you are with these texts from a first-hand contextual reading of them (rather than second-hand systematic theological assumptions), the better you will be able to assess what follows. Nothing has been so persuasive or formative to my own thinking on the New Covenant as reading these multiple, major passages on the same topic; collected into one reading, they reinforce each other and shed light on one another.

Table 1. Major OT Passages on the New Covenant

Book	Passage	Covenantal Designation	Reference
Jeremiah	31:31–40	“new covenant” made with “the house of Israel and the house of Judah”	31:31
	32:36–44 ²⁰	“everlasting covenant”	32:40
	33:14–26	“that good word that I have promised to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah”	cf. 31:31ff; 32:39–42
Ezekiel	16:60–63	“everlasting covenant”	16:60
	34:11–31	“covenant of peace”	34:25
	36:16–38	no explicit covenant reference but identical covenantal descriptions	cf. Jer 31:34; 32:37–41
	37:15–28	“covenant of peace”; “everlasting covenant”	37:26
Isaiah	54:1–17	“covenant of peace”	54:10
	55:1–13	“everlasting covenant”	55:3
	59:20–62:12	covenant described in eternal terms; “everlasting covenant”	59:21 61:8

Many other passages, of course, corroborate the details of the New Covenant.²¹ I have limited this list, however, to extended contextual units that explicitly refer to the “covenant.”²²

The Contents of the New Covenant

A detailed reading of the above passages reveals that the New Covenant is far more comprehensive and meticulous than many theological treatments of it—both covenantal and dispensational. While the New Covenant and the gospel overlap significantly, it is an oversimplification to equate them as coextensive. The New Covenant highlights certain gospel realities that are available universally in conjunction with the first coming of Christ (the Mediator of the New Covenant, Heb 9:15; 12:24) and become the core of NT revelation. But most of the components of the New Covenant lie dormant until the second coming of that Mediator.

Apart from systematic-theological fiat, it is exegetically inviable to sever the soteriological dimensions of the New Covenant from the Israel-specific and land-related promises that are interwoven into the warp and woof of that covenant. This is so for two reasons. The first is the most obvious: the New Covenant was made expressly “with the house of Israel and with the house of

²⁰ For a justification for including Jeremiah 33 as a New Covenant passage, see Appendix 1.

²¹ E.g., Ezek 11:14–20; Zeph 3:1–20; Zech 12–14; et al. As is frequent in prophecy, some of these passages interface current events and future prediction (blending near and distant fulfillment). For instance, even though Jeremiah 31–33 toggles back and forth between the New Covenant promises of eschatological regathering, restoration, and rebuilding and the historical promises of regathering, restoration, and rebuilding after the Babylonian captivity, the latter lie in the shadow cast by the looming and distant assurances of the New Covenant. The smaller and more immediate events foreshadow the larger, later, and lasting fulfillment. Just as Manasseh’s wickedness, captivity, repentance, and return from Babylon (2 Chr 33) were a prophetic prefigure of Judah’s experience on the national level, the nation’s exile and return from Babylon was a microcosm of the eschatological regathering and restoration under the New Covenant.

²² The only exceptions are Jeremiah 33, on which see note 14 above, and Ezekiel 36, which is an extended passage with far too much New Covenant language to omit. The parallels between Ezekiel 36 and Deuteronomy 30 are such a striking confirmation of Deuteronomy’s anticipation of the New Covenant that I have included a comparative chart of those two passages (Appendix 2).

Judah” (Jer 31:31; 33:14), that is, with “the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Jer 33:26)—the most unambiguous designations imaginable for national Israel and ethnic Jews.²³ Second, God solemnized this covenant with those recipients by multiple sworn oaths²⁴ (more on that below).

The ubiquitous assumption—on the part of both covenantalists and dispensationalists—that Jeremiah 31:31–34 *is the* New Covenant is, in my opinion, unfortunate and misleading. Functionally, this passage is much more akin to a preamble that introduces and briefly summarizes but does not remotely exhaust the detailed terms of the New Covenant. Some treat the seventy-three (Hebrew) words of Jeremiah 31:31–34 as the comprehensive expression of the New Covenant while virtually ignoring the approximately two dozen individual components of the New Covenant enumerated in multiple additional New Covenant passages. Such a truncated view of the New Covenant is as mistaken as treating the fifty-two opening words of the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution as the comprehensive expression of that document while dismissing its seven articles and twenty-seven amendments as symbolic window-dressing.²⁵ Or, to offer a biblical analogy, saying that Jeremiah 31:31–34 is “the” New Covenant is a bit like saying Isaiah 61:1–3 is *the* OT’s description of the messianic mission.

Table 2 illustrates how multidimensional, multitextual, and ethnospecific the New Covenant is. I have tried to tie the wording of each provision tightly to the text(s) from which it is drawn. The idea of enumerating the components of the New Covenant is not new.²⁶ Two features make this chart significant, however. First, it spells out of the details of those components with specificity. Second, the light-gray shading distinguishes between soteriological components (all of which are cited or alluded to in the NT as present, active, literally realized, and universally extended) and ethnically grounded (Israel-specific) components (none of which are cited or alluded to in the NT as present, active, or universally extended). The comparison between these two classes of components will be the basis for raising a vital hermeneutical question that is right at the core of this paper: *If the soteriological components of the New Covenant are cited in the NT as present, active, and literally realized not only for NT Christians but also—according to not only dispensationalists but also an increasing number of non-dispensational interpreters—for a future widescale conversion of ethnic Israelites (Rom 11:26), then on what objective hermeneutical basis would we not also expect all the other components of the New Covenant (in fact, the vast majority of them) to be literally realized for ethnic Israelites?*

²³ This seems painfully obvious to any dispensationalist, but that these same words clearly do not mean national Israel and ethnic Jews has historically been equally painfully obvious to covenant theologians such as Matthew Henry: “Observe who the persons are with whom this covenant is made—with the house of Israel and Judah, with the gospel Church, the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16), with the spiritual seed of believing Abraham and praying Jacob” (loc. cit.). Similarly, Vern Poythress: “With whom is the New Covenant made? It is made with Israel and Judah. Hence it is made with Christians by virtue of Christ the Israelite.” *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1994), 106.

²⁴ Jer 31:35–37; 33:19–26; Isa 54:9–10. In other words (to borrow the language of Heb 6:17–18), God not only affirmed “the immutability of his counsel” by expressing the promises of the New Covenant in multiple passages, but also “confirmed it by an oath”—comprising “two immutable things [his word and his oath], in which it is impossible for God to lie.” In addition to his divine oath, God frequently further guarantees his New Covenant promises with the language of certainty (e.g., Isa 55:5; 60:9; 62:8, 11).

²⁵ For a more detailed illustration of Jeremiah 31:31–34 as the “preamble” to the New Covenant, see Appendix 3.

²⁶ For example, see Pentecost 117, and Fredrickson 63, 68–69.

Table 2. Components of the New Covenant

#	Promise	Jeremiah	Ezekiel	Isaiah	Other
Object: “the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (Jer 31:31; 33:14), “the descendants of Jacob and David” (Jer 33:26), “the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Jer 33:26)					
1	God’s law will be internalized	31:33			
2	God’s Spirit will be internalized		36:27; 37:14		
3	God will be their God and they will be his people	31:33; 32:38; (cf. 24:7)	34:30–31; 36:28; 37:23, 27		Zech 8:8
4	a nationwide individual knowledge of God (?)	31:34 (cf. 31:1)		54:13	
5	iniquity forgiven and sin eternally forgotten / cleansing from sin	31:34	36:25, 33; 37:23		Zech 3:1–10; 13:1ff
6	divine oath certifies the eternal existence of Israel as God’s nation and covenant people	31:35–37; 33:23–26			
7	Jerusalem will be rebuilt, prosperous, and eternally secure	31:38–40; 33:16		60:1–62:12	
8	a universal regathering of Israel from all the nations	32:37; 33:26	36:24; 37:21; cf. 11:17	54:7	Deut 30:1–4; Zeph 3:20; Zech 8:8; 10:6–10
9	their permanent restoration to the land given to their fathers	32:37, 41	36:24, 28; 37:25; cf. 11:17	60:21	Deut 30:5; Jer 3:18; Amos 9:15
10	a sovereign, spiritual operation internally enabling them to obey and securing their loyalty to God forever	32:39–40 (cf. 24:7)	36:26–27; 37:23; cf. 11:19–20	59:21	Deut 30:6, 8
11	perpetual divine favor on Israel is sworn	32:40, 42		54:7–10; 62:3–5	
12	Israel will be known for its righteousness (from God)	33:16		54:17; 60:17, 21; 61:3, 10–11; 62:1–2, 7, 12	
13	perpetuity of Davidic line is sworn (with an oath)	33:17, 20–22			
14	perpetuity of Levitical line is sworn (with an oath)	33:18, 20–22			
15	Israel and Judah will be reunited into one nation		37:15–22		Jer 3:18
16	David will be established as their prince		34:23–24; 37:24–25		
17	a humbling remembrance of their past sin		16:61–63; 36:31–32		
18	Israel will be rebuilt, fruitful, and eternally secure		34:25–29; 36:29–30, 33–38	55:12–13; 61:4	Deut 30:9; Amos 9:13–14
19	international recognition of God’s unique blessing on Israel		36:23, 36; 37:28	61:9	
20	Israel’s international rejection and abuse will be forever reversed			54:14–17; 60:12, 14–15	Zeph 3:20
21	Jerusalem will be the center of international attention and worship			55:5; 60:1–62:12	Isa 2; Jer 3:17; Zech 8:22–23; 14:16–21
22	any nations who fail to honor Israel will be punished			60:12	Deut 30:7; Zech 14:12–14
23	God’s sanctuary will be in their midst forever		37:26–28		Zech 2:8–13
24	God will be their eternal light, overwhelming the sun and moon			60:19–20	Rev. 21:23; 22:5
Motive: the universal sanctification of God’s holy name (Ezek 36:21–23; cf. Matt 6:9) that he may be glorified (Isa 60:21; 61:3)					

Soteriological Provisions of the New Covenant

The soteriological promises of the New Covenant (marked with light-gray shading in Table 2) inevitably receive all the theological attention and emphasis (#1–5, 10) precisely because these are the only components cited and paralleled in the NT. That fact alone is hermeneutically highly suggestive. God will put his laws and his Spirit in his people's hearts,²⁷ transform them internally, grant forgiveness and deliverance from sins, and establish a permanent spiritual bond with them. These provisions find clear parallels in the NT. That means that only about twenty percent of the New Covenant's components have any NT citation indicating that they are operative and applicable to NT believers.²⁸ The presence of those citations in the NT highlights the conspicuous absence of the majority of New Covenant promises that are never mentioned in the NT, let alone described as fulfilled.²⁹

In addition, even the soteriological promises of the New Covenant are not merely individual in application³⁰ but repeatedly and explicitly *national* in scope. The New Covenant was made with Israel *as a nation* (Jer 31:31–32) and promises to be fulfilled in Israel *as a nation* (Jer 31:33–34),³¹ because God swears with an oath that Israel will never “cease from being *a nation* before me forever” (31:35–37). The soteriological elements may be extended on an individual basis in any era; but the New Covenant ultimately anticipates fulfillment on a national scale (cf. Rom 11:26). Moreover, woven into the fabric of these soteriological promises are details that also point to a necessarily Jewish fulfillment.³²

²⁷ “Just as the New Covenant [in] Jeremiah promised the facilitation of obedience by the internalization of the law, so the New Covenant [in] Ezekiel would secure obedience through the presence of God's Spirit in the heart.” Thomas Edward McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 90. This difference in expression is consistent with the respective theological emphases in each prophet. Jeremiah mentions the “law” 12x (Ezekiel 4x); Ezekiel mentions the Holy “Spirit” 14x (Jeremiah 0x).

²⁸ I have marked #4 with a question mark because although it is cited once in the NT (Heb 8) specifically to (professing) Christian Jews, the closest the NT comes to applying it to the Church at large is a possible allusion in 1 John 2:27. So, while it is a soteriological provision, in its full sense it appears to be an Israel-specific soteriological provision. Cf. footnote 30 below.

²⁹ G. K. Beale attempts to demonstrate the inaugural fulfillment of the land promises in the NT (756–72). Despite valiant exegetical effort on eight major passages to prove that thesis, the fact remains that the NT frequently cites New Covenant soteriological promises but never cites a single New Covenant land promise. See also Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 703–16. For a detailed critique of Gentry and Wellum, see Wade Loring Kuhlewind, “‘I Will Plant Them in This Land’: An Analysis and Critique of Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum's Kingdom through Covenant with Special Attention to the Progressive Covenantal Land-Promise View” (PhD diss., Bob Jones University, 2018).

³⁰ No one has ever been saved apart from the transforming grace of the gospel encapsulated in the New Covenant. Because the New Covenant contains the gospel in seed form, God extended the basic soteriological benefits of the New Covenant to believing individuals living under the Old Covenant. That explains the occurrence of occasional New Covenant expressions under the Old Covenant (e.g., Isa 51:7; Pss 32:1–2; 37:31).

³¹ This is the whole point of the guarantee that “they shall *all* know me”; that never was nor could be true under only the Mosaic Covenant. Moreover, as my friend David Saxon pointed out, that New Covenant provision is reduced to a mere meaningless truism if “Israel” has become (coextensive with) the Church, since it would then be tantamount to promising that “all believers shall know me.”

³² The primary examples of this are seen in Table 2 itself and in the Israel-specific promises described below, which are equally part of the New Covenant. Indeed, God's primary motive in establishing the New Covenant, as stated by Ezekiel, is the sanctification of his name “which you have profaned among the nations wherever you went” (Ezek 36:22)—an accusation that assumes a prior covenantal connection to God's name in a way that simply does not correspond to

Israel-Specific Provisions of the New Covenant³³

The New Covenant is rooted in the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants³⁴ because it is the mechanism for facilitating and fulfilling all of those preceding covenants.³⁵ Consequently, the New Covenant is rooted in the national and historical identity of Israel as the recipient of all those covenants: “Just as I have brought all this great calamity [because they violated the Mosaic Covenant] on *this people* [God’s people by virtue of the Abrahamic Covenant], so I will bring *on them* all the good [including the Davidic Covenant] that I have promised *them* [in the New Covenant]” (Jer 32:42; cf. 31:28). Forever.³⁶ In fact, most of the New Covenant promises are so nationally and historically rooted that they can be meaningfully applied only to those connected to that national-historical identity and experience. In addition, most are in some way linked to the land originally granted via the Abrahamic covenant.³⁷ Finally, these are not random, isolated prophecies. Because they are all components of the same covenant, they fall or stand together and either fail or find fulfillment via the New Covenant (though not necessarily all at the same time).

Regathering

One article of the New Covenant (repeated multiple times) promises a universal regathering of Israel “from all the nations” to which God had scattered them (#8). I, for one, am part of no people group whose ancestors were driven out of a divinely granted land and scattered among the nations in judgment. The NT never attempts to relate the New Covenant promises of regathering to Gentiles or the Church at large. Nor were they fulfilled in the Babylonian return, because of the next point.

Restoration

Tethered to the regathering promises of the New Covenant are promises to replant those regathered in the same land originally covenanted to their fathers, forever (#9). The language could hardly be more explicit:

Gentiles converted into the Church. Beyond the covenant’s broader context, however, Israel-specific threads are also woven tightly into some of the soteriological promises themselves (e.g., Ezek 36:33).

³³ For an illustration that I often use to explain what I mean by “Israel-specific,” see Appendix 4.

³⁴ I would include the Levitical Covenant as well (see #14, with references, in the chart), though that requires explanation beyond the scope of this article.

