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High-Altitude Spiral Preaching: A Philosophy and Methodology for Preaching from a Whole Book of the Bible in One Sermon as Part of a Long-Range Plan

by Kerry McGonigal[1]

There has been a resurgence of expository preaching in the twenty-first-century conservative-evangelical world,[2] and the church has benefited greatly from this recovery. This return to expository preaching typically expresses itself in verse-by-verse, paragraph-by-paragraph exposition, most often working sequentially through a book of the Bible.[3] Though there are good reasons for preaching smaller textual units, preachers who limit themselves to bite-sized units are missing out on the many benefits of big-picture preaching, or what I am calling "high-altitude preaching." This kind of preaching broadens out the borders of the preaching text, taking in an entire book, a collection of books, and even the whole Bible.[4]

Table 1. The Spectrum of Expository Preaching

Microscopic ⟷ Macroscopic		
Ground Level: Clauses, Verses, and Paragraphs	Low Altitude: Chapters and Sections	High Altitude: Entire Books and Entire Bible

In some cases, the lack of a balanced diet[5] from the pulpit stems from a lack of instruction in our Bible schools and seminaries. Coupled with that is the lack of sufficient modeling in this area.

[1] Kerry McGonigal (DMin) has been teaching expository preaching at Bob Jones University for over twenty years. He also has over a decade of experience in pastoral ministry. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Bible Faculty Summit held on the BJU campus in July of 2025.

[2] Consider the number of books published on expository preaching in the last decade or so: Haddon W. Robinson, Scott Wenig, and Torrey Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2025); David R. Helm, *Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God's Word Today* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014); David Strain, *Expository Preaching* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2021); Ramesh Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons: A Seven-Step Method for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001); Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon,* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018); Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Sermons* (Chicago: Moody, 2017).

[3] Even those who preach through whole books of the Bible often do so with their heads down, focusing more on the details of individual paragraphs than on what comes before and after and how the parts work together and relate to the whole book. The opposite problem is typified by those who use the text as a springboard into the vast landscape of the Bible, usually in an effort to make biblical-theological connections and preach Christ. Both approaches are lacking.

[4] Mark Dever preached a message covering the entire Bible entitled "The Whole Bible: What Does God Want of Us?." See *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 23-46.

[5] Pastors should provide a balanced diet of high-altitude, low-altitude, and ground-level preaching. I am not arguing for the *priority* of high-altitude preaching in pulpit ministry. The ratio I would recommend *as a general rule* is high altitude

Beginning preachers who have not been taught how to preach from a larger textual unit and who do not see it done on a regular basis will default to the emphasis of their theological education and the example of their ministerial mentors.

A connected problem comes with a lack of teaching on how to plan out a preaching calendar. The few resources devoted to this topic focus on a one-year approach not a long-range approach.[6] Unless a pastor has a background in educational theory and practice, he may not understand the need for laying out a preaching curriculum that includes both scope and sequence.[7] This lack of planning results in preaching that defaults to the next verse or paragraph and fails to consider how to lay out a preaching plan that includes a healthy mix of ground-level, low-altitude, and high-altitude sermons.[8]

In this paper I am arguing that *pastors should have a long-range plan for their preaching that incorporates high-altitude preaching from whole books of the Bible in a spiral approach, circling back to these books regularly and expositing them from different angles and with increasing depth and complexity. This is what I am calling high-altitude spiral preaching (HASP).*[9] This paper is a call for preachers to expand the scope of their texts from microscopic to macroscopic and give careful thought to the scope and sequence of their preaching calendar. I will both argue for this approach and model what it could look like, using Genesis as an example throughout.

Philosophy of HASP

High-Altitude Preaching

Description of High-Altitude Preaching

High-altitude preaching (HAP) is preaching at the book level and above. It can be thought of in terms of three analogies.[10] First, HAP is a 10,000-foot helicopter, high-level overview of the entire

(20%), low altitude (30%), and ground level (50%). There are also different kinds of sermons based on purpose, not length of text, but that is not my focus here. For example, Donald Hamilton describes "four distinct kinds of sermons: evangelistic preaching, edificational preaching, pastoral preaching, and prophetic preaching." *Preaching with Balance: Achieving and Maintaining Biblical Priorities in Preaching* (Geanies House, Scotland: Mentor, 2007), 206. That said, in planning out the preaching calendar with the church in view, there is more to think about than simply how big the textual unit is.

[6] For example, Stephen Nelson Rummage writes of his book *Planning Your Preaching,* "The purpose of this book is to help pastors put together a *quarterly, six-month, or yearly* schedule for what they will preach." *Planning Your Preaching: A Step-by-Step Guide for Developing a One-Year Preaching Calendar* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2002), 14 (emphasis added).

[7] Scope and sequence in the context of a preaching calendar would deal with (1) what content the preacher plans to cover (and by extension not cover) and (2) the order in which he plans to cover it. See James Estep, Michael Anthony, and Gregg Allison, *A Theology for Christian Education* (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 284.

[8] Scott Gibson argues that "preachers do plan" but "the conversation in a preacher's head may go something like this: *I've preached through a number of books from the Old and New Testaments but I've never preached through Numbers before. My goal has been to preach through all the books of the Bible before I retire. Yes, that's it. I'll preach through Numbers.*" *Preaching with a Plan: Sermon Strategies for Growing Mature Believers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 67.

[9] I am not going to deal with low-altitude preaching (chapters and sections).

[10] See Jonathan Leeman and Mark Dever, "On Overview Sermons," *Pastors Talk,* episode 165, March 30, 2021, https://www.9marks.org/episode/episode-165-on-overview-sermons/; Mark Dever, *Message of the Old Testament,* 17–20.

biblical book. Think of the contours of a landscape seen from a high altitude where you can see the lay of the land and all of its major features. It is preaching where, for example, all fifty chapters of Genesis are in view. Second, HAP can be compared to an archaeological dig designed to provide an initial survey of the site. There is the initial sweep of the area to map out major features. Then the archaeologist begins to dig in and excavate the various layers. Third, HAP can be likened to creating a map before going on a journey. The preacher zooms out to consider the whole trip, looking at distance and time, and considering key destination points along the way.

Basis of High-Altitude Preaching

The Bible admonishes preachers to preach the Word (2 Tim 4:2), but it does not specify the exact form that preaching is to take. The fundamental non-negotiable for biblical preaching is faithfulness to what God has revealed in his Word. Though there are many convincing reasons to engage in ground-level exposition on a weekly basis,[11] and the history of the church is replete with examples and exemplars, the Bible allows for liberty when it comes to particular methods and forms of exposition.

Though there are no examples in the Bible of someone preaching a whole-book sermon, there are examples of high-altitude preaching. Peter's sermon in Acts 2 runs all the way from the prophet Joel to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Stephen's sermon in Acts 7, the longest in the book, gives a big-perspective summary of Israel's history from Abraham to Solomon. Most notably, Jesus himself engages in high-altitude preaching in Luke 24, where "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (v. 27). Clearly, he engaged in the exposition of biblical texts at the ground-level, but it was highly selective engagement and part of his high-altitude fly-over of the OT. This is HAP at its best. It corrected the disciples' missing piece of the big story. It was not just that they were missing a text. They were missing a theme (suffering) that was found in many texts spanning the whole OT. But they did not see it. This was robust, highly-selective, text-grounded, high-altitude preaching of a biblical-theological theme throughout the OT.

Classification of High-Altitude Preaching

Where does HAP fall in the spectrum of preaching types? Historically and morphologically, sermons have been classified as expository, textual, and topical.[12] An expository sermon is one in which

[11] In answering the question, "Why are you compelled to preach verse by verse through books of the Bible, unlike other notable preachers such as C.H. Spurgeon?" John MacArthur replied, "Preaching verse by verse through books of the Bible is the most reasonable way to teach the whole counsel of God. If I am obligated to teach the whole new covenant message and all of the mystery unfolded, the only systematic way that I know to teach it all is to take it the way it comes, one book at a time from beginning to end. If I were to approach the goal of teaching the whole New Testament in random fashion, it would be a hopeless maze to lead people through. On the other hand, if I am committed to teaching the Word of God systematically so that all of the revelation of God is brought before His people, the only reasonable way of doing that is to go through it one book at a time. "Frequently Asked Questions about Expository Preaching," in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 341.

[12] In his classic work on preaching, John Broadus discusses these three "species of sermons": (1) subject-sermons (topical), (2) text-sermons (textual), and (3) expository sermons. *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermon*, ed. Edwin Charles Dargan, new (23rd) ed. (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1898), 306–338. For the three types of

the sermon's main points and subpoints come from one text. A textual sermon is one in which the main points are derived from one text, usually a verse of unique character, and the subpoints are derived from passages outside that text and its book. A topical sermon consists of two or more passages, often from different books, that are connected by a shared topic. The degree to which the preacher determines the organization differs based on the type. For an expository sermon, the organization is mostly determined by the text itself. For a textual sermon, the text determines the main points, but the preacher must decide where else to go in Scripture for their development. For a topical sermon, the preacher controls the organization and text selection from beginning to end.

Table 2. Types of Sermons

Sermon Type	Main Points Derived From	Subpoints Derived From	Organization Determined By
Expository	One text	The same text	Mostly the text itself
Textual	One text (usually a unique verse)	Passages outside the main text and its book	Text for main points; preacher for subpoint development
Topical	The preacher's synthesis of two or more passages (often from different books)	The preacher's choice of supporting texts	The preacher (from beginning to end)

With this classification in view, HAP can fit legitimately into each of the three types. Expository HAP is concerned to say what the Bible book says in the way it says it, just as expository preachers do when they handle a paragraph from Ephesians. For HAP, however, there will be a greater degree of selectivity in coverage, since the textual unit is typically too large to cover comprehensively in one sermon. That means the preacher exercises more influence in the book's re-presentation, but he is nevertheless bent on faithfully bringing out the argument of the book and its development throughout.

Textual HAP would look like taking a key verse from a book and using it as the organizational basis for the sermon. For example, texts such as Genesis 3:15 or 50:20 could be used as the organizational basis for a fly-over book sermon on Genesis. The text chosen becomes the lens through which the book is understood and developed.

Topical HAP is preaching from a book where a major topic or theme is traced throughout. In this kind of sermon, the preacher determines the topic and the texts from the book that will be highlighted and dealt with. The preacher also determines the organizational development of the theme.[13]

definitions of expository preaching, see Harold T. Bryson, *Expository Preaching: The Art of Preaching Through a Book of the Bible* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 11–41.

[13] The topic approach sounds very much preacher-driven, and it can be, but ideally the themes and texts dealt with in this category of sermon will be significant themes that surfaced by means of exegetical and theological study. This is to be contrasted with a preacher who cherry picks certain ideas or texts to say what he wants to say.

Of course, as with any classification scheme, there is going to be overlap, making some high-altitude sermons difficult to categorize.[14] An attempt is made in the next section to tease out some of the many kinds of HAP available to the preacher.

Table 3. Basic Types of High-Altitude Sermons

HAP Type	Main Points Derived From	Subpoints Derived From	Organization Determined By
Expository	The main points of the book	The preacher's choice of relevant texts within the book	The emphasis and flow of the biblical book
Textual	A key verse from the book	The preacher's choice of relevant texts within the book	The biblical text for main points; the preacher for subpoint development
Topical	The preacher's synthesis of the book's teaching on the topic or theme	The preacher's choice of relevant texts within the book	The preacher (from beginning to end)

Models of High-Altitude Preaching

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to the high-altitude sermon. Each variation represents different accents on and combinations of four key interrogatives: what, who, why, and how.

The "what" question relates to the book's content and argument. A what-type high-altitude sermon will focus on the message and theology of the book. It has a doctrinal orientation that either brings out the message of the book as a whole or traces one or more theological themes through the book.

The "who" question relates to the people involved—the author and his target audience. A who-type high-altitude sermon is going to focus on the relational dynamics of the book and rhetorical concerns. Connected to the "who" question and subsumed under it are the "when" and "where" questions. When and where did the author and his audience live (historical context)? What occasion prompts the author to say what he does in the way he does?[15]

Closely related, but with a slightly different accent, the "why" question highlights the author's purpose for writing. It builds on the people and occasion to zero in on the author's intentions and his objectives for writing. A why-type sermon can emphasize the application to the original audience (with

[14] For example, a topical high-altitude sermon, if tapping into the key theme or message of the book, might resemble more of an expository sermon that essentially says what the text says in the way it says it.

[15] For more on the rhetorical analysis of a book of the Bible, see my dissertation: "A Philosophy and Methodology for Preaching an Expository Book Series Governed by Apostolic Purpose and Based on Rhetorical Analysis: A Case Study of 1 Peter" (DMin diss., Bob Jones University, 2014).

the stress on the why of the human author) or it can emphasize the application to the modern-day audience (with the stress on the why of the Holy Spirit).

The "how" question relates to the structure of the book. How did the author organize the book to convey the "what" (message) and accomplish the "why" (purpose). A how-type sermon is going to be concerned to expose the skeletal structure of the book and help the audience understand how the book is put together. As with the classification of sermons, there is often overlap among these approaches which makes categorization difficult.

Table 4. Interrogative Categories of High-Altitude Sermons

Interrogative	Focus	Description
What	Content and Argument	Focuses on the message and theology, with a doctrinal orientation. Can highlight the book's overall message or trace theological themes.
Who	People Involved (Author, Audience)	Focuses on relational dynamics and rhetorical concerns. Includes "where" and "when" (historical context, occasion).
Why	Author's Purpose	Builds on the people and occasion to emphasize the author's intentions and objectives. Can stress application to original audience (human author's why) or modern audience (Holy Spirit's why).
How	Structure of the Book	Focuses on how the author organized the book to convey the message ("what") and accomplish the purpose ("why").