³⁵ The New Covenant brings to fruition the Abrahamic promise of universal blessing and land in perpetuity. The New Covenant internalizes and enables obedience to the law of God that the Mosaic Covenant imposed from without as an unbearable “yoke” (Acts 15:10) and justifies Jew and Gentile “from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:39). And the New Covenant reasserts the perpetuity of the Davidic Covenant with an oath (Jer 33:20-22, 25-26) that is ultimately fulfilled by “Jesus the mediator of the New Covenant” (Heb 12:24), “the Son of David” (Matt 1:1), and “Son of the Highest” who will receive “the throne of his father David” and “reign over the house of Jacob forever” (Luke 1:32-33).

³⁶ Jer 31:36, 40; 32:39, 40; Ezek 34:22, 28, 29; 37:22, 23, 25, 26, 28. The eternity of the New Covenant is one of its signal features; that is why it is also called “an everlasting covenant.”

³⁷ See #6-9, 13-16, 18-23 in Table 2; each either states or necessitates, in one passage or another, some connection to the land.

“I will bring them back to *this place*” (Jer 32:37).

“I will assuredly plant them in *this land* with all My heart and with all My soul” (Jer 32:41).

“I will . . . bring you into *your own land*” (Ezek 36:24).

“Then you shall dwell in *the land that I gave to your fathers*” (Ezek 36:28).

“Then they shall dwell in *the land that I have given to Jacob My servant, where your fathers dwelt*; and they shall dwell there, they, their children, and their children's children, forever” (Ezek 37:25).

The final reference above negates the possibility that these New Covenant restoration promises were fulfilled after the Babylonian captivity, since Israel was again booted out of their land by the Romans, for about 1800 years. These are eternal promises attached to an everlasting covenant. That is why it is so important to read these promises in their full New Covenant context.³⁸

Reunification

Folded into the New Covenant is a promise to reunite Judah and Israel into one nation, forever (#15). It is not at all clear in what sense this promise could be fulfilled in any meaningful way for anyone outside of those historical, national identities. Wound tightly³⁹ to that promise (Ezek 37:15–22) is God’s pledge to cleanse and deliver “them” (this unified nation) from all their past sin (37:23), to give them “David” as their king (37:24),⁴⁰ to guarantee their ongoing obedience (37:24), to give them and their descendants “the land that I have given to Jacob” forever (37:25),⁴¹ to make an everlasting covenant of peace with them (37:26), and to dwell in their presence forever as an international testimony to God’s sanctifying power and grace (37:27–28). It is a single, unified oracle all cut from the same New Covenant cloth.

³⁸ The New Covenant is, itself, nestled into a context addressing the certainty of the return from the Babylonian captivity (e.g., Jer 32:1–25), for the sake of comparison and contrast. The historical restoration was a temporary return of a still spiritually compromised people (as Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi demonstrate)—a pale shadow of the eschatological restoration described and promised under the New Covenant.

³⁹ It is important to note that this is not an argument that all these intertwined promises must be fulfilled at the same time (more on that below), but that they must all be fulfilled to the same people to whom they are promised.

⁴⁰ This Davidic promise may be a Messianic type fulfilled by Christ, though if that were God’s intent it would have been easy to communicate that much more clearly (“My Branch” or “My Servant”). Personally, I am inclined to see this as an intentionally literal reference to the rule of the resurrected David over Israel, under the universal millennial reign of the resurrected Christ.

⁴¹ Several of these components also raise a question: Do not the “eternal” promises require fulfillment in an eternal new earth (e.g., #13, 14, 18, 20, 23)? My own answer is that “eternal” (עוֹלָם) is governed by its context. “Forever” does not always mean as long as God exists; often it means as long as the current order lasts (e.g., Gen 43:9; Exod 21:6; Deut 13:16; Isa 32:14; Jer 35:6). For example, no one supposes that Exodus 21:5–6 requires a slave to belong to his Israelite master in the new earth. The Hebrew term conveys permanence for as long as the requisite circumstances prevail. In the context of the New Covenant, the word may carry its full force, implying a situation that will continue into the new earth; or it may convey a modified sense, implying “until time ends.” Both the Abrahamic Covenant and New Covenant promises are deeply anchored in the land; so “forever” is as long as the land exists. In fact, some translations (HCSB, NET) translate the Hebrew expression as “permanently” in connection with the land promises.

Reversal

God also promises in this New Covenant to reverse his posture towards Israel, forever (#11). By paralleling the divine source of Israel's past judgment with the divine source of Israel's future blessing, God identifies exactly who he has in mind (Jer 32:40–42, NASB):

I will make an *everlasting covenant* with them that *I will not turn away from them*, to do them good; and I will put the fear of Me in their hearts so that they will not turn away from Me. *I will rejoice over them to do them good and will faithfully plant them in this land with all My heart and with all My soul*. For thus says the LORD, “*Just as I brought all this great disaster on this people, so I am going to bring on them all the good that I am promising them.*”

In Isaiah, following the same contrast between God's past chastening and future blessings that identifies the promise as Israel-specific (54:7–8), God certifies with an oath that his change of posture toward them will be eternal and unalterable (54:9–10):

“For this is like the waters of Noah to Me; / For as I have sworn / That the waters of Noah would no longer cover the earth, / So have I sworn / That I would not be angry with you, nor rebuke you. / For the mountains shall depart / And the hills be removed, / But My kindness shall not depart from you, / Nor shall My covenant of peace be removed,” / Says the LORD, who has mercy on you.

Renovation

The New Covenant also promises the rebuilding, abundance, and perpetual security of not only Jerusalem (#7) but the entire land promised by God to Israel (#18). Again, the language in these passages is unambiguously Israel-specific.

Recognition

This promissory category groups together New Covenant provisions with international ramifications (#12, 19–22). The New Covenant will reverse the way Israel has historically been viewed and treated by the world at large. But “Yahweh's salvific activity on Israel's behalf is driven not primarily by pity for his people,”⁴² or even by a sense of justice because she deserves better. Jews are historically distinct from all other peoples for the sole reason that God created them and chose them and bound himself to them voluntarily and verbally, out of pure sovereign grace (Deut 7). What is at stake in the fulfilment of all these New Covenant promises to the Jews is not the Jews; what is at stake is the character of God. It is not about the Jews; it is about the trustworthiness of the words God chose to use. God gives at least four reasons—in the New Covenant—for reversing the nations' posture and perception towards Israel. They are all linked not to Israel's merits but to God's character:

⁴² Daniel L. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 2:421.

1. Sovereignty—because he has freely chosen to favor the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob out of all the nations (Jer 33:24–26).
2. Mercy—because he has purposed to magnify before all the nations his grace in saving undeserving Israel (Isa 60:21; 61:3).
3. Purity—because he has resolved to purge his own reputation among the nations (Ezek 36:22–23).
4. Integrity—because he has determined to display to all the nations that he is a God who does exactly what he says (Ezek 36:36).

God's salvation, whether of Jews or Gentiles, is always about the glory of his sovereignty, his mercy, his holiness, and his integrity. God has determined to make the fulfillment of his New Covenant promises to unfaithful, undeserving Israel Exhibit A to all the nations that he is the God whose words can always be trusted: "Then the nations which are left all around you shall know that I, the LORD, have rebuilt the ruined places and planted what was desolate. *I, the LORD, have spoken it, and I will do it*" (Ezek 36:36).

What about the Gentiles?

In my view, the NT leaves no doubt that the New Covenant has been inaugurated⁴³ and its soteriological benefits extended to Gentiles as well as Jews.⁴⁴ At the same time, it is important to notice not only that Gentiles were not the original recipients of the New Covenant but also that the New Covenant rarely if ever mentions Gentile *inclusion* as one of its components.⁴⁵ The theme of Gentile inclusion in God's redemptive purposes comes from an independent line of divine promises predating the New Covenant.⁴⁶

Two separate rivers of the divine purpose—God's determination to bless the Gentiles with salvation and God's New Covenant promises to Israel—converge to create the Church. That convergence is the "mystery" to which Paul refers in Ephesians 2–3. The New Covenant becomes the instrument by which God extends his saving work to the Gentiles, because "the blood of the everlasting covenant" (Heb 13:20) is the means by which all God's saving work is accomplished ("for the Jew first, and also for the Gentile"), and because the Mediator of the New Covenant is Christ (Heb 9:15; 12:24), in whom all of God's redemptive work centers. Nevertheless, the New Covenant

⁴³ Inauguration does not mean "fulfillment" but "initialization." The word allows select features of the New Covenant to be operative without requiring all aspects of the New Covenant to be operative—just as a president's inauguration marks the beginning, not the completion or fulfillment, of his presidency. (After all, he, too, has made a lot of promises on the campaign trail that he has not fulfilled yet!) The meaning and consistent application of this word *inauguration* is a significant distinction between dispensational and non-dispensational approaches.

⁴⁴ The fact that the New Covenant was made with Israel does not mean its benefits cannot be extended to others (Rom 9:15); but it does mean that its components, promises, and provisions must nevertheless be fulfilled, as stated, to those to whom it was made.

⁴⁵ This is all the more surprising in light of the fact that the Abrahamic and even Mosaic covenants include references to blessing on the Gentiles. But cf. Isa 55:4; Amos 9:12.

⁴⁶ E.g., Gen 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; Deut 32:43; Ps 117:1; Isa 11:10; 60:3; Jer 16:19; Mal 1:11.

itself, as it stands, retains an expressly Judeo-centric orientation that anticipates an expressly Judeo-centric fulfillment, most of which revolves around the land promises.

Sworn Divine Confirmation of the New Covenant

The New Covenant is not a single promise, or even a small cluster of spiritual promises. It is a covenantal archipelago glittering with dozens of detailed pledges and predictions—all addressed to Israel and Judah, all interconnected, and all confirmed by five sovereign oaths in which God ties their certainty to the most inviolable principles of creation itself.

Thus says the LORD, / Who gives the sun for a light by day, / The ordinances of the moon and the stars for a light by night, / Who disturbs the sea, / And its waves roar / (The LORD of hosts is his name): / “*If those ordinances depart / From before Me*, says the LORD, / *Then the seed of Israel* shall also cease / From being a nation before Me forever.” (Jer 31:35–36)

Thus says the LORD: / “*If heaven above can be measured, / And the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, / I will also cast off all the seed of Israel / For all that they have done*, says the LORD.” (Jer 31:37)

Thus says the LORD: “*If you can break My covenant with the day and My covenant with the night, so that there will not be day and night in their season*, then My covenant may also be broken *with David* My servant, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and *with the Levites*, the priests, My ministers.” (Jer 33:20–21)

As the host of heaven cannot be numbered, nor the sand of the sea measured, so will I multiply *the descendants of David* My servant and *the Levites* who minister to Me. (Jer 33:22).

Moreover the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying, “Have you not considered what these people have spoken, saying,⁴⁷ ‘The two families which the LORD has chosen, he has also cast them off? Thus they have despised My people, as if they should no more be a nation before them. Thus says the LORD: ‘*If My covenant is not with day and night, and if I have not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth*, then I will cast away *the descendants of Jacob and David* My servant, so that I will not take any of his descendants to be rulers over *the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*. For I will cause their captives to return, and will have mercy on them.’” (Jer 33:23–26).

Biblical theology is about not only what God says, but how he has chosen to say it. It is difficult to envision how God could have made it any clearer that national Israel would never be cast aside or cease to exist (Jer 31:35–37). Some have generalized this passage as a promise “that the New Covenant would be endless in duration.”⁴⁸ But the oath says nothing about the New Covenant at all; it is a

⁴⁷ Jeremiah 33:24 has often struck me as a remarkably accurate description of the hard supersessionism of old-line covenant theologians.

⁴⁸ Philip Graham Ryken, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, PTW (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 473.

promise of the perpetuity of those with whom he made the New Covenant (Israel). Similarly, Ray Ortlund's explanatory note on verses 35–36 reads: “God gives a fixed order to the natural creation, and it is just as impossible for the New Covenant to cease as it is for the natural order to cease.”⁴⁹ That is true but astonishingly irrelevant to what God actually says in the text being explained. He does not promise that the New Covenant would never cease to exist, but that “the seed [offspring] of Israel” would never cease to exist “as a nation before me forever.”

God immediately issues the second oath in Jeremiah 31:37, where Ortlund explains: “The full extent of creation is unfathomable and it is equally unfathomable that God would cast off the Israel of this New Covenant.”⁵⁰ Again, however, that is not how the text reads. The note tweaks the text with the addition of a single word (“*the* Israel of this New Covenant”). It is a small word, but it blows a hole big enough to drive an entire systematic theology through. The implication is that “the Israel” in view is a different “Israel” than the one being addressed in the historical context.

God might have said (in Jer 31:36), “then *the seed of Abraham* shall cease from being a *people* before me,” but he did not. He could have said (in Jer 31:37), “then I will cast off all *the seed of Abraham*,” but he did not. If God had made the New Covenant with “the seed of Abraham” it might have furnished significant biblical-theological warrant for applying it exclusively to the Church (cf. Gal 3:29). If that had been God's intent all along, he could have made that far clearer. Again, biblical theology is not only about what God says, but how he has chosen to say it.

The timelessness of God's commitment in these divine oaths is not merely to believers but to a nation that he will graciously convert into a nation of believers, to the international fame of his name and as a testimony that he is a God of his word. And yet the history of theology supplies ample evidence that we theologians can be wonderfully creative with the text when there is something we want it to say. What is at stake in how we handle these New Covenant oaths, and the promises that they are intended to guarantee as inviolable, is nothing less than *the integrity of God and the trustworthiness of his words*. These are not random texts that I happen to think are important; they are the divine oaths that anchor the meaning and intentions of the New Covenant. There could be no more sober caution to any theologian, and no more telling test of any theological system, than that.⁵¹

New Covenant language and its parallels in the NT prevent us from reserving all of its promises exclusively for Israel (as some dispensationalists have attempted to argue). At the same time, the NT's utter silence on the New Covenant's many Israel-specific promises prohibits us from collapsing the entire New Covenant into a purely spiritual manifesto fulfilled now in the Church. Even a future conversion of ethnic Israel, which many covenant theologians now acknowledge, does not alone satisfy the multiplexity and ethnospecificity of the New Covenant.

⁴⁹ Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr., Notes on Isaiah, in *The ESV Study Bible*, ed. Lane T. Dennis, et al. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 1432.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ It seems, therefore, a remarkable oversight that G. K. Beale's 1,000-page magisterial work focusing on “the unfolding of the Old Testament in the New” gives so much attention to the New Covenant yet includes no discussion of any of these divine-oath passages.

The Centrality of the Land in the New Covenant

Land is one of the threads that runs through God's entire covenant relationship with Israel. In the Abrahamic Covenant God promised to Abraham and to his descendants, among other things, a specific piece of geography, forever.⁵² Under the Mosaic Covenant God gave that land to Abraham's descendants and warned that if they broke their covenant obligations he would evict them from it (and he did), but he also promised that he would bring them back into that land (and he did, though they were later evicted again). The New Covenant promises that one day God will return them to that land permanently and change them internally so that they will never again forsake him. That has not happened yet. Any interpretation of the New Covenant, then, must decide what to do with its persistent and explicit references to the land. What is to be done, for example, with the explicit geographical and topographical details in Jeremiah 31:38–40?⁵³ These verses describe the rebuilding of Jerusalem along its northern, western, southern, and eastern boundaries, respectively.

God attaches unmistakably and, more to the point, *unnecessarily* explicit geographical language about what he is going to do to their capital city and their land as part of the New Covenant. Most interpreters understand that this is still part of the New Covenant, but Kidner turns one detail on its head when he argues, "[T]he promise that the city would never again be overthrown (31:40) is a further sign that we must look beyond 'the present Jerusalem' to 'the Jerusalem above' (Gal 4:25–26)."⁵⁴ Why? Because Jerusalem *was* overthrown again in AD 70. But history did not end in AD 70. The promise of Jerusalem's perpetual security compels us to look beyond post-Babylon Jerusalem; but it does not compel us to look beyond an as-yet future earthly Jerusalem.⁵⁵

This geographical specificity keeps showing up throughout the discussion of the New Covenant that spans Jeremiah 31–33.