High-Altitude Multi-Dimensional Book Sermons

The high-altitude multi-dimensional sermon is a blended approach designed to bring together the what, who, why, and how.

The book-introduction sermon. This type of sermon tries to address each of the key interrogatives with relatively equal weight.

- Who is writing to whom and why? (who and why)
- What are the main divisions of the book? (how)
- What is the main message of the book? (what)

This approach is the most common way of introducing a book, especially as a kick-off sermon to an expository book series. It gives people a good orientation to the main contours and key landmarks in the book.

The expository book sermon. "Expository" here means that the point of the text is the point of the sermon.[16] Some would add textual conformity[17] and purpose alignment.[18] Putting it all together, the expository book sermon is intent on preaching the central argument of the book (the what) in the way the book develops the argument (the how) and to accomplish (as much as possible in view of our contemporary audience) the purpose of the book (the why). Therefore, the sermon's argument, progression, and application is (as much as possible[19]) a mirror of the book's argument, progression, and application. In sum, the sermon's structure and argument and purpose is shaped by the structure, argument, and purpose of the book. Effort is made to show how the sections of the book connect to each other and work together to convey the author's overarching message and purpose. In this sense, it differs from the book introduction sermon because the book introduction sermon is more concerned to answer the various questions and less concerned to let everything surface progressively as the book itself brings it up.

Simply put, the expository book sermon (alternatively called an overview sermon[20]) is essentially an expanded version of the classic paragraph approach to exposition. But the text window is much wider. Messages like this often fail because they try to accomplish too much. They easily end up being information-heavy and coming across as a lecture more than a sermon. Preachers must have a clear focus and be vigilant in their selectivity.

Each of the following varieties of HAP tends to emphasize or accent one of the key interrogatives: who, what, why, and how.

High-Altitude "Who" Book Sermons

The biographical book sermon. A biographical sermon highlights the people or character development in the book. For example, a sermon of this kind from Genesis might focus on the key

[16] "Expositional preaching is preaching in which the main point of the biblical text being considered becomes the main point of the sermon being preached." Mark Dever and Greg Gilbert, *Preach: Theology Meets Practice* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 36.

[17] David Helm argues for "textual conformity" as part of his definition of expository preaching: "We don't superimpose our outline over the text. Rather, we bring out of the text what the Holy Spirit already put in. And that is best done in the manner in which he put it together. . . . I have defined biblical exposition as empowered preaching that rightly submits the shape and emphasis of the sermon to the shape and emphasis of a biblical text. . . . By *shape* and *emphasis* I mean that every natural preaching unit in the Bible comes ready-made with a Spirit-intended organization and emphasis. The job of the preacher is to find it. That is best done through the disciplined work of exegesis and theological reflection. Once that shape and emphasis are clearly apprehended, the preacher is ready to think about sermon construction." *Expositional Preaching,* 101.

[18] Again, Helm writes, "A faithful preacher starts the sermon preparation process by paying attention to a biblical text's original audience and a text's purposes for those readers." Ibid., 39. And Haddon Robinson: "How then do you determine the purpose of your sermon? You do so by discovering the purpose behind the passage you are preaching. As part of your exegesis, you should ask, 'Why did the author write this? What effect did he expect it to have on his readers?'" *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 108.

[19] "An expositor must give special attention not only to what modern men and women have in common with those who received the original revelation but also to the differences between them." Ibid., 87.

[20] Leeman and Dever, "On Overview Sermons."

players as they relate to the major movements of the plot: Adam and Eve (from Creation to Fall), Noah, Abraham (from childless to father of multitude), Isaac, Jacob (from deceiver to Israel), and Joseph (favored son to slave to ruler). The accent is on God's work through these individuals to accomplish his purposes. But the sermon would also put the spotlight on their failures, transformation, and growth.

A biographical sermon could also highlight one major character such as Abraham. This would still be a book sermon in that the focus is on the part Abraham plays within the message and purpose of the entire book. This is different from excerpting a slice out of Abraham's life and doubling down on that one segment (e.g., the call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1–9) or even preaching on the life of Abraham (Genesis 12–25).

The historical-contextual or rhetorical book sermon. Another form of the "who" book sermon is the historical-contextual or rhetorical book sermon. This approach is concerned primarily with the background and setting to the book and the relational and rhetorical dynamics driving the book's content and organization.[21]

The accent is on the author and his original audience. That is the "who" part. But exploring the relationships is not an end in and of itself. A sermon of this type focuses on the people part in order to bring out the purpose part. So it is also a "why"-type book sermon as well. What was the author's objective in writing what he did to this group of people living at this time and place in light of their unique circumstances? Any accent on the content or message part of the book is done primarily from the standpoint of the original recipients. How was this message heard and received by the original audience?

In the case of Genesis, the focus would be on Moses as the author writing to the Israelites during the wilderness period. The Israelites have left Egypt, and they need to understand their origins and why God chose them as his people; they need reinforcement on their identity and relationship to Yahweh.[22]

High-Altitude "What" Book Sermons

There is a kind of book sermon that focuses on the doctrine or theology of the book. These sermons tend to prioritize either biblical theology or systematic theology.

The whole-book biblical-theological book sermon. Some understand biblical theology to consist of tracing a theological theme through a book of the Bible.[23] A book sermon like this from Genesis might

[21] The rhetorical situation of a biblical book refers to the interplay between three key components that shaped why and how the book was written. (1) The problem: Every biblical book addresses some specific problem, need, or situation that called for a response. This is often the most important element to identify. (2) The audience: The people who were most directly affected by the problem (their circumstances, culture, and needs shaped how the author approached the issue). (3) The writer: The author's background, authority, and relationship to both the problem and audience influenced his rhetorical strategy. This framework helps the preacher understand not just what a biblical author said, but why he said it and how he structured his message to address his specific audience's needs.

[22] These kinds of messages can be challenging to preach if the original situation is not explicitly revealed or clear.

[23] Though Naselli takes a whole-Bible approach to biblical theology, he writes, "You can do biblical theology in many different ways. You can focus on a single book, such as righteousness in Romans or wisdom in 1 Corinthians. Or you can

pick up on the theme of God's providence and pull that thread all the way through from Creation to specific examples in the lives of Abraham and Isaac (e.g., God's provision of a sacrificial lamb as Jehovah Jireh), culminating in the story of Joseph and Genesis 50:20.

The whole-Testament biblical-theological book sermon. A biblical-theological approach that takes in the whole OT or NT expands the parameters beyond one book. However, in order to be classified as a book sermon, the book needs to be the primary focus and driving force of the message, not just a quick springboard into a larger theological exploration.[24] For example, the theme of providence could be established from Genesis, and based on the particular argument of Genesis related to God's providence, it could be shown to be extended out and developed throughout the rest of the OT.[25]

The whole-Bible biblical-theological book sermon. Another perspective on biblical theology sees it as a whole-Bible enterprise. Andy Naselli defines biblical theology as "a way of analyzing and synthesizing the Bible that makes organic, salvation-historical connections with the whole canon on its own terms, especially regarding how the Old and New Testaments integrate and climax in Christ."[26]

Metanarrative approach. One type of biblical-theological book sermon examines the book in light of the entire story of Scripture. A sermon like this might be concerned with how the book reveals or points to Christ through its various themes, types, and prophecies.[27] But the focus is on how the book fits into and contributes to the overarching story of God's redemption culminating in Christ. The metanarrative sermon is concerned to explain where the book fits into the plot of the story.

For example, a sermon of this type could look at Genesis from the standpoint of the Abrahamic Covenant and then extend out of Genesis to explore its connection to the Bible storyline and its fulfillment in Christ. Again, to be a whole-book sermon the focus cannot be chapters 12, 15, 17, and 22 alone. Chapters 1–11 would be addressed as the setting and background to the covenant, and chapters following Abraham's life and death would be brought in as the continuation of the story, a story that will then spill over the borders of Genesis and into the landscape of the whole Bible. The issue is one of proportion and emphasis. In this example, chapters 1–11 could be dealt with very quickly in view of the sermon's primary objective. But they are not overlooked.

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focus on a corpus, that is, the collected writings by a single author, such as love in John's writings (the Gospel of John, 1–3 John, and Revelation) or faith in Paul's thirteen letters. Even a casual Bible reader notices that John says things differently from Paul or Peter. Their emphases differ from and complement one another. Or you can focus on one of the Testaments, such as kingdom in the New Testament. If you focus almost exclusively on just one Testament, then that's called Old Testament theology or New Testament theology. Those are subsets of whole-Bible biblical theology." Andrew David Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2017), 233.

[24] At what point does a book sermon like this turn into a topical sermon? There is no set ratio, but either the book of Genesis will be seen as one stop among many along the way, or it will be clear that it is the foundation for the theme's further development.

[25] "The story of the Old Testament is nothing if not a story of divine providence." Kevin DeYoung, "The Old Testament Is a Story of Providence." The Gospel Coalition, April 24, 2012, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/the-old-testament-is-a-story-of-providence/.

[26] Naselli, 231

[27] In a sermon like this, Genesis might get 50% of the time and the metanarrative 50%. In a whole-book-type sermon (like the overview sermon), it might be Genesis 90% and the metanarrative 10%.

Thematic approach. Another type of whole-Bible book sermon traces out one or more key biblical-theological themes (e.g., God's glory, Creation, sin, covenant, temple, wisdom, holiness, the gospel, etc.) throughout the book and then, based on that book's treatment of the theme, ties it into the Bible's progressive development of that theme. It is like pulling the threads all the way through. David Helm refers to the central thread as the "melodic line." It is the "essence of what the book is about."[28] Often the book's melodic line will serve as a solid basis for both the metanarrative and thematic approach.

A number of images are associated with redemption in Genesis (e.g., coverings provided in Eden, the ark as a picture of salvation from judgment, etc.). The sermon could stay in one lane and focus on one major theme or subtheme in Genesis, or it could resemble a multi-lane highway with on and off ramps, showing how multiple themes intersect and where they end up. A Genesis sermon could show how God's sovereignty in Creation and history intersects with the Fall and its consequences. Or the sermon could relate God's covenant promises and blessings with the themes of faith and obedience. The combinations are many.[29]

The systematic-theological book sermon. The systematic-theological book sermon highlights and develops key pre-determined systematic-theological categories in a book: Theology Proper, Bibliology, Angelology, Anthropology, Hamartiology, Christology, Soteriology, Pneumatology, Ecclesiology, and Eschatology. This kind of sermon is concerned with answering two questions: (1) What does this whole book teach us about a certain topic, and (2) How does that cohere with the rest of the Bible's teaching on this topic?

Genesis is particularly well-suited for this approach, since it is the book of beginnings and sets the stage theologically for the rest of the Bible. In Genesis a preacher could focus on the doctrines of Creation, sin, redemption, providence, and the people of God, relating each to the appropriate theological category and its concerns and questions. Whereas a biblical-theological approach would put more emphasis on the theme's progression throughout the book, a systematic-theological approach will organize the topic in a more logical and conventional way, with more emphasis on the doctrine than on its development. In order to preach this kind of message and it still be a book sermon, there would have to be enough material on the topic throughout the book to examine it from a whole-book standpoint and develop it with subpoints drawn from the book.

The textual book sermon. Another high-altitude "what" sermon is the textual book sermon. In this model a key text is used as the organizational basis for the sermon's development. For example, Genesis 3:15 could serve as the key text for a Genesis book sermon.

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[28] Helm, 47. Helm gives these strategies for finding the melodic line of a book: "reading the book from *cover to cover*, reading and rereading the *beginning and end*, looking for important *repeated words, concepts, and phrases*, and hunting down *purpose statements*" (48).

[29] In addition to identifying key themes through personal engagement with the book, most good commentaries have an introduction section that addresses key theological themes in a book. For example, in a section entitled "Theology of Genesis," K. A. Mathews identifies six theological themes: patriarchal promises, God and his world, human life, sin, civilization, and covenant. *Genesis 1–11:26: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 54–63.

I. The Serpent's Strategy and the Conflict
II. The Woman's Seed and the Promise
III. The Seed's Suffering and His Victory

High-Altitude "Why" Book Sermons

A book sermon with an accent on the "why" question is either going to highlight the human author's intention and purpose for writing to his audience or the divine author's intention and purpose for including this book in the Bible and for today's audience. Of course, these two approaches can be combined in various proportions.

The original-audience book sermon. A Genesis book sermon of this type would emphasize Moses' intention for including and emphasizing what he does in the book (and in the Pentateuch as a whole) in light of the situation of the original recipients. There is overlap here with the historical-contextual or rhetorical book sermon described earlier. However, the particular press of a sermon of this kind is not as much on historical background and author-recipient relationship but on the effect the book was intended to have on those who first received it. Indicators of purpose will be found directly or indirectly in the text itself and suggested by the overarching message of the book.

The modern-audience book sermon. A Genesis book sermon of this type will highlight the applicational value and impact of the book on today's readers. For example, tracing the narrative of Creation, Fall, and redemption in Genesis could serve as a model for a biblical worldview. The sermon would flesh out specific applications where the framework seen in Genesis could help believers interpret the world around them. Regardless of the particular approach and how much of the original situation is brought into the sermon, the stress lands on the book's relevance for the modern-day reader. It is more contemporary than historical in its proportions.

High-Altitude "How" Book Sermons

Lastly, there are book sermons that emphasize the organization or genre of the book. The concern is to bring out the way in which the author said what he did.

The book-outline sermon. The book-outline sermon will help the listeners understand the way in which the author structured the book to get across his message and accomplish his purpose. They will walk away with a clear sense of the book's outline. The main divisions and their relationship to one another are of primary concern. For Genesis, a book outline sermon would zero in on chapters 1–11 and 12–50 and their relationship. Further divisions might be brought in depending on the sermon's length and purpose and in light of the simplicity or complexity of the book's organization.