Now therefore, thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning *this city* of which you say, "It shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence": Behold, I will gather them out of all countries where I have driven them in My anger, in My fury, and in great wrath; *I will bring them back to this place*, and I will cause them to dwell safely. . . . And I will make an *everlasting covenant* with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me. Yes, I will rejoice over them to do them good, and I will assuredly plant them *in this land*, with all My heart and with

⁵² Gen 12:7; 13:14–17; 15:7, 18; 17:8; 24:7; 26:3; 28:4, 13; 35:12; 50:24. An often-overlooked detail of the Abrahamic Covenant is that God promised the land not merely to Abraham's seed, but to Abraham himself (Gen 13:15, 17; 15:7; 17:8; 26:3; 28:4, 13; 35:12).

⁵³ This passage exemplifies the importance of my earlier point about seeing Jeremiah 31:31–34 as merely the preamble to the New Covenant, followed by the divine oaths in 31:35–37 and the geographical specifics in 31:38–40. The first major reference to the New Covenant is not 31:31–34 but 31:31–40.

⁵⁴ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987), 111.

⁵⁵ I love Kidner as a commentator, but what turns Kidner's interpretation here on *its* head is the prosaic reality of 1948. Whether the recreation of the state of Israel was a fulfillment of prophecy or not, it was undeniably a providential performance of miraculous proportions. To deny that is to shut one's eyes to the hand of God in the present world (as so many Israelis themselves have done) and to ignore his sovereign rule over the affairs of nations.

all My soul. For thus says the LORD: Just as I have brought all this great calamity on this people, so I will bring on them all the good that I have promised them [New Covenant]. And fields will be bought *in this land* of which you say, “It is desolate, without man or beast; it has been given into the hand of the Chaldeans.” Men will buy fields for money, sign deeds and seal them, and take witnesses, *in the land of Benjamin, in the places around Jerusalem, in the cities of Judah, in the cities of the mountains, in the cities of the lowland, and in the cities of the South*; for I will cause their captives to return, says the LORD. (Jer 32:36–44)

God could hardly make it clearer that he has the earthly Jerusalem in view. If God knowingly means something entirely different from what he knows will be understood by the terms he uses, it is difficult to escape the impression that he is misleading people—seriously and unnecessarily—because he did not need to be this specific if the natural meaning of his words was not his intention.

It is impossible to read through the Bible attentively and conclude that land is an inconsequential detail.⁵⁶ It is a tenacious and explicit theme in the OT. So it should hardly be surprising that the New Covenant reiterates this land component *repeatedly* (Jer 32:40–41; Ezek 34:13, 25–27; 36:24, 28, 34–35; 37:12, 14, 21–22, 25), *explicitly* (“the land that I gave to your fathers,” Ezek 36:28; “the land that I have given to Jacob,” Ezek 37:25), and *insistently* (“I will plant them in this land with all my heart and with all my soul,” Jer 32:41).⁵⁷ This is what even the Mosaic Covenant anticipated—not just a temporary return to the land after captivity, but a return to the land accompanied by internal transformation that would enable them to love and obey God, and possess the land forever (Deut 30:5–10). That is why at the heart of the debate over the fulfillment of the New Covenant is the issue of the land.

New Covenant Expectations

The New Covenant is a multiplex prophetic and promissory covenant made with ethnic Israel, a constellation of promises that revolve around two major events: the national conversion and the national restoration of national Israel. Theological views on those prophetic expectations have varied considerably over the centuries,⁵⁸ but they have tended to gravitate toward one of two major hermeneutical poles.

Supersessionism

Traditional covenantalists hold that because Israel rejected Messiah, God abandoned the nation and bears no further relationship or obligation to Israel (*qua* Israel); consequently, all her promises are transferred to and fulfilled in the Church. This view is broadly known as replacement theology or supersessionism, though like many systematic theological positions, it has developed a number of permutations over the years.

⁵⁶ See Appendix 5 for sixty OT references to God’s giving of the land to Abraham and his descendants.

⁵⁷ God rarely talks like this; such impassioned language expresses how serious he is about this promise.

⁵⁸ Michael J. Vlach, “Israel in Church History,” in *The People, the Land, and the Future of Israel*, 209. For a more detailed treatment see idem, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 27–76.

I neither view nor use either of these as pejorative terms, merely descriptive ones, though I am well aware that most covenantalists reject the descriptor. More recently, covenant theologians prefer to describe the Church as the “fruition” of Israel,⁵⁹ “spiritual Israel,”⁶⁰ the “new Israel” or “true Israel,”⁶¹ or even “restored Israel.”⁶² Don Hagner writes, “The church does not take the place of Israel; rather Israel finds its true identity in the church”; the view nevertheless insists that the church is “the heir to the promises” originally made to Israel.⁶³ The problem, then, is that (1) no single substitute term has emerged, and (2) most dispensationalists argue that the more modified expressions still amount to some form of supersessionism or replacement. In view of more recent covenantal expressions, one is tempted to propose the term *transmogrification theology*.

In any case, the traditional view, though not extinct, has been largely replaced with a more moderate approach that affirms a future conversion of ethnic Israel in keeping with Romans 11:26–27 but still denies any future national role or restoration of Israel to the land.⁶⁴ (Incidentally, Paul ties this national conversion to a New Covenant passage, Isa 59:20–21.) G. K. Beale’s modified supersessionism, however, denies any such future conversion for ethnic Israel; he thinks that the land-related promises “are fulfilled in a physical form” in the new earth “but that the inauguration of this fulfillment is mainly spiritual” in the present Church.⁶⁵

Many of these modifications reflect, to varying degrees, a welcome shift in what I view as the right direction, though in my estimation they still fall short of what both the text and the trustworthiness of God require.⁶⁶ Following are some reasons why.

Interpretational Inconsistency: Why Are Some New Covenant Promises Literal but Not Others?

The fact that the New Covenant’s soteriological promises are fulfilled literally for Jews raises a question of hermeneutical consistency. If one is willing to affirm (as many covenant theologians are) that all of the New Covenant’s soteriological elements will be literally fulfilled to literal Israel in a future nationwide conversion (on this present earth), what would prevent one from affirming

⁵⁹ Michal Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 131. More recently, however, Horton has argued somewhat differently: “The church does not supersede Israel” because “the church has always existed since Adam and Eve.” See “Covenant Theology,” in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, ed. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2022), 71.

⁶⁰ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 964.

⁶¹ Schreiner, 36, 860.

⁶² Thielman, 707.

⁶³ “Matthew,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003), 264. Cf. Oren R. Martin, “Question 6,” in *40 Questions About Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2020), 68.

⁶⁴ Erickson, 964; Schreiner, 859–60; Thielman, 370; Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology*, 132; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1994), 1104.

⁶⁵ *New Testament Biblical Theology*, 751. In what must rank as the most ironic statement of his 1,072-page biblical theology of the NT, Beale explains that space constraints prevent any detailed discussion of Rom 11:26 (710).

⁶⁶ “Readings that mute God’s Word or reduce its content need to be challenged” and “forms of covenantal supersession do exactly that, with negative consequences for the character of God” and “our ability to understand his word.” Darrell L. Bock, “A Progressive Dispensational Response,” in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies*, 221.

(consistently, it seems) that all of the New Covenant's non-soteriological promises will also be just as literally fulfilled to literal Israel in the future (on this present earth)?⁶⁷ On a covenantalist view, a minority of the New Covenant's promises will be literally fulfilled for literal Israel on the present earth, yet the majority of its promises will not be. Instead, the latter are fulfilled figuratively in the Church now⁶⁸ or literally only in the new earth.⁶⁹ The exegetical basis for such an inconsistent hermeneutic is far from clear. Moreover, this interpretational inconsistency seems to rest on a logical fallacy.

Logical Fallacy: Why Must the New Covenant Be Fulfilled All at Once?

Covenantalist interpreters rightly recognize that the NT extends the soteriological promises of the New Covenant in the present NT age beyond ethnic Israel. That leads many of them, however, to assume that the *entire* New Covenant must necessarily now be fulfilled and in force. This conflates *inauguration* (the New Covenant has now been initiated) with *fulfillment* (the New Covenant has now been fulfilled).⁷⁰

"Inaugurated" implies what Beale calls "beginning fulfillment."⁷¹ But it does not require (as Beale argues) that every provision of the New Covenant must, in some sense, be currently realized. Beale is correct that all the promises of the New Covenant are "intertwined with one another and, from the Old Testament vantage point, were to occur simultaneously."⁷² But this invites two counterpoints.

First, the crucial qualifier is the phrase "from the Old Testament vantage point." When Jesus read Isaiah 61:1–2 in his hometown synagogue, he stopped abruptly in mid-sentence after the first line of 61:2, excluding "the day of vengeance of our God." Then he closed the scroll and announced, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:17–21, NASB). All the elements in Isaiah 61:1–3 are (to borrow Beale's language) "intertwined with one another and, from the Old Testament vantage point, were to occur simultaneously." And yet, they did not.⁷³ Jesus' exclusion of the judgment

⁶⁷ I posed this question to Frank Thielman via email (November 18, 2011), and his reply (December 8, 2011) was both gracious and, well, frank: "I really need to give your question more attention, and it gives me a lot of food for thought. I think my biggest concern in imagining a literal fulfillment of several of the elements you mention . . . on your list is that these elements seem to be given a less-than-literal fulfillment in the New Testament itself. The ingathering of scattered Israel, for example, seems to find its fulfillment in the multi-ethnic Church, if my reading of the shepherding imagery in John is correct. Jerusalem now seems to be the Jerusalem above (Gal 4:21–31; Rev 21:9–27)." Both of these points seem to me to give inadequate weight to the multiple and repeated references to precise geographical and topographical details woven into the New Covenant (e.g., Jer 31:38–40; 32:36–44). Thielman continues: "I do not think that Rom 11:26 can be read in any other way than as a reference to a vast influx of ethnic Jews into the people of God in the last days. These other elements, however, seem to me to be fulfilled in less literal ways and that makes me think that other elements of the language of Israel's eschatological restoration in the Old Testament should also be read in less than literal ways."

⁶⁸ The "promises made to Israel are fulfilled in the Church as the new people of God, the new Israel (1 Pet 2:9–10)" (Schreiner, 36).

⁶⁹ Beale, 751.

⁷⁰ On this reasoning, God's blessing of Ishmael and Esau with some of the same benefits promised to Abraham (numberless descendants and a land inheritance) would have signaled the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant; but clearly it did not.

⁷¹ *New Testament Biblical Theology*, 729.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 771.

⁷³ Jesus elsewhere clearly taught that he had not come this time to judge (John 12:47).

component of what was from all appearances a seamless and “intertwined” prophecy signifies that prophecies may, in fact, be inaugurated without being fulfilled in their entirety. It would be a serious mistake, both hermeneutically and theologically, to insist (on the basis of Luke 4:21) that the rest of the Isaiah 61 oracle had to be fulfilled during Jesus’ first coming and then set about looking for ways in which it “must” have been fulfilled spiritually or symbolically or typologically. It is just as mistaken to insist that the non-soteriological, Israel-specific promises of the New Covenant “must” be fulfilled now in the Church, when the NT is as silent about them as Jesus was about Isaiah 61:3b.

Second, Beale’s argument operates on the basis of a major oversight—the national scope of the New Covenant.⁷⁴ The covenant has been inaugurated through Christ and its soteriological benefits extended to both Jew and Gentile on an individual basis. But what will signal its imminent and ultimate fulfillment is Israel’s covenantal transformation *as a nation* (Rom 11:26; cf. Zech 12:10–14). When that happens, *then* the spiritual and physical promises will be “intertwined with one another and . . . occur simultaneously.”

The idea that a prophecy “may have an anticipatory fulfillment . . . without exhausting the full prediction” is not a new or narrowly held view.⁷⁵ It is simply not applied by supersessionists to the New Covenant, which is treated as an all-or-nothing proposition because its fulfillment is linked to Christ. But this, too, suggests an oversimplification.

Eschatological Conflation: The New Covenant, like All Revelation, Finds Its Climax and Fulfillment in Christ, but at Which Coming?

As in any other field, simplification is a virtue in theology, but oversimplification can lead to ambiguity and imprecision. Likewise, Christocentricity may be the essence of biblical theology but that, too, can be oversimplified. It sounds theologically irrefutable to assert, “Every significant whole-Bible theme climaxes in the person and work of Jesus the Messiah,” or, “If you interpret the Bible in a way that does not point to Jesus, then you are not interpreting the Bible in the way that Jesus himself said you should.”⁷⁶ These assertions, however, beg the question. No Christian theologian doubts the hermeneutical centrality of Christ, but Christian theology is equally clear that the advent of Christ—as presented in both the Old and New Testaments—is not a one-time event, but a complex of two distinct comings, separated (as we now know in retrospect) by two millennia so far. Consequently, “the work of Jesus the Messiah” is not executed in its entirety at the first coming (cf., e.g., Isa 61 and Luke 4 explained above). To be sure, Christ’s redemptive work is complete, which forms the basis for the institution of the New Covenant of which he is the Mediator (Heb 12:24). But one of the key points at issue between premillennial and non-premillennial conceptions of the eschaton—as well as

⁷⁴ A supersessionist, of course, would not consider this an oversight but, rather, just a very different reading of the covenant’s audience and intent.

⁷⁵ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2011), 328.

⁷⁶ Andrew David Naselli, “Question 5” and “Question 8,” in *40 Questions About Biblical Theology*, 59, 85. For insightful critiques of this book, see the reviews by Ken Casillas in *JBTW* 1, vol. 2 (Spring 2021), 85–87, and Paul Henebury’s at <https://sharperiron.org/article/review-40-questions-about-biblical-theology>.

dispensational and non-dispensational conceptions of the millennium—is which eschatological prophetic fulfillments are not to be realized until Christ’s second coming. To say that the age of eschatological fulfillment comes in Christ is not at all the same as saying that “the age of eschatological fulfillment has come in Christ.”⁷⁷

False Comparison: How Can a Promise Be a Symbol?

If a symbol is *intended* by an author, then a literal interpretation actually demands that we take the symbol symbolically, not literalistically. When a teenager says, “I’m bringing my own wheels to the game tonight,” a literal interpretation demands that we understand him to mean that he will be driving his car to the game, not that he will show up lugging two tires on each arm. Literal interpretation understands that metaphor is a normal part of literal communication.

Supersessionists believe that the NT teaches that most of the New Covenant promises are actually intended to be understood symbolically or typologically. So when they interpret New Covenant promises symbolically, they claim a literal hermeneutic—because the NT, by using various OT elements symbolically, teaches us that the OT is intentionally symbolic. For instance, the Book of Hebrews explains that the Old Covenant sacrificial system was full of signs and shadows of spiritual realities (Heb 8:5). Galatians 4 uses Hagar and Sarah as an “allegory” of two different covenants.⁷⁸ The NT is signaling us, therefore, that the OT was an intentionally typological book presenting spiritual realities under the guise of symbols.

But this argument depends on comparing two very different categories—not just apples and oranges; more like apples and orangutans. There is a fundamental, qualitative difference between, on the one hand, a literal event (like the exodus), or institution (like the sacrificial system), or person (like Hagar and Sarah), or place (like Jerusalem) being used as a type of some spiritual reality, and, on the other hand, arguing that a *promise* is a type or symbol of some spiritual reality. A promise is a speech-act, a character commitment. “A promise entails an obligation. When somebody makes a promise, they’re not just stating something, they are doing something. They are forming a relationship and creating an expectation that carries moral obligation.”⁷⁹

The expectation created by a covenant—whether Genesis 12 or 2 Samuel 7 or Jeremiah 31—is grounded in what the recipient, based on his cultural, historical, and revelational context, could reasonably be expected to understand from the terms promised. “To postulate a ‘fulfillment’ of these covenant promises” based on an interpretation of the terms that was inaccessible to the recipient “overlooks the performative nature of the word of promise, violates the legitimate expectations of the recipients, and brings the integrity of God into question.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Naselli, “Question 9,” in *40 Questions About Biblical Theology*, 96 (emphasis added). Yet, change the word “fulfillment” to “inauguration,” and my objection to Naselli’s statement evaporates. In eschatology, as in good humor, timing is everything.

⁷⁸ Not all agree, however, on which covenant Sarah signifies, the New or the Abrahamic; a degree of ambiguity and subjectivity is an occupational hazard when it comes to interpreting symbols.

⁷⁹ Craig L Blaising, “Israel and Hermeneutics,” in *The People, the Land, and the Future of Israel*, 160.

⁸⁰ Blaising, 161.

The scriptural principles of progressive revelation and self-interpretation neither mean nor require “that the later Scriptures in the New Testament *reinterpret* the Old Testament sayings.”⁸¹ The view that the NT provides a new hermeneutical lens that significantly alters the meaning and referents of OT prophecy rests, moreover, on a rhetorical fallacy.

Rhetorical Fallacy: Why Does It Have to Be Either-Or?

The universalization of God’s redemptive purposes does not necessarily universalize all particular prophetic promises targeted at a specific audience. Again, Craig Blasing puts it succinctly.

Isaiah foresaw the extension of the favored term “my people” to Gentile nations *in addition to not in substitution of or redefinition of* Israel (Isa 19:24–25). . . . God’s plans for Israel and the nations are not mutually exclusive or successive programs but complementary throughout the entire canonical narrative. It is not necessary to eliminate the particular in order to institute the universal nor is it necessary to expand the particular to become the universal.⁸²

Supersessionists argue that the land promise to Abraham was universalized to include the whole world (Rom 4:13). But if the promise of a specific geographical inheritance (Gen 15:7, 18; 17:8; 28:4, 13; etc.) is swallowed up in a world-inheritance, so that the land-related promises of the New Covenant are globalized, then how do we make any sense out of the original terms of the promise? If “the land” becomes “the world,” and the New Covenant promises to bring Israel back into the land God gave to their fathers, then how will God “bring them back into” . . . the world? Granted, the overall promise has expanded from “I will give you this land” to “the meek shall inherit the earth.” The latter *expands* the former, but it does not and cannot *negate* the former.⁸³

Before we argue, therefore, that the NT posits a new hermeneutical grid for how we interpret the New Covenant’s non-soteriological promises, we need to answer this question: Does the NT require an *either-or* decision that “entails a radically revised understanding of God’s faithfulness to his promises”?⁸⁴ Or does the NT allow a *both-and* hermeneutical approach that *both* (a) recognizes an inauguration of the New Covenant that graciously extends its soteriological benefits beyond the original recipients, *and* (b) expects an equally literal fulfillment of all its promises to those to whom

⁸¹ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Recovering the Unity of the Bible: One Continuous Story, Plan, and Purpose* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2009), 134 (emphasis original).

⁸² “Israel and Hermeneutics,” 162 (emphasis original).

⁸³ This point is significant since most covenantalist explanations of the land promise make it sound for all the world as if Israel inherits everything but not the land.

⁸⁴ P. E. Satterthwaite, “Biblical History” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 49. Satterthwaite is not wildly overstating what supersessionism requires; he is, as a supersessionist, simply explaining what the NT fulfillment of OT prophecies requires of us—“a radically revised” conception of what it means for God to be faithful to his words. I find deeply disturbing any hermeneutic that necessitates radically redefining something as profoundly basic as divine integrity—that God could say something that he has given us every reason to believe means “this” when he actually means “that.”

God originally swore them?⁸⁵ The concept of present inauguration (what some call partial or progressive fulfillment) with later completion (final fulfillment) is a widely recognized prophetic phenomenon. Why not recognize the possibility that this is what is going on here, if it allows us to preserve the integrity of God by handling all his words consistently?

Exegetical Challenge: How Can Some New Covenant Promises Possibly Be Fulfilled in the New Earth?

In a welcome step toward a more consistently literal hermeneutic, many covenant theologians have proposed that the land-related promises of the New Covenant are fulfilled literally in the new earth.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, other loosely land-related promises involve conditions that would be nonsensical in the glorified and sinless new earth. For example, the New Covenant incorporates threats to any nations that will not honor Israel (Isa 60:12), but that cannot be a potential in the new creation. Built into the New Covenant is also the implication of procreation and ongoing generations in the land (Jer 32:39), which is also contrary to other revelation about resurrection life on the new earth. A comprehensive view of all the components of the New Covenant seems to warrant literal fulfillment to national Israel in a coming kingdom prior to the new creation.⁸⁷

Restorationism

I am using *restorationism* here as an umbrella term for all the Israel-specific components of the New Covenant (i.e., the majority of the New Covenant provisions) that assume and require the return and presence of national Israel in the geographical territory God originally promised to Abraham and to his descendants—promises which the New Covenant explicitly and repeatedly reaffirms. If the New Covenant still anticipates the restoration of Israel to their land, why does the NT not confirm this? I believe it does, though its emphasis is muted for several interrelated reasons. First, the spiritual conversion and transformation of the nation that is at the heart of the New Covenant takes priority; the subsequent promissory blessings of the New Covenant hinge on this. Second, in inaugurating the New Covenant, “God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name” (Acts 15:14); Paul explains how the Jews’ national rejection of the Mediator of the New Covenant plays into this (Rom 10–11). Third, because of their unbelief, “hardening in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (Rom 11:25). How long that will take is anyone’s guess but God’s. But Paul argues that if Israel’s “fall” (their rejection of the New Covenant Mediator) results in the riches of the Gentiles, *how much more* will Israel’s “fullness” (their reception of him) result in massive

⁸⁵ Personally, I would say the NT positively *encourages* a both-and hermeneutic, by quoting very selectively only from the soteriological provisions of the New Covenant, leaving the rest of it intact, and studiously avoiding labeling the Church with New Covenant recipient language.

⁸⁶ Poythress, 132–33.

⁸⁷ The only exception to this statement might seem to be #24. Some take the description of Isaiah 60:19–20 as purely metaphorical. Cf. Geoffrey W. Grogan “Isaiah,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 6:331. Smith points out that “60:19 does not say that God will destroy or remove the sun and the moon, just that they will be redundant and rather unnecessary” in light of the glory of God’s presence. Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 626.

Gentile salvation (Rom 11:12)? After the “fulness of the Gentiles” prompts the salvation of “all Israel,” the salvific impact on the Gentile population of the millennial world will be astronomical, like “life from the dead” (Rom 11:15). In spite of this muting, however, running just beneath the surface throughout the NT is a subtle but inexorable current of expectation that the Israel-specific dimension of the New Covenant awaits implementation.

Luke 1

Inseparably attached to the angelic announcement that Christ was coming is the angelic explanation of why he was coming: “He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:33; cf. Jer 33:26). There is no exegetical basis, here or anywhere else, for interpreting “the house of Jacob” as anything other than national, ethnic Israel.⁸⁸ The only texts that identify “the house of Jacob” as the Church are systematic-theology texts, not biblical texts. For the Messiah to fulfill this angelic proclamation assumes Israel’s presence in the land that God promised (in the New Covenant) to give to them forever.

Luke 22; Matthew 19

The night before his sacrificial death that would initiate the New Covenant, Jesus granted to his disciples a kingdom (Luke 22:29–30). In Matthew’s parallel, Jesus specifies that this will be “in the *regeneration* when the Son of Man sits on the throne of his glory” (19:28).⁸⁹ In what Jesus calls “the regeneration,” not only will he be sitting on his throne, but his disciples “will also sit on twelve thrones, *judging the twelve tribes of Israel*” (19:28). Since there will be nothing to adjudicate in a sinless new earth,⁹⁰ a reference to the earthly millennial kingdom (“the Messianic Age,” HCSB) fits the details here and parallels the implications of Acts 3:21 (see below). The disciples took this promise quite literally (Matt 20:20–21)—an understanding that Jesus plainly confirmed (20:23).

⁸⁸ Some interpreters have a remarkable ability to look straight through the unambiguous language of a text and see the exact opposite. Christ’s reign, says one, will be “not over an earthly people, but over the spiritual Israel.” Norval Goldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 76.

⁸⁹ The Greek word (παλιγγενεσία) occurs only here and in Titus 3:5 in the entire Greek Bible. Philo used it to describe the renewal of the earth following the Flood (*The Life of Moses*, II:65), and Josephus to refer to the “rebuilding and restoration” of Judah after the return from the Babylonian captivity (*Antiquities of the Jews*, XI:3:9). It is translated variously here: “the regenerated world” (CJB); “the Messianic Age” (HCSB); “when all things are renewed” (NET). ESV’s “the new world” seems to imply the new earth (2 Pet 3; Rev 21), which fails to fit the rest of the details in Matthew 21 (e.g., see next footnote).

⁹⁰ Some have suggested that “judging” simply has reference here to leadership, citing the verb’s use in the LXX (Judg 3:10; 10:1–2; 12:7). However, (1) this OT use always involves specifically military leadership in battle against Israel’s enemies; (2) nothing in these OT verses precludes the additional sense of adjudication; (3) we know that Israel’s judges were often involved in adjudication (e.g., Judg 4:4–5); and (4) this verb never demonstrably conveys the idea of governing in the NT. It is significant that the *only* passages where it is suggested that κρίνω “could have the broader sense of *rule*” (BDAG) are Matthew 19:28 and Luke 22:30—the very passages under interpretational dispute. If that were the intended sense in these passages, however, the natural word would have been ἄρχω or (in view of the mention of thrones) βασιλεύω.

Acts 1, 3

Only a month or so later, after his resurrection, the disciples asked Jesus, “Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Jesus’ reaction to the disciples’ question differs radically from the reaction of many interpreters: “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority” (Acts 1:7, ESV). Their question is “a natural one for Jews who have embraced the messianic hope,” and Christ’s response “does not reject the premise of the question that the kingdom will one day be restored to Israel.”⁹¹ Jesus displays no disapproval or disappointment with the disciples (unlike many interpreters) and leaves their expectation of a divinely instituted, potentially imminent, national and geo-political kingdom completely intact.

But there is another overlooked verse that is crucial to bring into this conversation. A few days later, Peter, preaching to the Jews in Jerusalem, uses a noun form (“restoration”) of the same verb used in 1:6 (“restore”): “Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive *until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time*” (Act 3:19–21, NASB).

The word *restoration* is significant—not the remaking, or the transforming, but the *restoring* of all things predicted by the prophets awaits the return of Christ. What prophets? Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel—in all those New Covenant passages. If you want to know what that “restoration” looks like, read their New Covenant prophecies. Far from claiming it had arrived in Christ, Peter declared that the restoration described by the prophets was still future. His language in this passage—especially in light of the exchange in 1:6–8—indicates that the Israel-oriented kingdom restoration that they anticipated in 1:6 (and continued to preach and anticipate throughout their lives) awaits the return and personal presence of Christ.

Romans 11

Paul’s prayer to God for Israel was that they would be saved (Rom 10:1). The answer to that prayer is predicted in 11:26: “All Israel shall be saved.” To back up that statement, Paul cites Isaiah 59:20–21 (a New Covenant passage), capping off an extended discussion that maintains a persistent distinction between Israel and Gentiles throughout. Indeed, his whole argument rests on that distinction (Rom 9–11). Equally importantly, Paul follows the promise of Israel’s nationwide salvation in 11:26 with an axiomatic assurance: “the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (11:29, ESV). One of those “gifts” affirmed throughout the OT, and in the New Covenant particularly, is their restoration to the land which he had sworn to their fathers—even though Paul is here stressing the soteriological dimension for the reasons I stated at the beginning of this section.

⁹¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 61–62.

Conclusion

Restorationism is not a bizarre, recent, or merely populist or political view; and it is certainly not a uniquely dispensational view.⁹² Numerous theologians of note believed in the literal restoration of national Israel to the land: John Owen,⁹³ Wilhelmus à Brakel,⁹⁴ John Gill,⁹⁵ Jonathan Edwards,⁹⁶ David Brown,⁹⁷ and C. H. Spurgeon,⁹⁸ to give a miniscule sampling. One who is often overlooked is John Edwards (1637–1716)—an Anglican Calvinist, a postmillennial covenant theologian, and a convinced restorationist. In 1699 he published *A Compleat History or Survey of All the Dispensations and Methods of Religion*.⁹⁹ He was convinced by Scripture¹⁰⁰ of the future and full conversion of Israel as well as their restoration to the land of Judah—at a time when nothing could have seemed historically less likely.¹⁰¹ Since at least “the second generation of the Protestant Reformers,” theologians both within and outside of dispensationalism have believed in Jewish restoration to the land God gave to their fathers, just as the New Covenant promises (Deut 30:5, 9; Jer 32:39–41; Ezek 36:24–28; 37:21–25).

The New Covenant is a multiplex prophetic promise made explicitly with the nation of Israel in multiple passages and is most satisfactorily interpreted and fulfilled via a dispensational hermeneutic. This hermeneutical alternative to the various versions of the supersessionist view sees the New Covenant as (a) providing the means by which God graciously extends to the Gentiles the

⁹² Gerald R. McDermott surveys restorationism throughout church history. *The New Christian Zionism* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 45–75. McDermott insists that Christian belief in Jewish restorationism is distinct from dispensationalism, significantly predates dispensationalism, and “goes back two thousand years to the New Testament” (15). While he is (I believe) correct in tracing restorationist expectation back to the NT, his examples from early church history are debatable; they corroborate belief in a widescale eschatological conversion of ethnic Israel, but not so much belief in Jewish restorationism. Indeed, “the general scholarly consensus” seems to be that there is little if any evidence of restorationism among the early church fathers. Donald M. Lewis, *A Short History of Christian Zionism* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2021), 29–30. That changes drastically by the early Puritan era.

⁹³ Crawford Gribben, *An Introduction to John Owen: A Christian Vision for Every Stage of Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 122–29. In fact, “by the early 1600s, the English Puritans had emerged as the main champions of restorationist readings of prophecy in the English-speaking world.” Lewis, 75.

⁹⁴ McDermott, 61–62.

⁹⁵ Gill “reflected the strong restorationist consensus of his Puritan forbears” and represents “a stable continuity of interest” in restorationism. Lewis, 75.

⁹⁶ McDermott, 62–65.

⁹⁷ Lewis, 29. Brown was a postmillennialist best known as a contributor to the classic Bible commentary by Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown. He also wrote an extensive volume on *The Restoration of the Jews* (recently reprinted and available at Amazon.com).

⁹⁸ Lewis, 98. Cf. “The Restoration and Conversion of the Jews,” in *Spurgeon’s Sermons*, ed. Anthony Uyl (Woodstock, Ontario: Devoted, 2017), 10:272.

⁹⁹ When I first located this three-century-old, 775-page work, it was available from Yale University Library in microform. Now it can be accessed on Google Books. See esp. pp. 691–721.

¹⁰⁰ He discusses Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 30, Isaiah 11 and 60, Hosea 3, Amos 9, Zechariah 12, Luke 2 and 21, 2 Corinthians 3, and especially Romans 11.