The genre-sensitive sermon. A book sermon of this kind would approach the message based on the book's dominant genre. For instance, if there are three primary text types in the Bible—narrative, discourse, and poetry[30]—then a book sermon of this kind would bring out the unique features and

[30] Helm writes (54), "The Bible has different genres: Old Testament Narrative, Prophetic, Apocalyptic, Wisdom and Poetry, Epistles, Gospels, and Acts. Within those different genres, you have three basic text types: discourse, narrative, and poetry. As a general rule, you won't discover the structure of a psalm (poetry) using the same reading strategies you would

impact of the primary text type.[31] The narrative book sermon would emphasize the book's plot structure, characterization, and dialogue. The discourse book sermon would emphasize the book's argument and its development. The poetry book sermon might highlight major recurring themes.

Table 5. Taxonomy of High-Altitude Sermons

Sermon Type	Focus
High-Altitude Multi-Dimensional Book Sermons	Blended approach (what, who, why, how)
Book Introduction Sermon	Introduces main divisions, message, and purpose (author/audience)
Expository Book Sermon	Preaches central argument of the book (in submission to book's how and why)
High-Altitude "Who" Book Sermons	Emphasizes people/context
Biographical Book Sermon	Highlights people/character development in the book
Historical-Contextual or Rhetorical Book Sermon	Focuses on background, setting, and relational/rhetorical dynamics
High-Altitude "What" Book Sermons	Emphasizes doctrine/theology or key text
Whole-Book Biblical-Theological Book Sermon	Traces a theological theme through one book
Whole-Testament Biblical-Theological Book Sermon	Extends a theme from one book through the whole OT or NT
Whole-Bible Biblical-Theological Book Sermon	Examines the book in light of the entire story of Scripture (metanarrative or thematic)
Systematic-Theological Book Sermon	Develops key systematic-theological categories in a book
Textual Book Sermon	Uses a key text from the book as the organizational basis for the sermon
High-Altitude "Why" Book Sermons	Emphasizes author's intention or modern audience relevance
Original-Audience Book Sermon	Stresses author's intention for the original recipients
Modern-Audience Book Sermon	Highlights the applicational value and impact for today's readers.
High-Altitude "How" Book Sermons	Emphasizes organization or genre
Book Outline Sermon	Helps listeners understand the book's structure and main divisions
Genre-Sensitive Sermon	Approaches the message based on the book's dominant text type (narrative, discourse, poetry)

Benefits of High-Altitude Preaching

Preachers are clearly not limited to ground-level preaching. When it comes to alternatives, there are many high-altitude alternatives with a number of important benefits.

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employ in a Gospel (most likely narrative or discourse). Knowing how each of the different text types works will help you to know which tools best unlock them."

[31] See Jeffrey Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety: How to Re-Create the Dynamics of Biblical Genres* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2007).

Perspective

HAP allows the listeners to see the whole landscape of a biblical book at a glance. It gives them a big-picture perspective, like stopping at an overlook area to take in a panoramic view of a beautiful landscape. People need to have a sense of the magnitude of the Bible, its grandeur, both in terms of the big picture and of its intricate and complex details.[32]

Clarity

HAP can create anticipation and provide clarity for subsequent ground-level messages. A book-overview sermon can serve as a roadmap to let the congregation know where the series is going and what they will see along the way. It provides shared expectations so everyone knows what will and will not be covered. That way church members are not disoriented or disappointed along the way.

Reference

HAP, especially on the front end of a series, allows the preacher to relate the details of ground-level preaching back to the overview. The preacher can refer back to the already-established framework as he moves through the book. An inductive approach to a series where the overview sermon comes at the end has some appeal,[33] much like the inductive preaching of a paragraph. However, for clarity, comprehension, coherence, and overall retention, a series that is front-loaded by HAP is preferred.[34]

Accommodation

HAP can also be an effective way to accommodate different learning styles and stages. For those who benefit from a map and need a framework to make sense of the parts, HAP can be extremely helpful.[35] And for new or untaught believers, HAP can be a great way to introduce them to more of the Bible more quickly.

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[32] Lloyd-Jones expresses the relationship and balance between high-altitude and ground-level preaching this way: "Let us begin by taking a general view of it [Ephesians], for we can only truly grasp and understand the particulars if we have taken a firm grasp of the whole and of the general statement. On the other hand those who imagine that, by giving a rough division of the message of this Epistle according to chapters, they have dealt with it adequately display their ignorance. It is when we come to the details that we discover the wealth; a summary of its message is most helpful as a beginning, but it is when we come to the particular statements and individual words that we find the real glory displayed to our wondering gaze." David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God's Ultimate Purpose: An Exposition of Ephesians 1* (Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1978), 12. Dever concurs, "Sometimes you can see things from a great height, where you can take in the whole, that you cannot see down below. It can be difficult to get to such a position and it might take a little more work, but it bears great fruit." *Message of the Old Testament,* 67.

[33] An inductive approach gives the preacher the opportunity to engage sermon after sermon with the details and conclude with a high-altitude sermon that puts the pieces together. Preaching an overview sermon on the front end requires significant planning and study beforehand and requires that the preacher come to some interpretive conclusions before the series starts.

[34] The ideal in many cases, especially with a longer series, is to begin and end a book series with HAP.

[35] Both cognitive science and neuroscience point to the value of starting with the big picture. The Evidence Based Teachers Network argues, "There is growing evidence that the brain needs two versions of the material being taught:

- The big picture of the whole topic.

Variety

HAP gives the listener a break from the ground-level approach to weekly exposition. They are able to come up for air, get a different perspective, and return to the usual approach with greater understanding and vigor. From a preaching standpoint, incorporating HAP into the mix adds variety for the preacher and the audience while still maintaining fidelity to biblical exposition.[36]

Holism

HAP encourages church members to think holistically in terms of entire Bible books, not just isolated chapters or memory verse texts. By hitting some of the big themes that run through whole books, people begin to associate these themes with the books themselves. For example, what book of the Bible would or could people turn to in order to study the providence of God? Would their minds turn to Genesis? This type of thinking is a step beyond merely asking, "What passages or verses address this topic?" Just as church members might recommend a book to someone with a particular question or need, through HAP church members are equipped to recommend entire Bible books to others to address those same questions and needs.[37] This approach would likely encourage and inspire church members to read entire books of the Bible in one sitting.[38]

Equipping

HAP equips people to do what is probably less natural and less obvious to them. Many Christians have grown up meditating on small, bite-sized portions of the Bible. They have been given tools for observation, interpretation, and application. But how many believers know how to trace a theme through a book? How many church members are equipped to move from a book of the Bible into the metanarrative of Scripture? How many church members know how to do biblical theology? HAP can help by modeling hermeneutically responsible whole-book and whole-Bible connections.[39]

- The detailed knowledge.

Teachers sometimes forget that they already have the big picture and assume that the students will build it as the topic develops. Of course some do, but the big picture needs to be taught alongside the detail for effective learning to take place. . . . If we look at the visual cortex, we can see that it does two jobs at the same time. One route (the 'what?' route) looks at the detail, while the other (the 'where?' route) looks for the big picture." "Advance Organisers: Giving Your Students the Big Picture"; accessed October 28, 2025, https://ebtn.org.uk/big-picture-2/. Giving people the broader context makes the information easier to retrieve, because it creates multiple entry points for the brain.

[36] Arthurs contends (30), "The primary reason [to preach with variety] is because God, the Great Communicator, uses variety."

[37] I have heard Mark Dever make this argument on several occasions.

[38] In his overview sermon on Genesis, Dever encourages non-Christians to read the entire book: "Friend, if you are not a Christian, I implore you to take the time to read through the book of Genesis. You may find some details that confuse you. You may have some unanswered questions. But you cannot fail to find the message loudly and clearly proclaimed: there is a God, he made you with meaning and purpose, and you have failed to live and love as you were made to do." *Message of the Old Testament,* 69.

[39] There is the danger, of course, of putting the Bible out of the reach of the average person with this approach (to the point where they are saying to themselves, "I could never do that.") But that's why showing (and not just telling) is important—there should be textual warrant for coming to these conclusions, not just subjective hunches. These biblical-

Framework

HAP not only gives the audience a framework for details, but it also gives the preacher the scaffolding necessary to engage in responsible ground-level preaching. HAP on the front end of a series keeps the preacher from losing his way interpretationally and getting sidetracked from the author's focus and intent. Starting with the big picture keeps the preacher in line with the author's overarching goal and message as he works his way through the individual parts.[40] HAP provides guardrails to keep the expositor from going off the road.[41]

Experience

HAP, especially the book-overview sermon, is an effective way of helping the contemporary audience experience how the original audience would have received the book under consideration. They were not received as bits and fragments in most cases, but as whole units conveying a complete, unified message. HAP allows preachers to immerse their listeners in the original historical context and help them hear and experience the book to some degree as the original audience would have.

Literacy

HAP is an effective remedy to the growing problem of biblical illiteracy in the church. Many church members are not even familiar with certain books of the Bible. Preachers may avoid starting a series through Leviticus for a number of reasons. However, a preacher is not obligated to spend an entire year or more working through Leviticus. He is at liberty to preach one message giving the church an overview or several messages tracing out key themes in Leviticus. Now the congregation knows enough about Leviticus to navigate it safely, even if they do not understand everything in detail.

Delight

HAP helps people see and delight in the larger redemptive purpose and storyline of the Bible. People rightfully object to certain expressions of Christ-centered preaching because it seems like a "Where's Waldo?" approach to finding Jesus in every verse. That said, unless there is a clear messianic

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theological truths are not a mystery locked up and guarded for exclusive use by seminary-trained pastors. However, the pastor-teacher is a gift to the church for a reason (Eph 4:11–16). He provides truth that the church can hold fast to. But that truth comes not only in small textual packages but also as large threads and themes running through books and the Bible as a whole. Also, part of the pastor's preaching ministry is teaching people how to read the Bible for themselves. That is why showing over merely telling is to be preferred.

[40] One objection to this is the inability to know ahead of time what the book is truly about until you have preached through it. But this is why planning the series ahead of time is so important. Preachers should ideally secret themselves away for some big-picture planning and give themselves time to study the major contours of a book before diving into chapter 1, verse 1.

[41] I can attest to the power of gaining a big-picture perspective to aid in preaching. For a number of years I taught a course called "New Testament Messages" where we surveyed all twenty-seven books of the NT each semester. This repeated exposure to the big picture of each book gave me intimate familiarity with the flow and structure of each book. It also gave me the confidence to navigate any part of the NT, understanding how each passage fits into its broader context. It is this big-picture perspective that greatly helps the preacher make meaningful cross-references in his teaching and preaching without losing track of the reference's contextual significance.

reference in the OT text or an explicit NT reference to the OT text, pastors may make little to no effort to preach the OT with reference to the larger redemptive storyline and the person and work of Jesus Christ. In part, the concern is that too much attention is drawn away from the OT passage and its unique message when preachers go big picture. But if a preacher regularly engages in HAP and is flying at 10,000 feet, it will be much easier and much more natural to see the grand scope of Scripture and preach Christ to the delight of the church.

Efficiency

Regular HAP alleviates the need or temptation to use biblical texts, especially in the OT, as springboards into the big picture. If a preacher wants to zoom out from a text and tap into the larger biblical-theological framework of Scripture, he has to balance his time carefully for a thirty-to-forty-minute message. However, if the literary context and Bible storyline are already clearly established in people's minds, then he can get to the big picture much faster and with less concern that it will feel forced or lack credibility whenever he needs to make those quick, big-picture connections.

Preachers who limit themselves to ground-level, weed-focused preaching keep their audiences from seeing and understanding big-picture themes and connections they might not otherwise see. Ground-level preaching will keep people's heads down and keep them from looking up and noticing the beautiful backdrop and landscape of the Bible. What will a preacher get if he zooms in on a narrative in Judges and stays there for the entire exposition? In order to make sense of the text as a Christian preacher preaching to New Covenant church members, context is required to understand and apply the passage correctly. A high-altitude sermon through the whole Book of Judges would give people an understanding of how the book fits into the storyline of the Bible and how it serves as a witness to Christ. Then the preacher could work through the narratives in Judges one by one with the larger framework already in view, allowing him to spend more time in the OT text while making quicker and more efficient reference to where the text stands in relation to Christ. This method is superior to the approach that spends ten minutes in the OT text and thirty minutes in the air. It is also superior to the approach of ending a sermon, say on the life of Gideon, with a tacked-on gospel connection: Jesus is the better Gideon.

Selectivity

HAP allows a preacher to get the message of the book across without getting all tangled up in the controversies and interpretive conundrums of the book.[42] The audience gets the core message and the pastoral purpose of the book without getting tripped up and tangled up in all the debated texts. HAP can be especially helpful for young or beginning preachers who are not yet up to speed on various controversies and may not know where they stand exactly on certain eschatological or ecclesiological issues.

[42] For example, a pastor can preach Revelation at a high altitude and focus on the encouraging message of this book designed to encourage persecuted believers without getting bogged down or sidetracked by the complex imagery and eschatological debate. That is not to say that ground-level preaching in Revelation should not be done and the particulars of eschatology discussed. But it is not the only way to preach the Book of Revelation.

Challenges of High-Altitude Preaching

Though there are many benefits to HAP, the preacher will need to remain alert to and strive to overcome several significant challenges.

Scope

The scope of content can be daunting for HAP. How do you prepare for a sermon when your text consists of fifty chapters? The time needed to work through this much material requires careful planning and an approach to the sermon that differs significantly from handling one to two verses. The usual one week of sermon preparation may not be sufficient for HAP.[43] And with reference to the sermon itself, can a preacher really cover all the chapters, establish the point, and apply it effectively in the allotted time for preaching? Can a thirty-to-forty-minute sermon really do justice to a book like Genesis? As a result many high-altitude sermons tend to transgress the time expectations for a given occasion.