¹⁰¹ Also, though a postmillennialist, he corroborates the virtual universal adherence to premillennialism during the first three centuries of the Church (651–53).

soteriological blessings promised from the beginning,¹⁰² (b) promising a future nationwide conversion of ethnic Israel, and (c) guaranteeing a future restoration of national Israel to the land God originally promised to Abraham and to his seed. All the preceding divine covenants—Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic—have been historically hampered by an unconverted Israel. The New Covenant addresses that perennial problem by guaranteeing the salvation and security of those to whom God graciously and sovereignly extends that covenant. That is why the New Covenant is the ultimate covenantal mechanism by which all the other covenants are ultimately and infallibly and finally fulfilled.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Gen 3:15; 12:3; 26:4; 28:14. Cf. Matt 26:27–28; Acts 3:25–26; 1 Cor 11:25–26; Gal 3:8. The Gentile contexts in which New Covenant language is applied to non-Jews include the last two passages. The Church’s observance of the Lord’s Table, for example, seems nonsensical if Gentiles are not extended beneficiaries of the soteriological benefits of the New Covenant that is pronounced to be at the core of that observance as spelled out in passages like 1 Corinthians 11:25–26.

¹⁰³ For a minimally detailed explanation, see footnote 30.

Appendix 1
*Comparative Chart of OT New Covenant Passages*¹⁰⁴

	Master	Gunn ¹⁰⁵	Kaiser	Compton	Pettegrew	Fredrickson	Talbert
Deuteronomy	(30)				30		(30)
Jeremiah				(24)	24	(24)	(24)
	31	31	31	31	31	31	31
		32	32	32	32	32	32
							33
		50		50		(50)	50
Isaiah			24				
					32	32	(32)
			42	42	42	(42)	(42)
					44	(44)	(44)
			49	49	49	(49)	(49)
				54	54		54
		55	55	55	55		55
		59	59	59	59	59	59
			61	61			61
Ezekiel		11	11	(11)	11	(11)	11
		16	16	16	16	16	16
			18				
			34	34	34	(34)	34
	(36)	36	36	(36)	36	36	36
		37	37	37	37	37	37
					39	39	(39)
Hosea		(2)	2	2	2		
Joel		2			2	2	(2)
Zechariah						(8)	
						12	(12)
Zephaniah							(3)

The most notable difference between my list of OT New Covenant passages and the majority of the others is my inclusion of Jeremiah 33. Numerous links connect Jeremiah 33 to acknowledged New Covenant passages in Jeremiah 31 and 32.

1. Jeremiah 33:8 reiterates even more forcefully the promise of complete forgiveness of sins, a key feature of the New Covenant (31:34).¹⁰⁶
2. Jeremiah 33:14 reintroduces “the days come” motif that initially introduced the New Covenant (31:31, 38).
3. In 33:14 God promises to perform “that good thing [lit., word, promise]” which he had promised, returning to the very language used of New Covenant promises in 32:39–42.

¹⁰⁴ Based on Fredrickson.

¹⁰⁵ David Gunn, “Overview of New Covenant Passages, Ostensible and Actual,” in *An Introduction to the New Covenant*, ed. Christopher Cone (Hurst, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2013).

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Michael Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (Silverton, OR: Lampion, 2017), 188–89.

4. In 33:14 God moreover specifies that the “promise” he will perform is that which he promised “to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah”—the precise language introducing the New Covenant in 31:31.
5. In Jeremiah 33:15, 16 the phrase “in those days” connects the promises that follow (33:15–26) to the New Covenant language that introduces the passage (“behold the days come,” 33:14).
6. The same kind of divine oaths that certify the New Covenant in 31:35–37 also certify the promises in 33 (33:19–22, 25–26).

Given the multiple echoes of Jeremiah 31–32 in Jeremiah 33, the burden of proof surely rests on those who wish to exclude the latter from OT passages describing the New Covenant.

Appendix 2
Comparison of Deuteronomy 30 and Ezekiel 36

Deuteronomy 30	Ezekiel 36
<p>⁴ If any of you are driven out to the farthest parts under heaven, from there the Lord your God will <i>gather</i> [קבץ] you, and from there He will <i>bring</i> [לקח] you. ⁵ Then the Lord your God will <i>bring</i> [בוא] you to the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it. He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers.</p>	<p>²⁴ For I will <i>take</i> [לקח] you from among the nations, <i>gather</i> [קבץ] you out of all countries, and <i>bring</i> [בוא] you into your own land. (Cf. 37:21: Surely I will <i>take</i> [לקח] the children of Israel from among the nations, wherever they have gone, and will <i>gather</i> [קבץ] them from every side and <i>bring</i> [בוא] them into their own land.)</p>
<p>⁶ And the Lord your God will <i>circumcise your heart</i> and the <i>heart</i> of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your <i>heart</i> and with all your soul, that you may live.</p>	<p>²⁵ Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.</p>
<p>⁸ And you will again <i>obey the voice of the Lord</i> and <i>do all His commandments</i> which I command you today.</p>	<p>²⁶ I will <i>give you a new heart</i> and put a new spirit within you; I will take the <i>heart</i> of stone out of your flesh and give you a <i>heart</i> of flesh.</p>
<p>^{5a} Then the Lord your God will bring you to <i>the land which your fathers possessed</i>, and you shall possess it.</p>	<p>²⁷ I will put My Spirit within you and <i>cause you to walk in My statutes</i>, and you will <i>keep My judgments and do them</i>.</p>
<p>^{5b} He will prosper you and <i>multiply</i> you more than your fathers.</p>	<p>²⁸ Then you shall dwell in <i>the land that I gave to your fathers</i>; you shall be My people, and I will be your God.</p>
<p>⁹ The Lord your God will make you abound in all the work of your hand, in <i>the fruit of your body</i>, in <i>the increase [fruit] of your livestock</i>, and in <i>the produce [fruit] of your land</i> for good. For the Lord will again rejoice over you for good as He rejoiced over your fathers.</p>	<p>²⁹ I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. I will call for the grain and <i>multiply</i> it, and bring no famine upon you.</p>
	<p>³⁰ And I will multiply <i>the fruit of your trees</i> and <i>the increase of your fields</i>, so that you need never again bear the reproach of famine among the nations.</p>

Appendix 3

Jeremiah 31:31–34 as Preamble: A Conceptual Parallel

The following text is cited from an article authored by two Constitutional scholars and Distinguished Professors of Law, Erwin Chemerinsky and Michael Stokes Paulsen.¹⁰⁷ Italics represent the authors' original emphasis; boldface type reflects my emphasis for comparative purposes.

The Preamble of the U.S. Constitution—the document's famous first **fifty-two words**—**introduces** everything that is to follow in the Constitution's **seven articles** and **twenty-seven amendments**. It proclaims **who** is adopting this Constitution: "We the People of the United States." It describes **why** it is being adopted—the purposes behind the enactment of America's charter of government. And it describes **what** is being adopted: "*this Constitution*"—a single authoritative written text to serve as fundamental law of the land....

The word "preamble," while accurate, does not quite capture the full importance of this provision. "Preamble" might be taken—we think wrongly—to imply that these words are merely an opening rhetorical flourish or frill without meaningful effect. To be sure, "preamble" usefully conveys the idea that this provision does not itself confer or delineate powers of government or rights of citizens. Those are set forth in the substantive articles and amendments that follow in the main body of the Constitution's text. It was well understood at the time of enactment that preambles in legal documents were not themselves substantive provisions and thus should not be read to contradict, expand, or contract the document's substantive terms.

But that does not mean the Constitution's Preamble lacks its own legal force. Quite the contrary, it is the provision of the document that declares the **enactment** of the provisions that follow. Indeed, the Preamble has sometimes been termed the "Enacting Clause" of the Constitution, in that it declares the fact of adoption of the Constitution (once sufficient states had ratified it): "We the People of the United States . . . *do ordain and establish* this Constitution for the United States of America."

I am not suggesting a precise correlation between the eighteenth-century U.S. Constitution and the eighth-century (BC!) New Covenant introduced by God in Jeremiah 31. Still less am I proposing that Jeremiah 31:31–34 is a technical, formal preamble to an ANE covenant. What I am suggesting is that the passage *functions* in a way that is similar to a preamble—a brief, introductory prologue to a much larger, detailed covenantal arrangement—and that to treat it as the whole, or even the sum and substance, of that larger body of highly detailed covenantal material is to seriously misconstrue the nature and content of that covenant. To that end, parallels in the rewrite below are suggestive and conceptually helpful. My substitutions for the sake of comparison are underlined.

¹⁰⁷ "The Preamble"; <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/preamble/interpretations/37>.

The Preamble of the New Covenant—the document’s famous first **seventy-three [Hebrew] words**—introduces everything that is to follow in the Covenant’s ten major passages and twenty-four provisions. It proclaims **who** is adopting this Covenant: “Behold the days are coming, says the LORD, when I.” It describes **why** it is being adopted: “not like the covenant I made with your fathers . . . which covenant they broke.” And it describes **what** is being adopted: “a New Covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah”—a single authoritative written text to serve as fundamental law of the land.

The word “preamble,” while accurate, does not quite capture the full importance of this provision. “Preamble” might be taken—we think wrongly—to imply that these words are merely an opening rhetorical flourish or frill without meaningful effect. To be sure, “preamble” usefully conveys the idea that this provision does not itself confer or delineate all the provisions of that covenant. Those are set forth in the substantive articles . . . that follow in the main body of the Covenant’s text. It was well understood at the time of enactment that **preambles in legal documents . . . should not be read to contradict . . . or contract the covenant’s substantive terms.**

But that does not mean the Covenant’s Preamble lacks its own legal force. Quite the contrary, it is the provision of the document that **declares the *enactment* of the provisions that follow**. Indeed, the Preamble might be termed the “Enacting Clause” of the Covenant, in that it declares the fact of adoption of the Covenant: “I will make a New Covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.”

It is true that Jeremiah 31:33–34 does begin to delineate some of the leading provisions of the covenant itself. But this is only by way of contrast to the former covenant (“*not like* the covenant that I made with your fathers . . . *but this* is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel”) and only in the broadest of terms compared with the detailed provisions that emerge in this and the other New Covenant texts.

To cite the Preamble to the Constitution as though it comprehensively expressed the sum and substance of the entire document would be a misleading oversimplification and lead to assumptions and interpretations never intended by the original writers. The authors’ statement that “preambles . . . should not be read to contradict . . . or contract the document’s substantive terms” is a telling observation. Similarly, theologians who routinely proof-text the New Covenant with only Jeremiah 31:31–34, as though it comprehensively expresses the sum and substance of the entire covenant, overlook the covenant’s breadth and complexity, and reinforce misperceptions unintended by the original Author. In this case, Jeremiah 31:31–34 “should not be read to contradict . . . or contract the covenant’s substantive terms” detailed in the rest of Jeremiah 31, 32, 33 and all the other New Covenant passages. The best way to correct such misperceptions about the New Covenant is to read its contents and provisions holistically.

The fact that Hebrews 8 cites only 31:31–34 does not prove that it represents the entire New Covenant, but that it introduces the replacement of the old covenant and inaugurates the soteriological features of the New Covenant operable in the NT era (both of these being major themes in the

theology of Hebrews). What a NT writer does *not* quote may be as important as what he does quote, in terms of signaling fulfillment (cf. Jesus' conspicuously incomplete quotation of Isa 61:1–2 in Luke 4:17–21).

Appendix 4
“Israel-Specific”: An Illustration

Suppose I walk into my NT theology class six weeks into the semester—long enough for them to begin to weary under the load of work I have imposed on them—and announce: “The day is coming, O my NT theology class, when I will receive a large inheritance check. In that day, I will (1) give each of you \$1,000, (2) take all of you out to a really nice restaurant for dinner, and (3) cancel all failing grades and award each of you an ‘A’ in NT theology.” Naturally, they’re pretty excited.¹⁰⁸

Then one day they start hearing rumors that I gave everyone in my apologetics class \$1,000, and even took that class out to dinner to a really nice restaurant—even though I never made any such promise to my apologetics class. Have I been unrighteous to do what I did for my apologetics class? No. Does that mean that I have fulfilled the promises I made? No, not until I do for my NT theology students everything I promised to *them*. Suppose I give the NT theology students \$1,000 each and a gift card to a really nice restaurant—have I discharged my promise? Again, no.

You could say the fulfillment has begun, or that the promise has been inaugurated. But it will not be finally fulfilled until the eschaton of the semester when I actually turn in an “A” for their final grade in NT theology. And yet there’s one thing that I have not done—and *cannot* do—for the apologetics students. I cannot give them an “A” in NT theology because they’re not NT theology students. That promise is “class-specific”; NT theology students are the *only* ones for whom I can fulfill that particular promise. There’s simply no academically legitimate way I can give apologetics students an “A” in NT theology.¹⁰⁹

The fact that the majority of the New Covenant promises are Israel-specific means that they simply have no hermeneutically legitimate way of being applied to Gentiles. God never brought my ancestors out of Egypt and made a covenant with them (Jer 31:32), promised them a specific piece of real estate (Ezek 36:28), or divided them into two separate nations (Ezek 37:15–22). Yet all of these are part and parcel of the New Covenant.

Here’s the larger point. The fact that the New Covenant was made with Israel does not mean its benefits cannot be extended to others. God will be gracious to whom he chooses to be gracious and can extend his saving mercy to anyone he wants. But it does mean that what he promised must still be fulfilled as stated to those to whom it was made. At the heart of the trustworthiness of the New Covenant is the trustworthiness of God not to mislead in the terms he uses, the reliability of his words as stated, and his ability to bring it to pass exactly what he promised as he promised it and to whom he promised it.

¹⁰⁸ Note to students: This is purely hypothetical; do not expect this in any of my classes. Ever.

¹⁰⁹ Obviously the analogy is neither exact nor exhaustive. The parallel to the New Covenant would perhaps be closer if some of the NT theology students had, say, received the cash while others had neglected to come by my office to pick it up (hard to imagine, I know, but then so is the rejection of a freely offered salvation).

Appendix 5
The Land Promise in the OT

Book	Reference
Pentateuch	
Genesis	12:7; 13:14–17; 15:7, 18; 15:8; 17:8; 24:7; 26:3; 28:4, 13; 35:12; 50:24
Exodus	6:8; 12:25; 13:5, 11; 32:13; 33:1
Numbers	11:12; 13:2; 14:23
Deuteronomy	1:8, 21, 35; 4:1; 6:3, 8, 10, 23; 7:13; 8:1; 9:5, 28; 10:11; 11:9, 21; 12:1; 19:8; 26:15; 27:3; 28:11; 30:5, 20; 31:7, 20; 34:2
Historical Books	
Joshua	1:6; 5:6; 18:3; 21:43; 23:5
Judges	2:1
1 Kings	8:34, 40, 48; 14:15; 21:8
2 Chronicles	6:25, 31; 20:7
Nehemiah	9:23, 36
Prophetic Books	
Jeremiah	3:18; 7:7; 11:5; 16:15; 24:10; 25:5; 30:3; 32:22; 35:15
Ezekiel	20:42; 36:28; 37:25; 47:14

Note: I employed multiple search parameters to locate over sixty references; but I am sure I have not found all of them.

Grudem, Wayne. *What the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2021. 93 pp. + 16 pp. (back matter).

This is the fourth book in a series by Grudem focusing on a specific ethical issue facing the Church. These “booklets” are composed largely of excerpts from Grudem’s book, *Christian Ethics*.¹ The impetus for this book is a change of the author’s position on what qualifies as biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage (39). In 2020 Grudem published an article on his change.² In addition, portions of this booklet were adapted from an essay found in *The ESV Study Bible* (9).³ This work brings Grudem’s most current understanding of the biblical data on divorce and remarriage into one source. In the introduction, five key questions are presented that require careful consideration (9).

According to the Bible, what are the legitimate grounds for divorce, if any?

Is divorce morally acceptable in the case of physical abuse or neglect?

If a divorce is granted for biblically legitimate reasons, is remarriage always allowed?

Can a divorced person become a church officer?

What reasons are given for the “no remarriage” view?