Summarization

The high degree of selectivity required by HAP necessitates a high degree of summarization. When it comes to showing versus telling, telling will most often win out. The need to package up large amounts of material into a few sentences or paragraphs means that the listener misses out on seeing for himself or herself. The preacher has to be ultra-selective in what he takes time to reference in the text, and the listener will end up being more dependent on the preacher's synthesis and less able to be a "Berean" in the moment (Acts 17:11).

Confidence

It can be more difficult to determine the point and purpose of a larger textual unit, because it is made up of so many ideas and may involve several purposes. Expository preaching is set apart by its intention to say what the text says and to cut with the grain of the author's structure and purpose. But can the preacher really say with any degree of confidence, "Here is the central argument of Genesis" and "Here is why Genesis was written"? Unless a book has a clear thesis and purpose statement (like John's Gospel does in 20:30–31), it can be quite challenging to have any degree of clarity and confidence about these central concerns.

Inexperience

HAP can be challenging for the less-educated or inexperienced preacher whose lack of a developed biblical and systematic theology makes identifying and tracing out themes in a book and throughout the rest of the Bible overwhelming. There is a certain amount of knowledge and skill set needed for synthesis, putting the pieces together. As the years pass, preachers will form up their framework and

[43] How much time a preacher spends preparing a high-altitude sermon will depend to some extent on the preacher's background and past study in that book.

this kind of preaching will be easier. Even with increased whole-book and whole-Bible study, the preacher may lack experience in putting it all into a sermonic form with applicational intent.

Dependence

Younger, inexperienced, or less-educated preachers may also find themselves greatly dependent on secondary sources for HAP. Because of the scope of material, press for time, lack of confidence regarding the book's message and purpose, they will likely feel the need to turn more quickly to the resources. Though not a problem per se, the more heavily a preacher is dependent on the secondary sources, the less personal and contextualized the message becomes. Being a first-hander with the biblical material will always aid communication, especially in the terms of fervency and freedom from notes.

Assumptions

In terms of presentation, although HAP can help address the problem of biblical literacy (see "Literacy" above), high-altitude preachers often make certain assumptions that the biblically illiterate will not be able to follow or understand. The high degree of selectivity that is characteristic of HAP means that the preacher cannot cover everything. The preacher must be careful that what is skipped over is not a necessary building block for some listeners to process and understand what is being said.

Academic

HAP, especially book-overview sermons, are difficult to preach as sermons. Too many of these overviews sound like something fit for a college Bible class or seminary. They are filled with facts and figures. Dates, historical events and background information, complete with detailed reconstructions of the occasion that prompted the writing, overwhelm any sense of how the sermon is designed to transform the listener. The academic-lecture approach often comes at the expense of a pastoral voice and relevant application and exhortation.[44]

Requirements for High-Altitude Preaching

The following are essential requirements for delivering effective high-altitude sermons, particularly the book-overview sermon.

Discernment

HAP requires discernment in selecting passages and themes to highlight. The preacher must ask, "What is the essential content that must be covered?" There must be a clear strategy. For example, "What are the key passages that best convey the structure and argument of the book without overwhelming the listeners with too many references and too much material?" In most cases the book

[44] It is precisely because of the academic, information-heavy nature of these sermons that some would object to preaching them as sermons and instead reserve them for Sunday school or some other teaching venue. However, much of the problem with that mindset is its inability to approach the book with a high degree of selectivity and focus.

or sermon purpose must guide and govern the selection and arrangement of materials. Haddon Robinson argues, "Sermons seldom fail because they have too many ideas; more often they fail because they deal with too many unrelated ideas."[45] Deciding which ideas should be the governing ideas requires discernment.

Focus

In tandem with discernment, HAP requires an understanding of the book's core. Because there is so much material to cover in most Bible books, the preacher needs to be crystal clear on what he needs to know in order to get it right and get it across.[46] He needs to drill down into the core interpretative and expositional elements: who, where, how, why, and what. Without this type of laser focus the sermon will likely lack clarity and purposeful progression. The "greatest hits" approach, where preachers choose out their favorite highlights from the book instead of getting at the book's overall message and its development, is not an adequate substitute.

Discipline

HAP also requires the willingness and discipline to leave parts of the study on the cutting floor. The high-altitude preacher should be on the alert to avoid information avalanche or overwhelm. He must hold back on the desire to share everything he has learned in preparation and everything that may be relevant to an academic discussion of the book and its themes. The optimal balance is one that brings together sufficient breadth and depth.

Synthesis

HAP requires the ability to synthesize material. The preacher has to be able to take a large chunk of content and distill it down to its core in order to come up with a coherent exposition in a relatively short amount of time. Part of this synthesis involves getting at the main message or burden of the book. Without this ability preachers will be more dependent on secondary sources for these summaries.[47]

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[45] Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 16.

[46] This language comes from Terry G. Carter, J. Scott Duvall, and J. Daniel Hays, *Preaching God's Word, Second Edition: A Hands-On Approach to Preparing, Developing, and Delivering the Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2018).

[47] Are we teaching our students in Bible college and seminary to do this? It is not sufficient to have students read works that model synthesis and hear us give them the product of our own study. How many methodological courses instruct students in the practical tools and methods of determining the main theme and purpose of an entire biblical book with any degree of confidence? Much of this type of instruction takes place at the paragraph level. Even then I am not sure we are adequately equipping students to know how to go about arriving at the main point or argument. The methodological section of this paper is a small (but insufficient) attempt toward addressing that problem for HAP in particular.

Framework

HAP requires a robust theological framework. Preachers should have a clear grasp of the metanarrative of Scripture and how the major sections of the Bible work together as part of the promise-fulfillment structure of Scripture. They would benefit from knowing how the biblical covenants are connected and culminate in the New Covenant. They need to know how their English Bible is organized and how each section functions. They also need a strong systematic theology and understanding of the Bible's coherence.[48]

Structure

HAP requires the preacher to function as a tour guide taking the congregation on a journey through a biblical book to the right destination. That means having a smooth, logical flow to avoid bumps and neck-breaking turns. The ability to structure a sermon with clear transitions and the ability to lead people deductively from an idea or inductively to an idea is crucial. With that much material in view, there are too many shiny objects vying for attention and ways of getting off course. A high-altitude sermon should not be disjointed and difficult for listeners to follow. There needs to be a beginning, middle, and end joined together by a clear argument developed logically.

Evaluation

HAP requires the ability to evaluate various interpretive perspectives found in the secondary literature. Though this is true of all preaching, it is especially the case with HAP, since opinions regarding a book's message, purpose, and outline[49] may vary widely. Though these resources can be helpful, they will confront the preacher with a number of options, requiring them to evaluate and come to a conclusion.

Edification

HAP requires pastoral awareness of the church's needs and a desire to shepherd the flock through big-picture preaching. HAP cannot be done to show off the preacher's biblical-theological muscles. It

[48] Helm's caution is good and necessary: "While I advocate for the role of systematics in preaching, there is a difference between this and teaching systems" (83).

[49] In his overview sermon on Romans, Lloyd-Jones quibbles with the traditional approach to outlining Romans. "Let us look at the Epistle as a whole; let us try to get a bird's-eye view of the great and massive argument. Many classifications have been suggested and surely there is an obvious preliminary division. The first eleven chapters are doctrinal, and then the rest, from chapter twelve to sixteen, is practical, the application of the doctrine that has already been laid down. That is a fundamental subdivision. But it is when we come to the subdivision of section one that I think we need to be careful, and to be exact in our subdivision. How many of you are familiar with some such classification as this? People say, 'Chapters one to four, Justification; chapters five to eight, Sanctification; chapters nine to eleven, parenthetical, dealing with the particular case of the Jews and its final solution'.

"Now I want to suggest strongly that that is a very misleading, and eventually harmful classification, and it is because so many have adopted it that they have got into difficulty over chapters five, six, seven and eight. It is the classification found in the Scofield Bible, but not confined to it—many have copied it from there and it has become quite well-known. But I want to suggest something different to you." *Exposition of Chapter 1–The Gospel of God*, vol. 1 of *Romans* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1985), 23–24.

cannot consist of an information dump to show the audience the extent of the preacher's knowledge and study. Effective high-altitude preachers need a strong pastoral tone in taking the point and purpose of the book across to today's church in applicable ways. The church and its edification have to be in view throughout the process.[50]

Spiral Preaching

Description of Spiral Preaching

I am not arguing for a one-and-done approach to the book sermon, though any of the HAP models can be preached as a one-time, stand-alone sermon. Spiral preaching is preaching that makes multiple, strategic passes through a book at various times with the intention to establish a foundation and then build off that foundation later with greater degrees of complexity and depth.

Perhaps the best approach to beginning an expository book series is the stand-alone overview sermon or the expository book sermon (bringing together in one message the who, what, why, and how in relative proportion). But an expository sermon series could begin with more than one high-altitude sermon: a book overview sermon *followed by* several biblical-theological book sermons highlighting key thematic threads. For example, the first pass through Genesis might emphasize Creation while a second pass might highlight God's providence.

Spiral preaching, then, consists of multiple passes through a book from multiple angles over a span of time. That is high-altitude spiral preaching (HASP). It can be compared to stopping at multiple overlooks to take in the same basic landscape. Or it is like traveling through the same region each year but taking different routes each time.

Basis of Spiral Preaching

The label *spiral preaching* is original to me. But it is based on a well-known pedagogical strategy called "the spiral curriculum."[51] The idea behind the spiral curriculum is that the teacher revisits a topic over time with increasing levels of complexity and depth. This ensures that students get repeated exposure to the topic but also that with each successive touch point the teacher is building on (connecting to and expanding on) those previous interactions, ideally adding more sophistication and substance and moving students over time toward higher-order thinking skills.

Benefits of Spiral Preaching

There are a number of benefits to spiral preaching. First, it strengthens long-term retention of the material by circling back around to the same books and themes over time. This spaced repetition

[50] This is not to rule out the possibility of high-altitude evangelistic preaching. In his overview sermon on Genesis, Dever does a commendable job of repeatedly engaging with non-Christians and appealing to them to repent and believe. See the chapter on Genesis in *Message of the Old Testament.*

[51] The spiral curriculum is associated with Jerome Brunner and his work *The Process of Education*. Aidan Severs, "What Is A Spiral Curriculum: A Teacher's Guide to What, How And When To Implement," Third Space Learning, March 31, 2023, https://thirdspacelearning.com/blog/spiral-curriculum/.

reinforces memory. What are five to ten foundational themes that preachers should be highlighting on a regular basis? What are the big ideas Christians should not lose sight of, and what books convey those ideas? Second, spiral preaching reduces cognitive load or overwhelm by layering the approach and moving from simple to more complex over time. Third, it provides a logical progression to the learning experience and a coherent theological curriculum. The congregation is able to see how doctrines relate to and build upon each other. Fourth, spiral preaching provides a fresh perspective with each subsequent pass through the book. This is a great way to maintain interest and keep the congregation engaged. It is the same book but from a different angle, keeping the coverage from becoming repetitive or stale.

Challenges of Spiral Preaching

There are, of course, limitations to the approach. First, it is challenging to develop a cohesive spiral curriculum. Planning and coordination and time are all required to make sure that the topics are revisited effectively. Second, if it is not well-planned and executed, there may be little to no advance in complexity or depth. Church members will end up with a repetitive and superficial understanding of the topic. Or, if there is too much space between visits, the congregation may have forgotten the foundation and need re-teaching. Third, spiral preaching can be challenging to address interconnected ideas adequately in layers. Fourth, spiral preaching is less common (rare?) as an approach, so there is less instruction on how to do it and fewer models to learn from. Are there any historical examples of preachers who approached preaching in this way? Fifth, some preachers are concerned that such a high degree of intentionality in planning out the preaching calendar will squelch the Holy Spirit's leading and lead to an inflexible plan. Though planning is important, it must be done in dependence on the Spirit in prayer. A spiral approach to preaching needs to be flexible and adaptable to congregational needs. Sixth, where are pastors going to find the time to plan out their preaching calendars this far in advance? Seventh, spiral preaching can be difficult in a ministry context where there is much transition and flux, with people coming and going. It is easier in an educational context where the same students will likely move through the system grade by grade and be assured of hearing the topic addressed progressively. For preaching this may mean the need to keep the distance between the passes shorter or to provide some review or supplemental resources to keep everyone up to speed and at the same level. Preachers need to be careful not to assume a certain level of knowledge or competency. As much as possible each message should be accessible to everyone, even if it is more complex in the development of certain themes.

Requirements of Spiral Preaching

HAP preaching, especially spiral preaching, requires the ability to think and plan from a long-term perspective. Preachers must ask questions such as, "How does this one sermon fit into my larger plan for the church over the course of three to five years?" It is this kind of thinking that helps him

determine what to include in one sermon and what to save for future sermons.[52] That is why HAP and especially spiral preaching are best done by regular preachers who plan to be at a church for the foreseeable future.[53] Even at the weekly level, HAP is likely going to require more planning and preparation than an expository message from a paragraph. Sufficient planning is required, of course, to avoid being repetitive. Preachers need to be asking themselves, "What will each new pass add in terms of connections, insight, or applications?"

Table 6. High-Altitude Preaching and Spiral Preaching

	High-Altitude Preaching	Spiral Preaching
Definition	Preaching a 10,000-foot overview of an entire book or larger textual unit	Multiple, strategic passes through a book, building complexity and depth with each revisit
Basis	Liberty in form in 2 Tim 4:2; high-altitude examples in Acts 2, Acts 7, and Luke 24	Pedagogical strategy of "spiral curriculum"—revisiting topics with increasing complexity
Benefits	Provides perspective, clarity, variety, and holistic understanding; equips believers to trace themes; helps to remedy biblical illiteracy; fosters delight; increases efficiency; allows selectivity	Strengthens retention; reduces cognitive load; provides logical progression; offers fresh perspectives; maintains interest
Challenges	Daunting scope; requires significant summarization; difficult to determine main point; challenging for inexperienced preachers; potential over-reliance on secondary sources; risk of assumptions; can sound academic	Challenging to develop cohesive curriculum; risk of superficial understanding; difficulty with interconnected ideas; rare approach; concern about squelching the Spirit; time commitment; difficult in high-transition contexts
Requirements	Discernment in selecting themes; focus on core interpretive elements; discipline in exclusion of material; ability to synthesize; robust theological framework; clear sermon structure; evaluation of secondary literature; pastoral awareness	Long-term planning; sufficient planning to avoid repetition and add insight; best for regular preachers with long tenure at a church

[52] For two of the better-known and helpful books that address sermon planning (albeit from a yearly standpoint), see Rummage, *Planning Your Preaching,* and Gibson, *Preaching with a Plan.* Are we teaching homiletics students at the graduate level how to do this? More attention should be given to helping preachers know how to do long-range planning.

[53] It would be conceivable for a guest preacher to preach through a whole book such as Habakkuk. But overview sermons that commence or conclude an expository book series or attempt to make multiple passes over time through one book of the Bible are usually going to be preached by those who are the primary preachers at their church.

The Methodology of HASP

High-Altitude Preaching and Genesis

Following is the method I went through to prepare an overview sermon on Genesis.[54] This is simply one of the many versions of HAP discussed earlier. But it does provide an example, and many of its major sections (steps) are transferable to other types of HAP. There are many things to look for and do in the process of preparing a sermon, but Table 7 captures my primary concerns.

Table 7. Primary Considerations in Sermon Preparation

Category	Interpretation	Proclamation
(1) **People**—author, recipients, occasion	Who is writing to whom? When and where?	To whom am I preaching? When and where?
(2) **Point**—content and argument	What is the author saying to them?	What do I want to say to my audience?
(3) **Purpose**—intention and response	Why is the author writing to his audience?	Why do I want to say this to them? How do I want them to respond?
(4) **Path**—organization and style	How is the author saying it?	How am I going to say it?

Though there is overlap and flexibility, I usually work in this direction during the exegetical and theological phases: 4 → 2 → 1 → 3. During the homiletical phase I work in this direction: 1 → 2 → 3 → 4. Table 8 summarizes the sermon-construction process, and the ensuing discussion elaborates.

Table 8. Sermon-Construction Steps

#	Step
1	Read through the entire book multiple times in one sitting.
2	Develop the book outline.
3	Determine the book argument.
4	Trace out any key words or concepts in the book.
5	Develop a book purpose statement.
6	Engage in theological analysis.
7	Craft the sermon purpose.
8	Craft the sermon argument.

[54] Though not poles apart, the process described here is with a view toward preaching Genesis, not just studying Genesis. For the average pastor (especially the bivocational one) who does not have the luxury of spending forty hours a week on sermon preparation, there needs to be a solid but efficient pathway from study to sermon. This is why seminary training and personal study and education are so important, because all of that can be quickly downloaded for a message like this, expediting the process without compromising quality and textual/theological integrity. Nor does this process expand on the spiritual and devotional aspects of sermon preparation, yet no sermon should be constructed apart from prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit, fellowship with Christ, and the personalization of the message to one's own life.

#	Step
9	Craft the homiletical outline.
10	Consult secondary sources.
11	Write out the sermon.

Step 1: Read through the Entire Book Multiple Times in One Sitting[55]

First Reading

I read through Genesis using *The NIV Sola Scriptura Bible Project*, which has no chapter or verse references. Though you could read multiple translations over the course of multiple read-throughs, I tend to use a more dynamic translation for this type of initial reading. Then as you go back to key sections to do your exegetical work, engage in translation comparison and reference more formal translations. During this first read-through I did not take any notes in order to experience the book without interruption.

Second Reading

During my second read-through I took seven half-sheet pages of notes. These notes were focused on determining the outline or structure of Genesis and its content (primarily chapter content and chapter summaries). During this reading I was looking for key/repeated words, themes, and verses. Already at this stage I was beginning to think about what I want to highlight in the sermon, but those thoughts needed to take a back seat to further investigation. I noticed the emphasis on seed and blessing, and I began to note things I wanted to go back to and dig into deeper or trace out (like the number of references to "blessing" in Genesis).

Ultimately what I wanted to be able to do is capture the entire book in one sentence in the form of an argument.[56] I was also looking for indicators in the text as to why Genesis was written. This may require some big-picture thinking, but at this point it was on my radar. So I was paying attention to any purpose-type statements in the book (e.g., Gen 50:20). By the end of this second reading I had a nine-page document of chapter content, summarizing each chapter in one line and underneath listing brief descriptions of the main actions of the narrative.

Third Reading

During my third read-through I scanned Genesis with my chapter-content document open and revised it based on another pass through the book. I was concerned, however, not just to understand the parts but to understand how the parts fit together and work together to advance the author's

[55] See Crossway, "5 Benefits to Reading Entire Books of the Bible in One Sitting," August 29, 2017, https://www.crossway.org/articles/5-benefits-to-reading-entire-books-of-the-bible-in-one-sitting/. I also listened to the David Suchet Audio Bible as I read. Reading/listening through Genesis took me about four and a half hours. I also recommend listening to an audio version of the book (even without the text in front of you) as many times as possible.

[56] By "argument" I mean a statement consisting of (1) what is true (the main theological assertion of the book) and (2) what is required (the response called for by what is true).

argument and purpose. At this point I realized that there were certain pieces of the story that were unclear to me, in terms of how they fit into the overarching narrative.[57] Placing a bookmark in those sections set a reminder to do further study there and eventually engage with secondary sources for help.

Additional Readings

With each read-through I continued adding to and refining my list of key words and themes, and I continued to connect more dots. At this point I was ready to formulate an outline of the book and summarize its contents.

Step 2: Develop the Book Outline

During this stage I wanted to get clarity on the book's major divisions. Following is a broad three-part outline of Genesis:

I. The Seed Promised (1–11)
II. The Seed Pinpointed/Particularized (12–38)
III. The Seed Preserved (39–50)

Though I wanted to re-present the book and its outline accurately, I was preparing a sermon (not a lecture) with the intention of helping my listeners become acquainted with Genesis. So even at this stage I was working with the wording to make it simple and accessible without sacrificing precision and accuracy. The power of HASP comes in alleviating the preacher from the need to cover everything in one message. Spiral preaching is designed to make multiple passes over time with increasing depth and complexity. Since I was preparing an overview sermon, I wanted people to have a clear sense of the basic framework of Genesis without being overwhelmed by detail. The details and layering could come later. I could work with several different possibilities for an outline. Here is one that highlights key events and people in the book:

I. Creation (1–2)
II. Fall (3)
III. Noah: Judgment and Salvation (4–11)
IV. Abraham and His Offspring (12–50)
    A. Abraham
    B. Isaac
    C. Jacob/Israel
        - Joseph

[57] For example, why is there so much space taken up with Isaac's livestock (the speckled and the unspeckled)? Creation gets two chapters and Isaac's goats get nearly two! What is the point about the stolen gods from Laban's household and Rachel sitting on them? (ch. 31). Or why mention certain events such as Reuben sleeping with Bilhah? In each case I am wrestling with how individual parts fit together and relate to the whole.

Step 3: Determine the Book Argument

One of my objectives in preaching an overview sermon is to communicate the main unifying message that runs through the whole book. I want my audience to have clarity on how the book is structured so that they know the lay of the land and what holds everything together, without being too detailed. The level of detail would depend on my audience (their biblical educational background) and my time, occasion, and purpose for the sermon. But to do a text argument for an entire book you have to get clear on the core components of the book. In the case of Genesis, here are the ones I identified: Creation, Fall (judgment to Noah), 3:15 (protoevangelium), offspring, Abraham and his descendants, the Abrahamic Covenant (blessing, offspring, land), and the preservation of Abraham's offspring (the story of Joseph).

My book argument ended up going through three revisions. The second draft was an attempt to follow the sequence of the book in the statement itself. The third attempt was an effort to condense the argument and boil it down to its essence.

Table 9. Book Argument of Genesis

First Draft	Second Draft	Third Draft
God is going to bless fallen and cursed humanity through the fallen yet blessed (increasing/serpent crushing) offspring of Abraham in spite of all obstacles (preservation).	Though God's image bearers (chs. 1–2) have rebelled against his good rule and are subject to the curse (ch. 3), God has promised to reverse the curse (3:15) for all who deserve his judgment (4–11), and bring blessing through blessed Abraham and his offspring (12–50).	God has promised to bless his fallen image bearers deserving of judgment through the blessed, serpent-crushing offspring of Abraham.

Step 4: Trace Out Any Key Words or Concepts in the Book

At this point I wanted to trace out the words *blessed* and *blessing* that were highlighted in my readings. So I identified the underlying Hebrew terms and did a word study using Logos Bible Software's Bible Word Study feature on both the verb form (בָּרַךְ) and the noun form (בְּרָכָה). I wanted to understand their semantic range and use within Genesis. I wanted to see if there were any connections with other themes, especially those reflected in my book outline and argument. I found that Genesis contains more references to blessing than any other book in the OT (surpassing other large books such as Deuteronomy and Psalms). This opening book of the Bible reveals God's heart toward his fallen and cursed Creation and creatures. It reveals a God who, though holy and just, has a favorable, curse-reversing disposition of kindness toward mankind (cf. Titus 3:4). Another observation I made had to do with blessing and fruitfulness. I knew that connection occurred in chapter 1, but I did not realize how much it continues after that. It became apparent that the blessing of Abraham's fruitfulness will be for the blessing of the nations.

I also consulted Hebrew lexicons and theological wordbooks. These sources categorize the uses, something that could be done by simply reading each occurrence of the word in context. However,

the sources provide a vast study of the word beyond Genesis (e.g., LXX and ANE uses). They provide charts with detailed breakdowns and helpful analysis and summary sections. They both confirmed and added to my initial first-hand work. As I engaged with this material, I was asking myself, "What are the implications of this sense or idea for Genesis as a whole and for the sermon?"

Step 5: Develop a Book Purpose Statement

Identifying why an author wrote a particular book of the Bible can be one of the most challenging tasks, simply because most books do not come with an explicit purpose statement. The purpose has to be identified by looking at the content (what the author says, especially noting any indicators of his intentions) and considering the relationship between the writer, his audience, and the occasion. In other words, understanding the "why" of a book requires understanding the "what" (content) in relation to the "who" (author and audience). I start with the content. Based on my engagement with the content of Genesis and my book argument drafts, I could surmise that Genesis is designed to introduce various "beginnings" (God, Creation, Fall, the Israelites, etc.). Specifically, it is designed to introduce God's plan of redemption through the seed of Abraham.

Since Genesis does not identify its author and recipients, I turned to various secondary sources for help in this area.[58] Based on that study, I came to the conclusion that Moses was writing to the nation Israel prior to their entrance into the Promised Land. With the people and occasion in view, I represented the purpose of Genesis this way: *Moses is writing Genesis to Israel to:*

- Remind them of who God is.
- Remind them of who they are and why they exist.
- Warn them through many examples about what will happen if they fail to believe.
- Encourage them to trust in God who is always faithful to his covenant promises.

Step 6: Engage in Theological Analysis

Fundamental to HAP is theological analysis. I highlighted biblical theology in my preparation for this sermon because I was approaching Genesis with more of a narrative framework than a doctrinal one. In other forms of HAP, systematic theology would play a more prominent role in preparation.

Relationship to the Pentateuch and the OT

At this point I was asking myself two big questions. First, what is the relationship between Genesis and the Pentateuch and the entire OT? Here is where I drew on years of Bible reading and teaching to quickly download some thoughts. Otherwise, I would be more dependent on secondary sources. The Pentateuch is the first act of God's grand story of redemption. It contains the initial promise of redemption through the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15), the identification of the particular seed through whom God would bless the nations (Gen 12:1–3)—the descendants of Abraham. The rest of

[58] One such source was John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

the Pentateuch is the story of how God is fulfilling his promises to Abraham through the nation Israel: their redemption from Egypt, their covenant with God, the laws that made up the covenant, and their preparation to enter the land of promise. Genesis is the beginning of that story of redemption through Abraham's descendants, the human focus of the rest of the books in the OT.

Relationship to the NT

Second, what is the relationship between Genesis and the NT? Using the New Testament Use of the Old Testament tool in Logos Bible Software, I created a list of quotations and allusions to Genesis in the NT. I preferred to start here so that there were objective and textually based grounds for moving from Genesis to the NT. These are much stronger than statements such as "Jesus is the better Joseph." Logos identified 188 allusions, eighteen echoes, twelve citations, and ten quotations (228 total). I scrolled through the list looking for ones that stood out to me or might be fruitful in relation to the book argument and purpose.

Topics that connect Genesis to the NT and that resonated with me as possible connection points for the sermon were as follows: Creation, image of God, rest, tree of life, disobedience and death, protoevangelium, Creation cursed, Cain and Abel, wickedness of the human heart, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Sodom, Jacob, and Judah. I created a list of quotations of and allusions to Genesis under those topic headings and then annotated them, noting all the possible connections I might want to develop in the sermon.