The booklet follows an outline format rather than chapters. Outline point A clarifies some of the misleading statistics concerning divorce and remarriage in American culture. The best reading of the data suggests that among unbelievers twenty to twenty-five percent of first marriages end in divorce (11). Grudem suggests that the divorce rate among evangelical Christians is less than five percent and that more than eighty percent of Christians would describe their marriages as “happy” (13). He provides several helpful studies to support these claims and rightly asserts that our culture would be greatly benefited to know that most marriages last a lifetime (11). Grudem then turns our attention to the tragic consequences of divorce upon the family. This includes the abiding anger in the hearts of divorcees toward their former spouses and the intense feeling of rejection experienced by their children (15–17). Only one out of seven remarriages proves to be stable, and nearly one-third of children between ages nineteen and twenty-nine have no ambition ten years after their parents’ divorce (17).

Outline point B examines God’s original plan for marriage. Grudem points to Jesus’ interaction with the Pharisees in Matthew 19, asserting that he avoided the debate raging between the rabbis while affirming God’s original plan for lifelong monogamous marriages (19). He suggests that any couple contemplating divorce should be asked, “Is it possible that this marriage can be restored and preserved?”

Outline point C presents OT examples in which divorce was allowed. The key text presented here is Deuteronomy 24:1–4. Grudem does not attempt to identify the “indecency” that gives rise to the

¹ *Christian Ethics: A Guide to Biblical Moral Reasoning* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018).

² “Grounds for Divorce: Why I Now Believe There Are More Than Two,” *Eikon, A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 71–79.

³ “Divorce and Remarriage,” in “Biblical Ethics: An Overview,” ed. Lane T. Dennis, et al. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 2545–47.

divorce nor offer any explanations for the abomination that would take place if the first husband took the divorced wife back after her second marriage ended (21–22). He simply asserts that the certificate of divorce gave the wife the right of remarriage and that the remarriage was not considered adultery (22). A series of other texts that mention divorce are cited as proof that divorce and remarriage existed under the Mosaic Covenant (Lev 21:7; Num 30:9; Deut 22:19; Jer 3:8). Grudem ends this section by declaring that the Mosaic Covenant does not have binding authority over this New Covenant age (23).

Outline point D documents two specific cases presented in the NT that allow for both divorce and remarriage. Grudem works through these texts: Matthew 5:32; 19:3–9; Mark 10:2–12; Luke 16:18; and 1 Corinthians 7:10–15. He supports his “brief summary” by demonstrating that the position is consistent with the Westminster Confession of Faith (37–40). He notes that the position of Jesus was far “stricter” than what was being taught by many rabbis in his day (24). At the same time, Jesus broke with the OT law, which called for the stoning of those caught in adultery (27). While the penalty for adultery is no longer physical death, Jesus teaches that adultery may bring death to the marriage (28). Grudem carefully demonstrates that the exception clause in Matthew 19:9 includes both divorce and remarriage. In the discussion of 1 Corinthians 7, Grudem asks and answers this question: “Would this passage apply to desertion by someone who professes to be a Christian?” He suggests that those in such a circumstance need wise counsel from the leaders of the church and where possible, “the steps of church discipline should be followed” (36–37). If the professing Christian is placed under church discipline, then “it would seem appropriate to treat the deserting spouse as an unbeliever” (37).

Outline point E asks if there are additional “legitimate grounds” for divorce and remarriage. This section begins with Grudem’s new understanding of 1 Corinthians 7:15 and is followed by a presentation of seven additional circumstances that “may” warrant the claim to being a biblical divorce. Grudem asserts that the historic understanding of “in such cases” is wrong. He suggests that the phrase “in such cases” was never researched and was assumed to be referring to the cases of desertion like this one (39). In his research Grudem found “several examples where this phrase clearly referred to more kinds of situations than the specific situation that the author was discussing” (40). He researched fifty-two examples of the Greek phrase *en tois toiousois*, “in such cases,” and chose three that establish his new position (40–42). Grudem offers this conclusion from his research: “He (Paul) implies that divorce is a legitimate possibility not only in cases of desertion by an unbeliever, but also in other circumstances that are similar to but not necessarily exactly like desertion” (42). He suggests that Paul reasoned that desertion by an unbeliever destroys marriage just as much as adultery (44). Thus, Paul added to Jesus’ teaching. As Paul reasoned to add desertion, we too can reason other cases that would break the marriage bond. The seven categories that come to Grudem’s mind are as follows (45–48):

- Abuse of the spouse (physical or emotional)
- Abuse of children
- Extreme, prolonged verbal and relational cruelty
- Credible threats of serious physical harm or murder
- Incorrigible drug or alcohol addiction

Incorrigible gambling addiction

Incorrigible addiction to pornography

Who gets to decide whether a believer's circumstances rise to the level of "in such cases"? Grudem's solution is for pastors, elders, and Christian counselors to seek wisdom as they prepare to discern which cases provide warrant for a biblical divorce (48). A biblical divorce means that the local church is saying that the innocent party is not sinning to obtain a divorce. Grudem answers several objections he anticipates to his expanded understanding of "in such cases" (51–52).

This section moves to two other suggestions for expanding biblical grounds for divorce that Grudem does *not* accept. He provides a detailed dismissal of David Instone-Brewer's assertion that material or emotional neglect are grounds for a legitimate biblical divorce (rooted in Brewer's understanding of Exod 21:10–11). He lists six reasons why Brewer's argument fails and should not be found convincing. Grudem strongly asserts that "Jesus did not teach that divorce was allowed for material or emotional neglect" (58). He concludes this point by showing that divorce cannot be justified on the basis of incompatibility or irreparable damage. He asserts that Craig Blomberg is wrong to suggest that the Church consider these as legitimate grounds for divorce (60).

Outline point F seeks to answer three specific circumstantial questions. The first question concerns the responsibility of those who have divorced on unbiblical grounds. Since their remarriage was an act of adultery, how do they now move forward? Grudem offers wise counsel warning couples not to pursue a second unbiblical divorce. They cannot undo their prior sin, but they can confess it and be cleansed (63). The second question asks whether divorced people can become church officers. Grudem suggests that the demands for pastors to be the husband of one wife does not exclude those who have been part of a biblical divorce/remarriage. He asserts that Scripture "refers to the present status of the man, either to his character of being faithful to his wife, or else to the fact that he is not a polygamist" (65). He dismisses the parallel often cited between the requirement for a pastor (1 Tim 3:2) and the requirement for a widow to be supported (5:9). He concludes that Paul is "not prohibiting from church leadership a man whose wife has died and who has remarried, or a man who has been divorced and who has remarried (these cases should be evaluated on an individual basis)" (71). The last question concerns the need to advocate for laws in society that reflect biblical standards. Grudem helpfully articulates that marriage is a creation ordinance and asserts that God's teaching on divorce and remarriage are not limited to believers (72). He concludes that God's standards for marriage and divorce are "ultimately best for all people" (72).

Outline point G provides a brief evaluation of the more restrictive views on divorce and remarriage. Grudem quickly dismisses Carl Laney's argument for a no-divorce, no-remarriage position. Such a position teaches that all divorces and all remarriages are sinful and should never been engaged in by believers. Grudem demonstrates that Laney's argument concerning the Greek word *porneia* meaning incest cannot stand up to honest exegetical or lexical scrutiny (75). The second position he refers to as the divorce-but-not-remarriage position: some divorces are not sinful, but all remarriages after divorce remain sinful. The only way a remarriage is not sinful, according to this position, is remarriage after the death of the spouse. Grudem addresses the leading advocates of this position,

Gordon Wenham and William Heth. Heth, as he notes, changed his position in 2002 and has written a lengthy article explaining his change.⁴ Grudem provides a compelling discussion concerning the harm inflicted on the innocent party of an unbiblical divorce. The innocent party, according to Wenham, must pursue a life of singleness and can never remarry as long as their former spouse is alive. Grudem suggests that this wrongly forces the innocent spouse to be a continual victim (“enslaved”) of the sin of their former spouse (82–85).

Outline point H offers practical counsel to people who have experienced painful divorces. Grudem suggests that the Church needs to minister to them by providing opportunities for them to safely discuss their feelings and be helped to the place of genuine forgiveness (86). He encourages all who have been divorced and remarried, even those done unbiblically, to remain in their present marriage. He concludes with this admonition: “If you are married, you are now married to the right person, and God wants you to make that marriage a good one for the rest of your life” (88). The book ends with an appendix addressing the translation of Malachi 2:16 and a series of questions for personal application.

The strength of this work is its relative brevity in addressing this important issue. It carries a pastoral tone throughout and strongly encourages the Church to protect God’s institution of marriage and those victimized by abuse. Grudem clearly establishes that God’s plans and purposes for marriage are for the good of all people. God’s revelation concerning divorce and remarriage is for all people. All people need to hear it and would be helped if their culture honored it as well. Grudem is deeply concerned that the Church help any woman who has been victimized by abuse. All the cover-ups that have been exposed in recent years provide compelling reasons for the Church to move quickly.

In addition, this booklet provides a great primer to larger study of this important issue. Grudem documents well the various exegetical issues that are involved in most of the key texts dealing with divorce and remarriage. He does not shy away from the difficult questions. He provides a valuable interaction with the positions of both Instone-Brewer and Blomberg on the legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage. The summary of the more restrictive positions on divorce and remarriage is very brief—providing an introduction to some of the arguments by a few leading proponents of these positions.

The primary weakness in this volume is narrow support offered for such an expansive suggestion concerning what qualifies as a biblical divorce. Grudem’s suggestion that Paul merely reasoned his way to desertion as a new ground for divorce and remarriage is rather insulting. Paul’s teaching on divorce and remarriage was far more than his personal reasoning; Paul is giving us the very Word of God. God gave the nation of Israel very clear instruction about marriage within the covenant community. The closest OT parallel to 1 Corinthians 7 would be Israel’s putting away of their covenant wives to marry pagan women. In both Ezra and Nehemiah, God commands the Israelites to put away their unbelieving wives. Malachi confronts marriage to pagans as an abomination (Mal 2:11) and a profaning of the covenant (Mal 2:10). Paul provides the Church much-needed clarity

⁴ “Jesus on Divorce: How My Mind Has Changed,” *SBJT* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 4–29.

concerning the unequally yoked marriages that were taking place as people were getting saved. The Church needed divine revelation on how a new believer should respond to their unsaved spouse.

The suggestion that “in such cases” must allow for us to reason our way into other legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage sets too much confidence on human reason and too little confidence on the sufficiency of God’s revelation. Grudem anticipates this objection to his new position and declares that he is not trying to open the flood gates but to “save thousands of sincere Christian believers from suffering horrible abuse for decades” (52). It should be said that his reasoning regarding what he calls possible grounds for biblical divorce will provide “justification” in the mind of many believers for an unbiblical divorce, which as Grudem notes, God hates.

The new categories suggested by Grudem as potentially legitimate grounds for divorce are sins the Church should confront through the divinely ordained means of church discipline. Grudem repeatedly urges those considering divorce for these other grounds to consult their church leaders. While encouraging church leaders to make reconciliation a first goal, Grudem taxes those leaders with the responsibility to determine what qualifies as “in such cases” (30n25). It is far better to admonish the Church to be serious about the responsibility of member care/discipleship that includes the practice of church discipline. Church discipline is hard work, but we have clear revelation from God on how to navigate this hard work. Sin confronted through the process of church discipline brings a decisive response on the part of the ones sinning. They will repent and be restored or continue in their sin and be removed. Instead of creating hypothetical categories that *may* resemble desertion of an unbelieving spouse, the Church is better served to hold fast to the revelation that it already possesses.

A second weakness is Grudem’s handling of the “husband of one wife.” His argument that this text was meant to prohibit polygamy has very little support. He acknowledges that polygamy was not a significant problem then or now, yet he limits the significance of the qualification to that issue. He places the emphasis on pastoral qualifications as dealing with their present circumstances and not their past. The ideas of blamelessness, ruling one’s house well, and having a good reputation with those outside the church cannot exclude one’s past. In fact, novices are excluded from the pastoral ministry because there is not enough data on their life to discern their qualifications. A church holding that a divorcee could serve in the role of pastor/elder or deacon must establish that the divorce was biblical. This would need to be done before the congregation so there would be no question as to the blamelessness of the candidate. It would be impossible for one who had sinfully divorced his wife to have a good reputation with those outside the local church (which includes the ex-wife).

The title of this booklet is *What the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage*. There are certainly some valuable discussions in this volume that help any reader to understand more about the issue. However, Grudem’s reasoning to new legitimate grounds without divine revelation makes this volume more of what Grudem has to say about divorce and remarriage than what God has said.

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Marsh, Cory M. *A Primer on Biblical Literacy*. El Cajon, CA: Southern California Seminary Press, 2022. 89 pp. + 20 pp. (frontmatter) + 38 pp. (backmatter).

Cory Marsh's church ministry and academic roles have situated him to observe a gap in teaching emphasis in relation to Scripture. Systematic theology tends to convey formal bibliology. Hermeneutics details the formal principles of Scripture interpretation. And most scholarly books explore these same academic issues. The topic of biblical literacy for its own sake receives much less attention. In his short work, *A Primer on Biblical Literacy*, Marsh offers a lay-level reflection on the importance of biblical literacy among the people of God. He argues on *a priori* grounds that "it is not only *possible* for Christians to understand the Bible but, in large measure, they are *expected* to understand it" (86). God would not have given us his written word unless he intends for us to read and grasp its meaning. Marsh divides his argument into three chapters that examine the need for biblical literacy (ch. 1), the definition of biblical literacy (ch. 2), and the method of biblical literacy (ch. 3). He closes with an appendix that provides the full text of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy followed by recommended resources.

Common human experience demonstrates the need for biblical literacy. Eras of significant biblical illiteracy (e.g., the Middle Ages) have always led to the captivity of the Church and of the individual human conscience to the whims and manipulations of unbiblical leaders. When the people of God do not know the Scriptures for themselves, they are unable to ferret out false teachers. If they do not know the truth, they cannot hold others to the truth. In Marsh's words, "The wolves are never held accountable to the Scriptures by their sheep" (9). Nationwide surveys reveal that the average churchgoing Christian today remains contented with whatever information a pastor dispenses from the pulpit. Many "*sincere Christians simply do not study the Bible for themselves*" (16, emphasis original).

Chapter two defines biblical literacy through the phrase "achievable awareness and proficiency" (21). That is, literacy does not equal scholastic training or comprehensive knowledge. Instead, it is a familiarity that runs deeper than a Sunday-school-level awareness of basic stories to an understanding of how Scripture fits together, what it teaches, and what it means for us today. Literacy exhibits an adequate proficiency that recognizes when someone is misconstruing a passage (29). Marsh observes that a portion of this literacy stems from the character qualities of believers. They must be "regenerate, prayerful, humble, obedient, and diligent" in order to grow in discernment (33).

The third chapter introduces the reader to the value and necessity of hermeneutics in the process of acquiring biblical literacy. Since biblical hermeneutics involves the study of the principles utilized in the combined art and science of interpretation, it encompasses a broad field of academic study. Nevertheless, Marsh effectively summarizes a series of key principles—the necessity of determining the original author's meaning and intent (52–58); grasping and submitting to the context (59–64); attending to history, literature, and theology (64); observing the progress of revelation (65–67); retaining the natural sense of the text and its single meaning (69–71); and extending that meaning by recognizing the text's significance (71–72). The remainder of the chapter (75–81) offers two biblical examples of the process of sound interpretation.