Throughout the sermon construction process, I moved from analysis to synthesis and back to analysis again. The fruit of my theological analysis would be to craft a theological or canonical argument for Genesis in light of my biblical-theological reflection. Here is mine. Keep in mind that this is not a statement for my audience or for the sermon. It is designed to help me think clearly about high-altitude relationships and connections.

> Against all hope from a human perspective, God is rescuing his fallen creatures from judgment, restoring his image of true righteousness and holiness in them, and reconciling their relationship (granting them a right status) with him not by works but through obedience-expressed faith in the promised seed of Abraham, the rightful king of Judah, Jesus Christ, whose offering establishes a new covenant, giving victory over sin, death, and the serpent, and the right to enter God's rest and eat from the tree of life in the paradise/city of God.

I went go back to the book purpose statement and considered enhancing it in light of the canonical context and the Holy Spirit's progressively revealed intention for the Book of Genesis.

Step 7: Craft the Sermon Purpose

As I turned the corner officially from my exegetical and theological analysis to the sermon, I wanted to start by connecting my audience and their needs to the following: the book argument, the canonical argument, and the book purpose. In particular, *by the end of this message I want my audience to:*

- Understand the argument, purpose, and structure of Genesis.
- Be confident that God will fulfill his promises no matter what "impossible" circumstances appear to stand in the way.
- Reject a works-based approach to righteousness before God and accept the substitute offering of God's beloved Son, Abraham's Seed and source of curse-reversing blessing.
- Praise the Lord for rescuing us from deserved judgment and from the wickedness of our own hearts and giving us victory over sin, death, and the serpent.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of the purpose statement for effective preaching in general and for high-altitude preaching in particular. A clear purpose will aid in giving the sermon a strong applicational focus and keep it from becoming a lecture on various aspects of the book. The purpose statements above serve as a filter to help me know what should come into the message and what should stay out.

Step 8: Craft the Sermon Argument

The sermon argument is the case or claim I would like to make in the message that is drawn heavily from the book argument but also informed by the audience and sermon purpose. Here is my initial attempt: *Put your faith in the good news that God will rescue and restore fallen humanity through the serpent-crushing work of the Seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ.* This first draft went through many revisions before becoming final, although I rarely enjoy a sense of finality about this foundational sentence.

Step 9: Craft the Homiletical Outline

Because I wanted my target audience to understand the structure of Genesis (see my first purpose statement), I organized my message based on the text outline of Genesis as much as possible. This is in contrast to a thematic approach, another legitimate form of HAP. I wanted to keep the outline as simple as possible. As I developed my outline, initially I thought through the key things I wanted to emphasize that are in line with my book/sermon argument and purpose, because I cannot and should not try to say everything in one message.

At this juncture I was wrestling with questions such as, "Should I state the main points historically, timelessly (theologically), or contemporarily?" It seemed to me that in this case a timeless statement was a nice compromise to avoid sounding like a lecture (historical) but also to avoid imposing contemporary application onto the structure. It worked well here because the focus was on what God has done and is doing. The Book of Genesis does not come packaged as commands to us directly.

I. God's good creation is cursed and stands in need of blessing through the gospel (1–11).
   A. God's good creation (1–2)
   B. The Fall (3)
   C. The gospel (3:15)
   D. The aftermath (4–11): sin and judgment

II. God's curse-reversing blessing will come through Abraham and his seed (12–36).
   A. God makes foundational promises to Abraham and his descendants.
   B. These promises are reiterated to Isaac and Jacob/Israel.
III. God's preservation of that seed points to his commitment to fulfill his promises to Abraham (37–50).
IV. God's Son, Jesus, is Abraham's Seed and the rightful King of Judah, who will bring about the promised blessing.
   A. Through the New Covenant
   B. Through the offering of himself as a substitute (serpent crushing, phase 1)
   C. Through his righteous rule (serpent crushing, phase 2)

Step 10: Consult Secondary Sources

The preacher will have to decide how much time to spend in self-discovery versus secondary sources. If I have six to eight hours to prepare a sermon, will I spend two hours reading resources outside the biblical text itself? Four hours? And where am I going to start? Do I start with self-discovery, move to the secondary sources, and then back to self-discovery (now with the secondary sources providing guidance), or back and forth as needed? Here are a few other questions a preacher can ask:

- Where am I stuck? Maybe I have gone as far as I can on my own. I have questions that need answers, but I am not able to answer those questions.
- Where and when do I need to check the work I have done and the conclusions I have come to?
- Where do I need to fill out and supplement the work I have done?
- How much time do I have for self-discovery?

Step 11: Write Out the Sermon

As I wrote out the sermon, I am focused on developing the outline (how) in a way that highlighted my argument (what) and served my purpose (why). When preaching an overview sermon, there is much that has to be glossed over, especially with a fifty-chapter book like Genesis. So I decided strategically which texts I was going to read and/or bring to my audience's attention. In the case of chapters 1–2 of Genesis, I wanted my audience to see that the original creation was "very good" so that they appreciate the devastating effects of the Fall. I wanted them to be introduced to the serpent, since he is a key player not only in Genesis but also in the whole Bible story. And I wanted them to see the blessing motif, because I wanted to underscore God's disposition of kindness from the beginning and to prepare them for the curse that is coming and the promise given to Abraham to bless the nations. In other words, as I developed my message I constantly asked myself, "What does my audience need to know now in order to be set up for connections and eye-opening moments later in the sermon?"

Spiral Preaching and Genesis

For a book like Genesis, the preacher could make a one-sermon pass initially through the entire book focusing on the major narrative progression and themes: Creation, Fall, Abraham, patriarchs, and Joseph. A second pass (that could include one or more sermons as part of a mini-series) could dig more deeply into theological themes such as God's sovereignty and providence or sin (its nature and consequences). A third pass could double-tap on the relevance of the Creation account for today's Christian or lessons from the lives of the patriarchs or how God's redemptive plan begins and culminates in Christ. Here is what a possible long-range plan for spiral preaching in Genesis might look like.

Year 1: First pass through Genesis (one sermon)—the overview sermon, a 10,000-foot aerial view from Creation to the formation of Israel, pointing out major landmarks

- Creation and Fall (1–3)
- The spread of sin and the flood (4-11)
- The patriarchal narratives (12–50)
    - Abraham's call and covenant
    - Isaac
    - Jacob
    - Joseph

Year 2: Second pass through Genesis (four sermons), deepening the study

- Creation covenant and Fall
- Noahic covenant
- Abrahamic covenant
- Patriarchal narratives

Year 3: Third pass through Genesis (seven sermons)

- The days of Creation
- The impact of the Fall
- The account of the flood—judgment/salvation
- The journey of Abraham—faith
- The life of Isaac
- The transformation of Jacob
- The story of Joseph—God's providence

Year 4: Fourth pass through Genesis (twenty-five sermons)

- Detailed exposition of specific passages

With previous foundation-laying messages in place, preachers do not feel the weight of covering everything, and they can zoom in on areas within the book without losing the overarching book

context and flow. This might be a remedy for the problem of moralistic-type preaching from OT narratives. It is going to be much safer to draw out moral life lessons and applications from the patriarchs if the larger book context (its message and purpose and placement in the metanarrative of Scripture) is (and has been) in view.

One reason some preaching of the OT fails is the fact that the preacher disproportionately emphasizes the larger context to the detriment of giving sufficient attention to the text. There is thirty percent OT text (if that) followed by seventy percent context. But if one were to preach the larger context as a stand-alone message, if the preacher engaged regularly in high-altitude spiral preaching, he would be free to spend more time in the details of the OT text and not feel like he has to preach two sermons.[59] He could also press into the applicational parallels and character examples (both positive and negative) with less concern for legalism or moralism.

Conclusion

Ground-level preaching remains foundational to any fruitful ministry of the Word. Pastors should continue preaching "verse by verse" through books of the Bible as their regular approach to weekly exposition. This paper is a call for preachers to supplement that approach. It is a call to expand the scope of their preaching texts from microscopic to macroscopic and give careful thought to the scope and sequence of their preaching calendar beyond the next book and the next year.

In this paper I have argued for high-altitude spiral preaching (HASP). Preaching entire books of the Bible cyclically, from various angles, and with increasing depth and complexity provides the church with a rich and varied diet from God's Word. In an age of biblical illiteracy and fragmented Scripture knowledge, HASP is an approach to help pastors equip their churches to enjoy a high-altitude perspective and engage with the whole counsel of God.

[59] It is always dangerous to assume certain knowledge. See Chapell, 253–55. Therefore, every message preached by a Christian minister should provide some degree of explicit gospel orientation.

Luke's Prologue to His Gospel and the Study of History

by Mark Sidwell[1]

One purpose of constructing a biblical worldview is to enable Christians to follow Scripture in shaping their approach to every human endeavor. This is as true of high culture and academic disciplines as in other spheres of life. A Christian artist should strive to form and follow a Christian philosophy of art. Christian readers and writers should consider how the Bible directs a proper approach to literature. Students of history ought to follow the same path. Christianity is a historical religion, revealed in God's actions in human affairs, and Scripture provides guidance about how to view history.

Because so much of the Bible is historical, it is daunting to survey the historical sections of Scripture in order to formulate a biblical approach to history. Think about how massive Augustine's *City of God* turned out to be when that writer wrestled with writing a Christian philosophy of history. A more manageable and focused topic to tackle is the prologue of Luke's Gospel (1:1–4). In a single Greek sentence Luke outlines issues and principles that the Christian historian should weigh. Although the inspiration of Scripture precludes historians from aspiring to the level of Luke's work, his prologue nevertheless suggests the value that other works of history can provide.[2]

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[2] There is a large literature on Luke as a historian. For an excellent overview of interpretations of Luke the historian that also offers careful analysis of related issues, see Scott McKnight and Matthew C. Williams, "Luke," in *Historians of the Christian Tradition,* ed. Michael Bauman and Martin I. Klauber (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 39–57. Among the numerous helpful full-length works are I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), and for an older but still useful study, A. T. Robertson, *Luke the Historian, in the Light of Research* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936). Despite some critical views, Justo González, *The Story Luke Tells: Luke's Unique Witness to the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) offers thought-provoking observations about Luke's work. Also of interest is Daniel Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the "Acts of the Apostles,"* trans. Ken McKinney, Gregory J. Laughery, and Richard Bauckham, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 121 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). This work covers more recent literature and provides pertinent discussion of issues relating to Luke's historical work from the perspective of narrative criticism; however, the author is open to critical views and, in postmodern fashion, unduly inserts the author between the history and the reader. Among the numerous shorter studies, see Earl E. Cairns, "Luke as a Historian," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 122, no. 487 (1965): 220–26, which is surprisingly thorough considering its short length, and F. F. Bruce, "The First Church Historian," in *Church, Word, and Spirit: Historical and Theological Essays in Honor of Geoffrey W. Bromiley,* ed. James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 1–14. On the prologue in particular, an older but highly influential contribution is Henry J. Cadbury's extremely technical "Commentary on the Preface of Luke," Appendix C in *The Beginnings of Christianity, Part I The Acts of the Apostles,* ed. F. J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, vol. 2 *Prolegomena II Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1922), 489–510.

Luke the Historian

Writers commonly call Eusebius of Caesarea "the father of church history" because of his influential *Ecclesiastical History* written in the fourth century. Certainly his work was important, a key precedent in recording the church's history. Yet Luke, writer of the Book of Acts, could also bear that title. Even those scholars who question the inspiration of Luke's writings have difficulty denying that he was as much a historian as Eusebius (although some do). How much more should those who believe in the inerrancy of Luke's work through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit regard Luke as a pioneer—indeed *the* pioneer—church historian.[3]

We know few biographical details about Luke. Paul calls him "the beloved physician" (Col 4:14), indicating that he was a doctor. Paul also apparently identifies him as a Gentile (not among those "who are of the circumcision," Col 4:11).[4] The only certain fact we have about his life is that he was a companion of Paul, as indicated by the "we" passages in Acts (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–8; 27:1–28:16) and brief references in Paul's epistles. Luke was one of Paul's few companions with him just before the apostle's execution (2 Tim 4:11). Schaff calls later traditional stories about Luke "far below the healthy and certain tone of the New Testament, mostly vague and often contradictory, never reliable."[5] Schaff mentions the traditions that Luke was a painter, that he suffered crucifixion in Greece, and that his remains were ultimately buried in the Church of the Apostles in Constantinople—none of which is demonstrably more than legend.

Anyone approaching the study of history must face the basic question: What is history? People generally understand the term *history* differently in different contexts. Walter Kaiser captures something of this diversity in his use of the terms "history-as-event" and "history-as-account."[6] Sometimes we think of "history" as all the events that have ever occurred in the past—"history-as-event." Such history is real but unknowable in its totality, except in the mind of God. "History-as-account" is what we read or study. Someone has researched sources from the past to construct a narrative that attempts to reflect "history-as-event," doing so well or poorly according to the ability of

[3] There is little surviving evidence of organized Christian historical writing between Luke and Eusebius. One of the few possible historians in this period is Hegesippus (second century), whose work is lost but fragments of which are preserved by Eusebius. Judging from these fragments, however, Hegesippus's work does not appear to be a systematic history of Christianity as much as a collection of anecdotes. See Mark Sidwell, "Hegesippus: 'Grandfather of Church History,'" *Biblical Viewpoint* 23, no. 2 (1989): 73–81. Robert Wilken credits Hegesippus with perhaps the earliest appearance of a common idea in Christian views of history, that the apostolic age is a unique and indeed model historical era, "the standard by which all other ages are judged." Robert L. Wilken, *The Myth of Christian Beginnings* (1971; reprint, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 44–45. For the relevant passage in Hegesippus that Wilken discusses, see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.19.

[4] William Kirk Hobart, *The Medical Language of St. Luke* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, and Company, 1882) argues that the medical language used by the author of the Gospel and Acts proves his identity as a doctor. Later writers have generally scouted this idea, but Hobart does show that the author demonstrated a familiarity with medical language.

[5] Philip Schaff, *Apostolic Christianity,* vol. 1 of *History of the Christian Church* (1910; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 652. See Schaff's brief sketch of Luke's life, 649–52.

[6] Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age Through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 2.

the historian and the sources available. Even inspired scriptural histories remain only accounts that present a part of the past selected according to the purpose of the writer and the divine intention.

Luke's Terminology

With this understanding of "history-as-account" in mind, we can look more closely at how Luke wrote an "account," starting with the terminology used to describe his work. One important term, which Luke did not use of his book, is *Gospel*.[7] A "Gospel" is a uniquely Christian form of literature, the Gospel of Luke being of the same genre as Matthew, Mark, and John. Each of these works presents the "good news" of Jesus Christ with the "news" implying that something is true, that something has happened.[8] Luke helps define a Gospel when he describes his particular Gospel as an account of "all that Jesus began both to do and teach" (Acts 1:1). A Gospel, then, is a historical record but also a portrait of the person and work of Jesus Christ. That later "Gospels" such as collections of sayings in the Gospel of Thomas or the ludicrous infancy narratives such as the Gospel of James are non-historical or legendary does not affect the historical validity of the canonical Gospels.

In Acts 1:1 Luke uses the term *treatise* to describe his Gospel, though the Greek word *logos* has a wide semantic range of meaning that limits its usefulness in understanding precisely how Luke defines his work. More narrowly, in Luke 1 the author uses "declaration" (v. 1), also rendered "account" or "narrative" (Gk. *diégēsin*). Joseph Fitzmyer pulls together these shades of meaning, translating the word as "a narrative account" and calls it Luke's "quasi-title" for his Gospel.[9] Some translations imply another term in verse 3 as "orderly account" (ESV and NIV), but there is no noun in the Greek. Rather these words are adverbs for "accurately" and "successively," as reflected in the KJV, "write unto thee in order," emphasizing the manner of writing rather than a term for the kind of writing. In brief, Luke writes an "account," a report or description, of the life and work of Jesus Christ although, as we shall see, it has a theological purpose.[10]

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[7] Luke uses forms of the word *gospel* in quoting Jesus (e.g., 4:18) and in describing Christ preaching the gospel (e.g., 9:6) but does not use the word to describe his own work as Mark does in Mark 1:1. Luke also uses the word several times in Acts, normally of preaching the gospel (cf. Acts 8:25; 14:7; 16:10).

[8] As F. F. Bruce notes, "Christianity as a way of life depends upon the acceptance of Christianity as good news. And this good news is intimately bound up with the historical order." F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?,* 5th rev. ed. (1960; reprint, Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978), 7–8.

[9] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX),* AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1981), 174. Fitzmyer offers a good discussion of usage of the word, describing the numerous ways *diégēsin* was used in Greek literature, noting particularly how writers used it of historical accounts but not exclusively in historical writing. Among the several examples of how the word is used of historical works, he includes some from Josephus, which might prove an interesting parallel to his contemporary Luke (292).

[10] Edwards suggests Luke's use of the singular for "account" in v. 1 implies that there is "but *one* gospel narrative, of which there are various versions." James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke,* PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 24, italics in original.

Luke's Accuracy

The idea of a historical account brings us to the next question: How true is Luke's account? Scholarly questions about the historical value of Luke's writings trace back largely to Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) and the Tübingen school of interpretation, which dramatically reduced the historical value of Luke's work. Dating Acts to the second century, Baur and his followers viewed the book as an apologetic for Christian unity written long after the events it supposedly describes. This approach understandably provoked considerable controversy, and its ideas echo through Lukan studies down to the present.[11] One response was a spate of efforts to defend the historical value of Luke's Gospel and Acts. Among these was that of Sir William Ramsay (1851–1939). Schooled in the Tübingen approach, Ramsay began his career as an archeologist with a low opinion of Acts as a historical source, but his research changed his mind. He concluded that the accuracy of Luke in many factual details pointed to his overall dependability.[12] Other scholars have followed this approach even before Ramsay, such as J. B. Lightfoot, and more modern writers such as F. F. Bruce.[13]

It has sometimes been assumed that Luke's accuracy could not have been greater than that of the ancient Greek historians. The implication of such arguments is that we cannot expect Luke to be any more accurate than Greek historians in general. Yet, for the moment leaving aside the question of inspiration, Greek historians theoretically had a high respect for historical accuracy, even if many fell short in practice. Lucian, whose *How to Write History* was perhaps the only essay on the theory of history in ancient Greek literature, says that "history cannot admit a lie, even a tiny one, any more than the windpipe . . . can tolerate anything entering it in swallowing" and that "history has one task and one end—what is useful—and that comes from truth alone."[14]

A particular focus in comparing Luke to other Greek historians has been the speeches in Acts.[15] Greek historians commonly composed fictionalized speeches that they inserted in the mouths of their subjects, with no listeners or readers believing such speeches to be *ipsissima verba.* In his history of the

[11] For an excellent review of the history of the interpretation of Acts, see W. Ward Gasque, *A History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975). See also a concise summary of Gasque's conclusions in his article "The Historical Value of the Book of Acts: An Essay in the History of New Testament Criticism," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (1969): 68–88. As a typical example of how Tübingen still affects evaluation of Luke's work, see the introduction to Luke in Michael Grant, ed., *Readings in the Classical Historians* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), 395–97.

[12] For a summary of Ramsay's approach to and attitude toward Luke's work, see W. M. Ramsay, *Luke the Physician and Other Studies in the History of Religion* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), 3–68. In *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (1911; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 35–52, Ramsay describes his change of attitude toward the historicity of Acts because of its accuracy in details.

[13] Noting that Luke "affords his critical readers so many opportunities for testing his accuracy," Bruce compactly reviews many specific historical references that Luke records correctly in the Gospel and Acts. *The New Testament Documents,* 80–92.

[14] Lucian, *How to Write History* 7, 9. Marguerat, 13–21, discusses Luke's work in light of the ideas Lucian sets forth about Greek historiography.

[15] For a brief overview of the issue, see F. F. Bruce, *The Speeches in the Acts of the Apostles,* The Tyndale New Testament Lecture, 1942 (London: Tyndale, 1942), 5–8; available at https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/tp/speeches_bruce.pdf, accessed October 22, 2025.

Peloponnesian War, Thucydides frankly admitted composing speeches that were not transcriptions of the originals. Critics then suggest that the same is true of Luke, as in the sermons recorded in Acts. Thucydides also describes, however, how he sought to use his own recollections and the recollections of others to preserve the essence of such speeches, "the accuracy of the report being always tried by the most severe and detailed tests possible."[16] If Greek historians in general sought the highest degree of accuracy that they could, there is little reason on that basis to question how Luke, with even greater resources, could achieve accuracy.[17]

Certainly Luke displays a great sense of history in his Gospel and Acts, demonstrated by his attention to historical detail. Luke is deeply aware of contemporary events, placing both the Gospel account and the rise of the church within their historical milieu. A good example of this awareness is Luke's introduction to the ministry of John the Baptist: "Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother, Philip, tetrarch of Ituraea and of the region of Trachonitis and Lysanias, the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness" (Luke 3:1–2). Even then we cannot miss Luke's ironic underscoring about what is important in history. Despite the presence of notable Roman and Jewish leaders, "the *word of God* came unto *John* in the *wilderness.*" Elsewhere, Luke carefully records contemporary events and personages. Bruce notes, for example, that Luke is the only NT writer to name a Roman emperor, in fact naming three (Augustus, Tiberius, and Claudius).[18]

Luke and the Historian's Method

Charles Erdman succinctly observes, "The fact of inspiration should not blind us to the human means by which the Spirit of God secured accuracy in the communication of truth and in the composition of the Holy Scriptures."[19] In the prologue to his Gospel (1:1–4), Luke not only offers a summary of his own method of research and writing but also provides guidelines for the Christian historian:

> Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, even as they delivered them unto us, who from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent

[16] Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 1.22. In general historians do not regard Thucydides's speeches as fiction, even though they do not think that they are precise recreations of the original speech. Barker observes, "Modern opinion on the whole agrees that these speeches [in Thucydides] do not violate credibility." John Barker, *The Superhistorians: Makers of Our Past* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1982), 24.

[17] McKnight and Williams observe, "The question that needs to be addressed is this: did Luke summarize the actual speeches accurately, or did Luke invent the speeches according to his own needs?" They appeal to both the pattern of historical writing and theological content of the sermons to indicate the dependability of Luke's accounts (47–48).

[18] Bruce, *The New Testament Documents,* 81. He goes on to note other examples of Luke referring to specific Roman officials, Jewish political leaders, and Jewish religious leaders, 81–82.

[19] Charles Erdman, *The Gospel of Luke: An Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1931), 17.

> Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed.

Although various authors have found different schema for history in this prologue,[20] I suggest four concepts discernible in Luke's history: the use of sources in writing history, history's basis in real events, the importance of orderly presentation in history, and the reliability of history—the latter a point in which the question of biblical inspiration plays a large role.

Investigating Sources in History

First, all good history is based on careful research of sources. Luke acknowledges his dependence on sources, citing "eyewitnesses" who helped in preparing his account and admitting that he was not always among the witnesses. Robertson summarizes Luke's sources as personal observation (for Acts), interviews with eyewitnesses, and documents.[21] More specific suggestions for sources are Mary (Luke 2), Philip (Acts 21:8–10), Mnason (Acts 21:16), and James (Acts 21:18), as well as the "we" sections of Acts.[22]

The sources in Luke's work confront us with the whole synoptic question. Luke describes those who "have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration," indicating they were "eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word." Do these witnesses include the other Gospel writers? How much did Luke use (or was even aware of) the other canonical Gospels, particularly Matthew and Mark, with whom he shares so much content? This subject is too large for such a brief study as this, but it is at least possible that Luke used Matthew or Mark (or both) in drawing up his account.

Of course writers must use caution in identifying Luke's sources. J. C. Ryle warns,

> It would be mere waste of time to inquire from what source Luke obtained the information which he has given us in his Gospel. We have no good reason for supposing that he saw our Lord work miracles, or heard Him teach. To say that he obtained his information from the Virgin Mary, or any of the apostles, is mere conjecture and speculation. Enough for us to know that Luke wrote by inspiration of God. Unquestionably he did not neglect the ordinary means of getting knowledge. But the Holy Spirit guided him, no less than all other writers of the Bible, in his choice of matter. The Holy Spirit supplied him with thoughts, arrangement, sentences, and even words. And the result is, that what Luke wrote is not to be read as the "word of man," but the "word of God." (1 Thess. ii. 13.)[23]

[20] Earl Cairns, e.g., discusses Luke's method under consideration of the words *investigate, from the beginning, accurately,* and *orderly* (or *systematic*). Cairns, 224–25.

[21] Robertson, 46–50.

[22] Taken from Cairns, 223, and Bruce, "The First Church Historian," 5.

[23] J. C. Ryle, *St. Luke. Vol. I.,* vol. 3 of *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (1858; reprint, Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 1969), 3–4.

Nevertheless we must not go to the opposite extreme of insisting—against what Luke himself says—that an inspired writer would use no sources or do no research.[24] We might note in contrast to Ryle's position the plausible arguments F. F. Bruce makes for identifying some of Luke's sources in his Gospel and in Acts.[25]

Using sources to write good history necessitates skill in handling them. Luke indicates his facility in verse 3, where his words can be taken in one of two ways. In one sense his description of method might refer to a personal grasp of the subject as in "having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first" (KJV) or "having followed all things closely for some time past" (ESV). Because Luke uses *parakoloutheō,* which has the sense of "investigate," others render it "having investigated everything carefully from the beginning" (NASB). The first rendering speaks to Luke's mastery of the material, that Luke's expertise gives him credibility in evaluating his sources. The second points to his diligence in researching relevant material. Either rendering establishes his credentials to write on the subject, particularly because other Gospel writers had some firsthand experience of Christ.[26] Earl Cairns notes how the Greek physician Galen uses *parakoloutheō* for the investigation of symptoms.[27] Such a usage recalls the common description of Thucydides as a historian, that he "diagnosed" events by searching out their underlying causes like a physician diagnosing a disease.[28] We may well picture "Doctor Luke" seeking out historical truth in the same way he approached illness in his patients.

History's Basis in Real Events

Second, although sources are important, it is vital that those sources be true. History is grounded in real events. It has a genuinely objective character in that it relates something that really happened. The English word *Gospel* is the rendering of the Greek *euaggelion* or "good news." Unlike collections of "sayings" of Christ as in the Gospel of Thomas or the hypothetical Q document, the canonical Gospels provide an account of historical events that are key to the narrative. A genuine Gospel requires correlation with real events. If the Christian faith is based on truth, then history must relate that truth accurately. J. Gresham Machen wrote, "It is true that the Christian gospel is an account, not of something that happened yesterday, but of something that happened long ago; but the important

[24] John R. Rice, who held a very mechanical dictation view of inspiration, labeled the idea that Luke interviewed other people such as Mary or the apostles and "wrote it down like any other historian" as "a lie from Hell." John R. Rice, "Christianity a Miracle Religion," *Sword of the Lord,* 16 November 1936, 2, quoted in Howard Edgar Moore, "The Emergence of Modern Fundamentalism: John R. Rice and 'The Sword of the Lord'" (PhD diss., George Washington University), 373.

[25] Bruce, *The New Testament Documents,* 41–43.

[26] Matthew and John were of course disciples who witnessed Christ's life firsthand. Mark, as far as we know, was not an eyewitness, but there is in his case the early tradition that Mark used Peter as his main source.

[27] Cairns, 224.