A few details in the book could use greater clarity. For instance, chapter 2 claims that “half [of American Christians] can’t name *even one* of the four Gospels” (25, emphasis added). The accurate current statistic is that half of American Christians cannot name *all four* Gospels.⁵ Chapter 3 uses the phrase “begs the question” (the name of a logical fallacy) when it means “raises the question.” Although this expression has both the technical and common functions, the reader might expect greater precision in a chapter that relates to hermeneutics. Chapter 3 also refers unnecessarily to a specific country music singer and song, although other examples of distinctive genres are readily available. A conservative reader might misunderstand the point of the example and question the author’s purpose in the citation. Finally, the author briefly quarrels with the expressions *hermeneutical circle* and *hermeneutical spiral* (61), but on this point he is somewhat unconvincing. A “cycle” expresses forward progress no more clearly than a “circle” does, and a “spiral” readily implies directionality and growth. While of course an author must use his preferred wording, Marsh’s critique seems out of place.

Several facets of *A Primer on Biblical Literacy* exhibit particularly commendable qualities. First, although footnotes appear only occasionally, they point lay readers to constructive resources that are accessible to Marsh’s audience. The author wastes no time trying to impress the reader with his own significant knowledge. Instead, he focuses on communicating succinctly what the reader needs for growth in biblical literacy. Marsh demonstrates a solid understanding of a writer’s responsibility—to keep his primary audience in mind and to write so that the reader may understand. Second, the work exhibits a strong devotional tone. It urges believers to choose greater intentionality in their knowledge of the Scriptures. It invites the lay reader to experience deeper understanding of God’s Word without becoming an academic professional. Anyone who “hears” the book correctly must sense Marsh’s devotion to the inspired, inerrant Word from a wise and gracious God.

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⁵ A. W. Geiger, “5 Facts on How Americans View the Bible and Other Religious Texts,” Pew Research Center (April 14, 2017); <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/14/5-facts-on-how-americans-view-the-bible-and-other-religious-texts/#:~:text=But%20fewer%20than%20half%20of,to%20God%20despite%20extraordinary%20suffering>.

Millar, J. Gary. *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation*. NSBT. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2021. 243 pp. + 29 pp. (back matter).

This book is the fifty-fifth in the New Studies in Biblical Theology series, of which D. A. Carson, renowned New Testament scholar, is the editor. Carson notes in the series preface, “Contributions to the series focus on one or more of three areas: (1) the nature and status of biblical theology, including its relations with other disciplines (e.g., historical theology, exegesis, systematic theology, historical criticism, narrative theology); (2) the articulation and exposition of the structure of thought of a particular writer or corpus; and (3) the delineation of a biblical theme across all or part of the biblical corpora” (vii). It is the third of these three areas, the study of a biblical theme, that Gary Millar pursues in expounding the doctrine of personal transformation as taught in the canon of Scripture.

Dr. Millar has served as the principal of the Queensland Theological College in Brisbane since 2012. The college is the ministry training institution of the Presbyterian Church of Australia, where Millar teaches OT, pastoral ministry, and preaching. He came to his present ministry by way of studies in theology in Aberdeen, Scotland; ministry in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland as a pastor in church planting and church revitalization for seventeen years; and Oxford, where he earned a DPhil on Deuteronomy. Principal Millar is the author of several commentaries and other scholarly works on Scripture. He travels widely in Australia and beyond, encouraging local churches through the ministry of the Word. He also is the co-founder and chair of The Gospel Coalition Australia.⁶ This brief biography is important to understanding the scholarly but pastoral tone of his book.

Millar’s strong pastoral connection to the real world, his fervency of spirit, and his impassioned love for Christ reveals itself throughout the book. This spirit explains the record of his tireless labors in Christian academia and for the Church. He is no armchair theologian. Reading the lines and between the lines of his book, the reader meets a skillful, warmhearted pastor-theologian, whose desire to live out what he has discovered presents itself in this carefully researched work. A serious work of theology in which the author’s heart shines with the warmth of Christ is rare, and this is a rare work. Its central topic, personal spiritual transformation, certainly lends itself to this result. The reader discerns a gracious brotherliness and worshipful tone that pulsates from the preface through the rest of the pages. Millar says, “Writing this book has made me gasp all over again at the extent of his love for us, the extravagance of his work in us and the relentlessness of his commitment to us” (x).

The chapters of *Changed into His Likeness* are organized with helpful headings throughout. The author also provides valuable conclusions at the end of each chapter (27, 53–55, 122, 172, 215–22, 242–243). These conclusions help the reader transition easily to each next chapter. The logically arranged chapters give a solid sense of progression, unity, and completeness to the work.

Proportionality provides clarity in a book because it gives greater attention to the most vital information and less attention to ideas of lesser significance. Chapter 3, “Can a Leopard Change Its Spots?,” is disproportionately long (sixty-six pages) compared to all the other chapters. In fact, it is three times the length of chapters 1 and 6, but for good reason. The author treats the whole OT

⁶ “Gary Millar,” Queensland Theological College; last modified Dec. 06, 2016, <https://www.qtc.edu.au/about-qtc/faculty-staff/>.

corpus on his subject in this one chapter but with a remarkable conciseness and refreshing thoroughness. Chapter 4 covers the entire NT corpus on personal transformation in forty-nine pages. This is an even more remarkable feat considering that the process of personal transformation is taught primarily in the NT, a fact Millar demonstrates convincingly. This is a prime example of progressive revelation, a feature of the Scriptures that biblical theology calls to our attention, as the author observes (223).

So, from the perspective of proportionality, that the author devotes 115 of his 243 pages, or sixty-four percent of the book, to the unfolding of the biblical information section by section, author by author in both canons on the subject makes sense. The remaining thirty-six percent shows the importance of the subject through current cultural contextualization. It further provides a discussion of the image of God in man as essential theological context for discussing personal transformation. Then it adds valuable and relevant lexical and linguistic background for the discussion. After examining the biblical material, Millar cites the significant contributions of other theologians through the centuries on personal transformation. In all, it is a well-balanced presentation of the truth on this subject of personal spiritual change.

While *Changed into His Likeness* is not a long book, it is thorough. It boasts an eighteen-page bibliography with 357 entries, an index of authors containing 283 writers cited in the book, and 514 footnotes, many of which are content notes. The work is preeminently a work of Scripture exposition, as evidenced by the 654 passages cited from fifty-six of the sixty-six books of the canon. The book is also an interaction, a conversation with current scholars whose works touch on the theme of Christian personal transformation. As a Reformed, Evangelical, Presbyterian minister, the author does not surprise the reader by showing a certain preference for and deference toward Reformed authorities, both past and present (evidenced by citations in the index of authors). But none of these authors are cited inappropriately or gratuitously. Their contributions are valuable and worthy of inclusion.

To assist the potential reader, the ensuing discussion summarizes the method of development in Millar's monograph. It provides a synopsis of each chapter and also cites benefits and weaknesses. Chapter 1, "Clearing the Ground" (twenty-two pages), begins by citing non-Christian psychological authorities on personal change—showing that most believe it is difficult to achieve, extraordinarily complex, and lacks a clear path how to achieve it (1–8). Millar then shows that movements within evangelical Christianity either promise too much personal change too easily, which he calls "the toxicity of over-realized eschatology" (9), or they offer too little change through "the aridity of under-realized eschatology" (12). Millar then shows that believers have been changed already in Christ through the gospel—sanctified positionally (13–20)—and will be changed ultimately at glorification (21–26). True to the biblical-theological method, he quotes Scripture passages profusely to establish these truths. He concludes the chapter by explaining that it is "life in the middle," between these two states, which his theology of personal transformation develops (27–28).

In chapter 2, "On Being 'Us': Biblical Anthropology and Personal Transformation" (twenty-six pages), Millar discusses contemporary secular perspectives of human nature, both corporeal and non-corporeal. He cites the thoughts of non-Christian psychologists, neuroscientists, and quantum

physicists, demonstrating the relevance of this discussion for believers today. He shows that what Scripture has to say about man's nature, both physical and spiritual, is highly relevant (29–32).

Articulation of the image of God in man and biblical descriptions of man's spiritual and physical nature follow. Millar offers clear, non-technical, subtly sophisticated discussions that attest thorough acquaintance with the biblical languages, relevant linguistic sources, and biblical passages (32–47). He shows that in Scripture there is both a dualistic description of man as physical and spiritual and a holistic description of man as a unity, both of which should shape our view of human nature. He then warns that extreme views result in misguided practice and thought. For example, an overly holistic view of man results in a distorted missiology that gives priority to man's temporal, physical condition as a primary concern in the mission of God in the world, or it may result in the false doctrine of annihilationism since the body and the soul are so inextricably bound up together that one cannot survive beyond the other. On the other hand, an overly dualistic view of man results in a “gospel minimalism,” which “reduces human beings to ‘souls on legs’” (50–53). This attitude renders the Christian compassionless concerning the temporal needs of others. The author rejects each of these extremes and argues that man is both simple and unified in his being—distinctly physical and spiritual, based on the biblical-theological evidence (53–55).

Chapter 3, “Can a Leopard Change Its Spots?” (sixty-six pages), tackles the question whether the OT teaches continuing moral change. Millar's strategy is to first consider six case studies of major figures in the OT: (1) Noah, (2) Abram/Abraham, (3) Jacob, (4) Moses, (5) David, and (6) Solomon. He concludes that the narratives of these lives are not focused on describing positive, personal spiritual growth. In fact, all exhibit profound instances of regression and failure—calling for God's gracious forgiveness and restorative action (56–94).

While he concedes that Rahab, Naaman, Manasseh, and Nebuchadnezzar provide powerful examples of personal transformation in the OT (85–94), Millar considers these to be exceptions rather than the rule. Though mentioning their faith and repentance, he seems disinclined to emphasize these traits. He also does not emphasize the penitential psalms and psalms about the believer's relationship to the Word—psalms which result in personal transformation and are filled with repentance and faith for change. The national revivals in Israel and Judah also receive relatively light emphasis, even though the people followed godly leaders in large-scale repentance and faith. These are all profound case studies about personal transformation in the OT. Millar's casual treatment of these examples diminishes vital information to strengthen his assertion that the OT teaches little about the process of progressive personal transformation. The facts speak otherwise. God intends the OT narrative to provide examples of personal transformation for us to follow (e.g., 1 Cor 11, Heb 3–4, 11).

Next, Millar develops the thesis: “In fact, the hope and longing for change is a vital part of the overall fabric of the theology of the Old Testament, and a key building block of a robust biblical theology” on the subject (102). Working through the Pentateuch, the Psalms and Wisdom Literature, and then the Latter Prophets (especially Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Joel), Millar demonstrates that this hope and longing for change is expected and desired in the future (102–12). It is only the detailed description of the process of personal transformation in the *present* that he contends is largely absent from the OT. When compared to the NT, this conclusion is true, as the author shows later.

After answering some probable objections to his view about the paucity of clear teaching on the process of personal transformation in the OT, Millar returns to his primary contention in his closing statement of the chapter: “A careful reading of the Old Testament, then, suggests that change or transformation is both necessary and deeply desirable, but remains elusive until the new covenant (i.e., the dramatic intervention of God promised in multiple places and construed in various ways) is set up by the coming of Messiah” (122). It is his next chapter which shows how the NT addresses this need for a full process of personal transformation through the New Covenant.

In chapter 4, “On Wine and Wineskins” (forty-four pages), the author alludes to the parable of Jesus about the necessity and dangers of change. He uses this analogy to unfold the biblical theology of the NT about the process of personal spiritual transformation. He systematically works through the teachings of Jesus (123–44), Paul (144–63), Peter (163–65), James (165–66), Hebrews (166–69), and John (169–71)—following the biblical-theological method of grouping the material by author, citing Scripture profusely, and displaying distinctive elements from each author to develop the overall teaching of the NT.

By treating the corpus of each NT author on personal transformation, Millar demonstrates each author’s different emphases while developing the same theme. Christ’s teaching in the Gospels, the foundation of all else, is that his life through the gospel daily gives the believer the grace to live the beautiful life of conformity to the law of God and bear fruit for God’s glory (127–28). The author shows that Paul is the most detailed of the NT writers in the specifics that bring about and characterize personal transformation. The author concludes insightfully, “It is important that we realize that when it comes to real-time change God makes through the gospel as, by the Spirit, we are united to Christ, the New Testament articulates a doctrine of transformation that is multi-faceted, extravagant and immeasurably rich” (172).

In chapter 5, “Pursuing Change” (forty-four pages), the author “steps sideways to engage with how a range of ancient and modern theologians have dealt with this subject, in confidence that this will further enrich both our understanding and expression of the biblical material” (172). Under the heading “The Inner Life and Biblical Change,” Dr. Millar expounds the thought of Augustine of Hippo (174–77), Thomas Aquinas (177–79), Jonathan Edwards (179–81), Thomas Chalmers (183–86), C. S. Lewis (187–90), and James K. A. Smith (191–92). Millar sees value in Augustine’s trinitarian emphasis regarding personal transformation (175). He argues that the Reformers were indebted to Aquinas for teaching that the happiness of God is the ideal disposition we should conform ourselves to by grace (178–79). He lauds Edwards for his teaching about the inner experience of joy in God (180–81). He commends Chalmers for his insight into self-examination (184). He concedes that Lewis is not a theologian but sees him as a man of deep insight into humanity, spiritual nature, and personal spiritual warfare (187–88). On the other hand, Millar warns that Smith “has to a large degree, lost the centrality of the gospel, which itself has the power to change people” (192). Smith may write incisively about cultural problems, but he wrongly believes that introducing new liturgies for worship is the answer for the internal poverty of Christians spiritually.

Under the heading of “Christology and Biblical Change,” Millar draws heavily on Calvin to develop the idea of our union with Christ as central to any change in the believer (193–97). Calvin and

the author are in complete harmony with Scripture in this emphasis. Without Christ we can do nothing. He alone in us is the source of all grace for change.

Next, the author develops “Piety and Biblical Change,” showing how preeminent theologians and pastors of the past have emphasized the public and private means of grace for change (i.e., the Word, prayer, and worship). John Owen, John Newton, John Wesley, and B. B. Warfield are cited extensively and convincingly, demonstrating the strong emphasis they gave to personal piety for personal transformation (197–211). Surprisingly, Millar then briefly discusses the growth and value of the modern biblical counseling movement, particularly when it manifests the theological emphases of the Reformed tradition (212–14).

Before articulating a concise theology of personal transformation in his final chapter, the author observes that while no theologian he has cited has articulated such a theology, they have contributed to what he has come to understand about this truth from Scripture. First, “Biblical change is complex” (215–16). Second, “Biblical change is God’s work” (216–17). Third, “Biblical change is trinitarian” (217–18). Fourth, “Biblical change flows from our union with Christ” (218–19). Fifth, “Biblical change is word driven” (219–20). Sixth, “Biblical change requires biblical piety” (220). Seventh, “Biblical change is comprehensive” (220–21).

In chapter 6, “Changed into His Likeness” (twenty-one pages), the author unfolds the biblical theology of personal transformation at which he has arrived by examining Scripture. He develops it by briefly underscoring that personal, progressive transformation is a NT reality (223). He places God at the center and as the prime actor in the process, not diminishing the responsibility of the believer who must cooperate and obey. These are the actions of God to change us: (1) “God transforms our relationship with him” (225–27). (2) “God transforms our knowledge of him” (227). (3) “God transforms our desire for him” (227–28). (4) “God transforms our character (our resemblance to the Lord Jesus Christ)” (229–30). (5) “God transforms our experience of life (with him)” (230–31).

Next, Millar emphasizes that God changes us through the gospel. By this he means through the Word by the Spirit beginning at salvation and continuing throughout the Christian life. The author questions the Reformed teaching of the Lord’s Supper and baptism as additional means of grace—acknowledging that this teaching, though propounded by Calvin, has virtually vanished from Reformed teaching. He does not suggest that these ordinances carry grace in themselves, but that personal transformation is effected through obedience and fellowship in their practice (232–34).

Finally, Millar says that God changes us by enabling us to respond in repentance and faith as we are convicted by His Spirit through the Word (235–37). He explains that the process of change is not accomplished alone, but through the fellowship of the church—as believers build up one another, hold each other accountable spiritually, and encourage one another to love and good works (238–41). We must persevere for there to be transformation wrought by God (241–42). Millar concludes that the change in us will be life-long, arduous, and sometimes painful. The pilgrim’s path of transformation is progressive and often mysterious. It leads to the throne of God, where we will experience complete transformation as faith becomes sight and we see his face.

The depth, breadth, and solidly biblical-theological character of this work commend it. The gracious pastoral tone and clear, concise expression also commend it. Most of all, the interesting and

thorough development of a theology of personal transformation commends it. *Changed into His Likeness: A Biblical Theology of Personal Transformation* is a book worth reading, worth thinking through, and worth internalizing for growth in Christlikeness. It is biblical theology at its best. We owe a debt of gratitude to our brother Gary Millar for his great care and sacrifice in writing it.

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Lawson, Steven J. *Called to Preach: Fulfilling the High Calling of Expository Preaching*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2022. 208 pp.

The following review is intended to encourage future pastors and ministry leaders to evaluate and grow in their call to expositional preaching. Steven Lawson's *Called to Preach: Fulfilling the High Calling of Expository Preaching* includes nine chapters in which the author sequentially introduces and explores elements of a call to preach God's Word. Lawson pastored for thirty-four years, has authored thirty-three books, serves as the professor of preaching at The Master's Seminary, and trains pastors around the world in the skill of expositional preaching. In this work, Lawson's focus is the faithful and effective expositional preaching of God's Word. In it he provides a broad overview of biblical and practical suggestions, progressing from discerning a call to preach to delivering an expositional message.

In his first three chapters, Lawson provides a biblical and philosophical view of the call to preach. He shares nine indicators of a legitimate call to preach: growing desire, ability to teach, godliness, exemplary living, will of God, confirmation from others, spiritual influence, sense of urgency, and a providential open door (29). Next, Lawson explores the preacher's biblical mandate from 2 Timothy 4:1–5. He details God's specific instructions to Timothy as a "strict charge" that is "extended to every preacher called by God and is the timeless standard for all who preach" (49). Lawson elevates the preacher's responsibility to exalt God, stating that "a towering understanding of God leads to transcendent worship and holy living" (50). This third chapter is saturated with the high and lofty values of preaching the glory of God, through the gospel of the Son, in the power of the Spirit. These three ideas give the reader an elevated view of the privilege and responsibility of the preacher.

In chapters 4–8, Lawson moves from philosophy to practice, providing the reader with a thorough explanation of expository preaching. He leads the student through several stages of studying for an expositional message: the orientation stage (the tools of Bible study), the preparation stage (the steps of effective study), the evaluation stage (understanding the spiritual needs of the audience), the selection stage (choosing passages for various kinds of exposition), the observation stage (initial investigation of the text), the interpretation stage (detailed investigation of the text), and the consultation stage (referencing resources for the text) (90). Then he details the practical assembly of an expository sermon through several stages: the explanation stage (detailing the major points of the sermon), the implication stage (seeking to write out the text's implications for the modern audience), the application stage (stating what the text requires of the audience), the illustration stage (adding windows of light), the introduction stage (crafting an attention-drawing opening), the conclusion stage (the final word), the inspection stage (reviewing the message for length, accuracy, and balance), and the intercession stage (praying over the message).

Turning to sermon delivery, Lawson describes eighteen practical ideas for developing an effective communication style—supporting his insight with both Scripture and other quotations. His wisdom in connecting with a spiritually diverse audience is one of the most helpful aspects of the book. He discusses twelve different states of spiritual development that may be represented in the audience, and

he challenges the preacher to be mindful of each as Scripture addresses them all effectively. Lawson wraps up this portion of the text by sharing seventeen suggestions for improving as an expositor.

The author closes with a fitting and compelling final chapter on the personal life of the preacher, in which he challenges every preacher that “God must prepare the preacher before the preacher can prepare the message” (165). His closing words call the preacher to faithfulness and fidelity in the expositional preaching of Scripture. This is especially significant in a day when theologically light and biblically thin self-help sermons abound in many Christian churches.

This book is remarkably practicable and actionable. Every pastor or future pastor should read it. For the experienced pastor, it is a clarifying journey that will rekindle a passion for faithful exposition. For the younger pastor or student, it will establish a strong foundation and biblical perspective for effective future ministry.

Weaknesses are difficult to identify in this book, but it would have been well-served by a chapter or section on biblical theology. Giving the reader a high-altitude view of the grand narrative of Scripture (as one cohesive, redemptive, historical narrative) would help the expositor-in-training to frame the context of any biblical text within the broader redemptive story and God’s Christo-centric narrative arc. The closest that Lawson comes to this is in a one-paragraph section entitled “Bible Survey” in chapter 4 (71).

Called to Preach is both informational and inspirational. It is an excellent survey of the broad topic of expository preaching presented by a well-qualified author. This resource will motivate and equip a preacher to engage his call, grow his skills, and faithfully execute his task. The author provides a broad treatment of the vital components of effective expository preaching. Each of Lawson’s nine chapters contains wise admonitions, motivating insights, and a biblical perspective that will develop any pastor, but especially next-generation pastors. Dr. Lawson has served the church well with this new resource that God may use to help many biblical communicators to lovingly and faithfully present the life-giving truth of his Word.

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Weremchuk, Max S. *John Nelson Darby: A Biography*. Updated and expanded ed. El Cajon, CA: Southern California Seminary Press, 2021. 214 pp. + 16 pp. (back matter).

John Nelson Darby is a fairly well-known figure in church history, but not always one who is known accurately. Writers sometimes label him as the founder of the Plymouth Brethren (which he was not) or as the man who invented dispensationalism (which he did not). Rather he deeply influenced these movements in their early history. Throwing further light on Darby and his contribution would be a welcomed contribution to historical understanding.

Max Weremchuk attempts to provide a fuller picture of Darby's life, but his attempt is not a complete success. This biography, a revision of an edition published in 1992, seeks to be more edifying than scholarly. The author does not discount scholarly research on Darby—and hints at other studies to come—but his purpose is more to present the personal life of Darby. Such an emphasis is welcomed toward contributing to a better understanding of Darby's character, but it leaves the reader wishing for a bit more.

Part of the problem is the author's determination to communicate the details of Darby's life—too much detail at times. The book relies heavily on block quotations. Although this method demonstrates that the author's points rest on primary sources, it is stylistically deadening. The author also devotes too much space in the text (rather than footnotes) to dealing with matters of detail such as the chronology of the events of Darby's life. More summarizing or editing of the selections from the quoted material along with moving technical points to the footnotes would help the work to flow better and better highlight the main points the author is making.

Weremchuk succeeds in providing insight into Darby's life and heart, but often the reader could profit from knowing more of the historical setting. At one point the author quotes Darby: "I felt God, out of England, gave me the French speaking countries as a field of labour, perhaps America also, and in fact this did not fail. In His constant goodness He added part of Germany." The problem is that Weremchuk provides little detail in the narrative of the wide ministry represented in this statement, although in an appendix he does provide a helpful timeline that gives some context. Integrating Darby's views and personal reflections more into Darby's historical context would in fact help the reader grasp those views and reflections better.

Fortunately, there are positive aspects to the book. It is refreshing to hear a sympathetic author review Darby's life, particularly because he is a controversial figure who has often drawn a negative press. Although one might regret that the book does not give greater place to Darby's theology or the controversies in which he participated, the author gives good emphasis to Darby's devotional and church life. The reader likely understands his character a little more. Also, although the large quotations from primary sources work to the detriment of the flow, some of the selections do provide insight into Darby's thought. For example, the final appendix—a writing by Darby titled "What Do I Learn from Scripture?"—not only sums up Darby's views but also illustrates something of his method, such as his resistance to formal statements of faith.

So, in brief, the work is a sympathetic biography that casts light on Darby's views and personal character. The author mentions in his "Foreword" (which technically should be a preface) that in this

revision he took to heart some of the criticism of his first edition. Perhaps this present book is another step toward bringing the story of Darby to the public, to be followed by a more scholarly work that the author intimates is yet to come.

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Gregg R. Allison and Andreas J. Köstenberger. *The Holy Spirit. Theology for the People of God.* Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020. 485 pp. + 31 pp. (front matter) + 66 pp. (back matter).

This is the premier title of a newly proposed multi-volume series (Theology for the People of God) that primarily targets “students, seminarians, pastors, and other church and ministry leaders” (xxii). Each volume in the series will be co-authored by a pair of convinced evangelical Baptists (xxi). What is most intriguing, however, is that the volumes “emphasize integration of biblical and systematic theology in dialog with historical theology and with application to church and life” (xxii). In keeping with this primarily bi-perspectival approach, part 1 (219 pages) lays the groundwork with a biblical-theological survey of the Holy Spirit through the Old and New Testaments. Part 2 (262 pages) then explores specific systematic-theological issues related to the Holy Spirit, incorporating relevant historical theological insights along the way.

The biblical-theological methodology progresses straightforwardly through each successive corpus of both Testaments, pausing along the way for summaries of the data and charts that helpfully track every reference to the Spirit in each corpus. The following systematic-theological analysis covers a wide array of issues, including the Spirit’s deity and personhood, intratrinitarian relations, relation to Scripture, and the Spirit’s role in creation, providence, salvation, the Church, and the future. A chapter on contemporary issues briefly evaluates Pentecostalism, the charismatic movement, and third-wave evangelicalism (including its more recent Reformed expressions). Given the authors’ affirmation of continuationism (see below), their concluding application is unsurprisingly generic: “Our pneumatology urges believers and churches to avoid easy reductionism by which Pentecostal and charismatic phenomena are dismissed as either the highest expression of divine blessing [sic; “dismissed” as such?] or the derelict result of demonic activity” (470).

The fundamental theological posture of the authors is solidly orthodox. A smorgasbord of positions espoused in the book will give readers a feel for its contents and orientation. (1) The trinitarian formula in Matthew 28:19 is attributed not to “Matthean parlance” but directly to “Jesus’s *ipsissima verba*” (59). (2) The authors’ “pneumatological interpretation of the creation account stands against all non-creationist views,” “rejects theistic evolution” (299–300), and holds the *ruach* in Genesis 1:2 to be the Holy Spirit (11–12). (3) They helpfully trace the source of the Bible as a “trinitarian revelation, initiated by the Father, expressed through the Son, and terminating in the Holy Spirit, who inspired it” (307–09). (4) Summarizing four views on the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, both authors hold that this sin involves “malicious, irrational rejection and slander” of the Spirit’s testimony to Christ that attributes it to Satan, but they disagree on whether that sin may be committed today (343–44). (5) The authors embrace the priority of regeneration to conversion (369). (6) Several pages argue for the eternal, double procession of the Spirit. The promise of biblical passages that confirm *eternal* procession (259) never actually materializes, however; while several passages are adduced for the *double* procession, arguments for the *eternal* procession are limited to assertions from church fathers. The authors acknowledge that the church’s historic formulation of the doctrine “*added* to the biblical affirmation of John 15:26 but *did not contradict* it” (258, emphasis original). (7) The Holy Spirit gives individual believers “specific guidance as to the where, when, how, and whom of career, ministry,

marriage or singleness, family and more. While controversial in some circles, such guidance is well supported by Scripture” (400). (8) In a discussion of soteriological inclusivism, which argues that the Spirit himself may be an avenue of salvation within other religions even apart from any knowledge or confession of the death of Christ, the authors soundly conclude, “Our doctrine of the Holy Spirit . . . holds to exclusivism and rejects inclusivism” (474).

Some omissions are a little surprising for a volume dedicated to a thorough unfolding of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Though the authors seem to imply indirectly that OT believers were not permanently indwelt by the Spirit (22, 54), they include no detailed, systematic discussion of that issue (nor any footnote reference to one). Likewise, in tracing the biblical theology of the Spirit through Acts, the authors propose no potential resolution to the apparent contradiction between 20:22 and 21:4 and 11 beyond stating the obvious: “It is difficult to understand how the same Spirit who constrained Paul to go to Jerusalem leads believers and Agabus to warn him against doing so” (96); granted, an extensive German study is footnoted for further reference, but that is an odd option for a volume expressly intended “not first and foremost [for] other ‘professional’ theologians” (xxii).

For many readers, the most debatable position espoused by Allison and Köstenberger will be their defense of continuationism. The biblical-theological survey on passages relating to tongues concludes that the phenomenon in Acts 2 involved xenoglossia—the ability to “miraculously speak in foreign languages” (84). The authors never address, however, whether the tongues-speaking practiced in Corinth and regulated by Paul was also xenoglossia. What are readers to make of this? Should we assume that they believe the tongues-speaking in Jerusalem and Corinth were identical, since they never say otherwise? Or does their silence on this point intentionally leave the door open for their later affirmation of continuationism (429–34)? The failure to clarify this point vexes their defense of continuationism, since at the core of that position is the argument (and therefore the need for biblical-theological data) that the Corinthian tongues-speaking was not xenoglossia. Avoiding any discussion of the nature of tongues outside of Acts (Corinthian or modern) is conspicuously unhelpful for any fair and biblically informed presentation of the debate.

The authors’ summary of the cessationist position is equally disappointing. “Cessationism points to the following support in its favor,” it begins. “(1) First Corinthians 13:8–13 associates the cessation of sign gifts . . . with the completion of the New Testament canon” (431). Granted, point (2) acknowledges “a modification” of this view that rejects this interpretation. But why begin by attributing to cessationism a view that, in point of fact, most cessationists reject? One expects a bit more informed accuracy in an academic work of this caliber. The authors cite Anthony Thistleton (a continuationist) over a dozen times elsewhere in the book; this might have been an apropos time to cite him once more, for even Thistleton concedes that “*few or none* of the serious cessationist arguments depends on a specific exegesis of 1 Cor. 13:8–11.”⁷ Listing the completion-of-the-canon view as central to cessationism also undermines the relevance of their further arguments against this view. For example, they pose the following question: “As the early church read these passages . . . what would

⁷ Anthony C. Thistleton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1063 (emphasis added).

have signaled to them that these apostolic instructions no longer apply” since “no such signal appears in the texts themselves” (432)? But if the sovereign Spirit simply ceased giving a particular gift, no such signal in the text would be necessary. Indeed, the counter-question might be posed: what text signaled to the early church the cessation of normative, inspired Scripture? A formidable argument has been made that the cessation of tongues need not be argued for on any textual grounds but on purely historical grounds—just as all orthodox believers (the authors included) would argue for the cessation of inspired Scripture not on any textual grounds but on historical grounds.⁸ Similarly, the authors argue against the cessationist view: “At what point and in what manner did the early churches and their leaders *know to suspend the operation of the gifts* of prophecy, speaking in tongues, and the other sign gifts?” (432, emphasis added). This is an astonishing question to pose in a book on the theology of the Holy Spirit, given the unequivocal biblical-theological data that churches and their leaders have nothing to do with either instigating or suspending spiritual gifts in the first place (1 Cor 12:7–11, 18, 24, 28); such gifts are purely at the sovereign disposition of the Spirit—a point the authors rehearsed just four pages earlier (428) but overlook in their critique of cessationism.

All that being said, the book’s strengths far outweigh its weaknesses, and the authors have made a significant contribution to pneumatology specifically and to theological method in general. Hopefully this model of directly interfacing biblical and systematic theology within the same volume will find its way into other theological studies in the future.

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⁸ See Alan N. Grover, “Canon Theology As a Model for Cessationist Theology: A Biblical Case for Cessationism (PhD diss., Bob Jones University, 2015). Part of Allison’s and Köstenberger’s argument, of course, is the debated assertion that “the historical record of the continuation of the sign gifts is solid. It is simply not the fact that these gifts died out after the apostolic age was over or that their continuation was confined to marginal, even heretical, groups” (432). See Grover, chapter 9, “Historical Evidence for Cessationism.”