[28] "Refusing to compromise by emulating more seductively romantic writers, he [Thucydides] modelled his own approach on the medical pioneers of the Hippocratic school. These emphasized the need for careful observation, and for the maintenance of regular records which would then facilitate accurate prognoses, or predictions, about the future: by building up a reliable set of data, one could hope to establish patterns in the course of diseases, and the effects of various prescriptions; and such knowledge of past processes could then serve to inform decisions in the future." Beverly Southgate, *History: What and Why? Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern Perspectives,* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2001), 19–20.

thing is that it really happened. If it really happened, then it makes little difference when it happened. No matter when it happened, whether yesterday or in the first century, it remains a real gospel, a real piece of news."[29]

We may see this factuality in Luke's use of *peplērophorēmenōn* in verse 1. Some translations render this word as "things which are most surely believed" (KJV, MEV) or "matters fully believed" (Darby). Other translations render it as things "accomplished" (NASB, ESV), "fulfilled" (NIV, NKJV), "taken place" (GNT) or "which have happened" (Phillips). The former renderings imply the dependability of the content of the faith, that the content is trustworthy because it is historically true. The latter translations stress the objective reality of the events that underlie the Gospel account.[30] Either way, Luke affirms that these are events that surely happened.

History as an Orderly Presentation

Third, real events need to be effectively organized in good history. Lucian writes, "As to the facts themselves, he [the historian] should not assemble them at random."[31] A good history provides orderly presentation following a theme, not random stories and anecdotes. Here Luke's manner or method is foremost. Luke focuses on "all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order" (v. 3). "The very first" or "the beginning" asserts a starting point for Luke's account, although interpreters debate the meaning. For some it is Luke's own acquaintance with the gospel message and its spread, but more tend to see it as going back to the beginning of the gospel story, as shown by Luke's narrative of Christ's birth.[32] Likewise "in order" or "orderly" (*kathexēs*) speaks of a pattern and structure, which is indeed evident to any reader of Luke's Gospel. It may even be, as Marshall believes, that the term implies a chronological approach.[33]

Curiously, the emphasis on Luke's design and purpose has led to additional questions about his accuracy, the supposed contrast between "Luke the historian" and "Luke the theologian." Without question, Luke was both, as reflected in the title of I. Howard Marshall's work *Luke: Historian and Theologian.* Some scholars who see conflict between these two roles argue that Luke's emphasis on theology shapes his Gospel to the detriment of his history, that communicating a distinct theology

[29] J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 122.

[30] Fitzmyer discusses three interpretations of *peplērophorēmenōn* "things that come to fulfillment" as meaning (1) things completed or accomplished, (2) things fully assured, and (3) things that "have been fulfilled." He argues for the third. Fitzmyer, 293.

[31] Lucian, *How to Write History,* 47.

[32] Garland offers the attractive suggestion that "from the beginning" could refer to Luke's purpose of looking back to the OT foundation, as in how Christ addressed his disciples "beginning at Moses," on the road to Emmaus (24:27), linking the gospel narrative to the whole of scriptural history. David E. Garland, *Luke,* ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 54. Perhaps relevant to this idea is the fact that Luke traces Christ's genealogy back to Adam (Luke 3:38).

[33] Marshall, 40. Luke's approach is clearly generally chronological, although we should not press this point to details. Matthew and Luke, for instance, differ on the order of events in Christ's temptation (Matt 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13), and Matthew's use of "then" in v. 5 indicates a stricter chronological order than Luke's.

leads him to distort (however unintentionally) the historical account.[34] Theories associated with source criticism and especially redaction criticism, which stresses the role of the "redactor" or editor in shaping his material, have particularly fed this tendency.[35] Yet there is no reason to fall into an either/or dichotomy. In fact, the accuracy of Luke's account only confirms the theology he teaches. McKnight and Williams ask, "If one does not think that Luke was an accurate historian, can one really formulate a theology of Luke that is of any value?" They argue that if Luke is not historically accurate, then any "theology" derived from his writings is simply an invention.[36] Because Christianity is a historical religion, genuine theology must be based on historical truth.

Reliability: The Question of Certainty or Likelihood in History

Finally, good history is reliable. In one sense this point is just an extension of accuracy in history—that which is accurate is reliable. Luke's language, however, highlights a key distinction between his work (and all other historical accounts in Scripture) and other works of history. Luke says he writes to Theophilus so that he might know the "certainty" of what he has been taught. The fact of divine inspiration provides Luke's Gospel with a dependability that nonscriptural accounts cannot achieve. Scripture conveys certainty whereas human works of history can provide only likelihood. Sometimes the degree of that likelihood can be high, as in stating that the Battle of Gettysburg occurred in Pennsylvania in July of 1863. At other times, as in debating the causation of events such as the outbreak of World War I, those causes may be subject to considerable dispute. Regardless, never is human historical writing as certain as that of the Bible.[37]

Another support for the reliability of Luke's work is the implication of divine activity asserted in the prologue. The phrase "those things which are most surely believed among us" in verse 1 is often rendered as "things accomplished among us" (NASB, cf. ESV), which points back to our previous discussion of the factuality of events. But the phrase can also be rendered "things that have been fulfilled among us" (NIV), the idea being that these events realized a divine purpose. Garland argues

[34] The fountainhead for much of this modern discussion of "theology vs. history" in Luke is Hans Conzelmann and his work published in English as *The Theology of St. Luke,* trans. Geoffrey Buswell (New York: Harper, 1960), followed and developed by writers such as Ernst Haenchen. See Gasque, "The Historical Value of the Book of Acts," 69–72. Gasque also discusses those he believes are precursors to this approach.

[35] For a close analysis of the question of Luke's sources and the place of form criticism and redaction criticism in Lukan studies, see Marshall, 57–68.

[36] McKnight and Williams, 49.

[37] In regard to divine inspiration, some authors have appealed to the use of *anōthen* in v. 3, rendered "from the very first" in the KJV. The fact that *anōthen* can mean "from above" in some contexts (cf. John 3:31, James 1:17) has led a few interpreters to hold that such is the meaning in Luke 1:3, arguing that Luke is claiming divine inspiration in his work by use of this term. Popular commentator John R. Rice, for example, argues vigorously for this rendering and cites several other writers in support, including Erasmus, C. H. Spurgeon, and C. I. Scofield. John R. Rice, *The Son of Man: A Verse-by-Verse Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke* (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord, 1971), 22–23. However, the large majority of interpreters and virtually all English translations render it "from the beginning" or "from the very first," based on the temporal usage of *anōthen* in other contexts such as Acts 26:5. On the various meanings of *anōthen* and related terms, see *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis,* 2nd ed., ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 1:337–39.

that something is "fulfilled" in the sense that God brought it to pass.[38] In this way Luke contrasts with other Greek historians. The pattern of Greek historical writing, going back to the "father of history," Herodotus, was to shift from overemphasizing the intervention of the gods in human affairs to focusing on human autonomy and responsibility. As Du Plessis notes, Luke's "purpose was not to draw important lessons from history, as it was the case with other Greek historians, but to serve Christianity with a true report of *God acting in history.* For Luke, historical facts are only meaningful when they are interpreted and ordered within the framework of this central truth."[39]

While stressing the reliability of inspired history, however, we must emphasize that reliability should be the goal of all history. Histories by definition are not works of fiction. The more accurate—the more *true*—a work is, the greater its value in reflecting the past and providing use to the present. Luke presents a model of historical perfection. To borrow from football coach Vince Lombardi, historians will not reach perfection, but in striving after it they may achieve excellence.

Conclusion: Luke as the Historian's Model

John Calvin observed, "That history is the teacher of what life ought to be, is what heathens have with truth said; but as it is handed down by them, no one can derive from it sound instruction. Scripture alone justly claims to itself an office of this kind. For in the first place it prescribes general rules, by which we may test every other history."[40] Luke's prologue provides us with this sort of "test" by outlining qualities of good history, and historians may learn from this model.

Although human histories are not inspired, there is still value in studying Luke's pattern. Fitzmyer, who himself questions the historicity of Luke, nonetheless observes that Luke's description of his work as "thorough (*pasin*), traced from the beginning (*anōthen*), orderly (*kathexēs*), and accurate (*akribōs*)" provides "four qualities that any historian would be proud of."[41] The four qualities enumerated in this article do not define all the qualities of good history but they are all necessary components.

First of all, an emphasis on truth is a helpful antidote to this postmodern age in which a highly perspectival view of history can reduce historical writing to an opinion of the historian. Although history may grant only likelihood rather than certainty, likelihood does not translate to total uncertainty. With care in writing and guided by Scripture, history can capture something of the genuine "history-as-event." The hermeneutic of suspicion so prevalent in postmodern scholarship may teach us caution in exploring our sources, but it does not completely negate the results of historical research.

Second, the emphasis on dependable sources provides some reason for believing the results of historical work to be dependable. History by definition is not fiction but an avenue for pursuing truth,

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[38] Garland, 53.

[39] I. I. Du Plessis, "Once More: The Purpose of Luke's Prologue (Lk 1:1–4)," *Novum Testamentum* 16, no. 4 (1974): 271 (emphasis original).

[40] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans,* trans. and ed. by John Owen (1849; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947), 182–83.

[41] Fitzmyer, 15.

if based on trustworthy evidence. Historians should not accept or reject evidence on the basis of how it matches their preconceptions. Luke spoke of relying on "eyewitnesses," surely the first line of dependable sources, and implied the use of other materials in his work. Such sources are not infallible, and modern historians do not have Luke's advantage of divine guidance. Yet modern historians must, like Luke, seek out the best first-hand information that they can find.

Third, the concept of order is definitely a virtue in historical writing. Logical organization makes any sort of writing clearer. Furthermore, a sense of purpose focuses the argument of a work. Having a purpose for a historical writing does not detract from accuracy any more than Luke's conscious effort to lay out a definite theology should call his veracity into question. Historians may distort the picture by letting their purpose override evidence, but the result is no longer good history. Order serves to communicate better to the reader what the historian intends.

Finally, reliability should be by definition characteristic of history. Histories may be unreliable to some degree because of the failures of the historian, but the ideal is to relate a true story, just as Luke related the "good news" in his writing. Even the unattainable bar of inspiration, with the reliability it conveys, holds its lessons. Inspiration teaches historians humility. They should temper expectations for their work, realizing their limitations while seeking to communicate the truth.

Luke not only modeled history in his Gospel and in Acts, but he also set a patten for other historians in his prologue. Due consideration of Luke 1:1–4 should help Christian historians produce superior works of history.

Revelation and the Qur'an: Has God Spoken Through Muhammad?

by Elise M. S. Smith[1]

The vivid images of looming, crescent-mooned spires, masked women, exotic Arabic calligraphy, and headlines of radical Islamist activity can cause interest or even fear in those that find themselves outside of the Muslim faith. In many ways, Christians and Muslims could not be more different. But Christians may be surprised to find familiar biblical stories and characters in Islam's holy book: the Qur'an. The Qur'an connects its authority in part to biblical prophets such as Abraham, Noah, Jonah, David, and even Jesus. In addition, both Christians and Muslims claim that God has spoken through the prophets in order to communicate his divine will to mankind. It is of crucial importance for both faiths to determine what the nature of revelation is and whether God has spoken through Muhammad in the Qur'an.

Inspiration

Many world religions claim to have an inspired word from God. What are the criteria by which someone can know that he has the true Word of God in his hands? Muslims appeal to arguments similar to those used by Christians. However, it is important to analyze the differences between the approaches to understand what is at the heart of Qur'anic claims to inspiration and inerrancy.

The Qur'an and Inspiration

The word *reveal(ed)* occurs 146 times[2] (see Table 1) and *revelation* occurs 215 times[3] in the English translation of the Qur'an. In contrast, the word *recite* occurs forty-six times. Most of the occurrences of *reveal(ed)* speak of Muhammad as the recipient of the revelation, and Allah is the speaker. Interestingly, the next most frequent context for *reveal(ed)* is that Christians and Jews should believe in their own revelation and/or Qur'anic revelation.

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[2] All Qur'anic citations are from the Pickthal English translation, available at https://www. quranexplorer.com.

[3] Muhammad Abu-Hamdiyyah provides a Muslim definition of revelation: "Revelation means a disclosure, an enlightening experience or divine or supernatural communication. Two main words are used in the Qur'an for revelation. The first is *wahy-un* (with *un* for pronunciation only, standing for the nunnation), the verbal noun of the verb *waha (wahaya)* meaning 'to reveal', 'inspire' or 'indicate', and some variations of this verb, namely *awha* (the causative form of *waha)* meaning to 'cause inspiration', 'give sign' or 'indicate'. The second usage is based on the verb *nazala,* meaning 'to descend', but mostly in the intensive form *(nazzala)* or the causative form *(anzala),* both with the meaning 'to cause to descend or send down'." *The Qur'an: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000), 26.

Table 1. Occurrences of *Reveal(ed)* in the Qur'an

Topic	Passages
Revealed to Muhammad	2.23, 2.285, 2.4, 2.62, 3.29, 3.3, 3.44, 3.7, 4.105, 4.166, 4.61, 5.67, 5.81, 6.114, 7.2, 10.94, 11.12, 14.1, 15.6, 16.64, 16.89, 17.106, 18.1, 18.27, 20.13, 20.2, 20.38, 24.1, 25.1, 25.6, 39.2, 39.41, 47.2, 53.1, 64.8, 72.1, 76.23
Belief in Christian Scriptures	2.136, 2.213, 2.41, 3.199, 3.4, 3.65, 3.84, 3.93, 4.136, 4.162, 4.47, 5.44, 5.45, 5.46, 5.47, 5.48, 5.59, 5.66, 5.68, 5.83, 6.114, 6.91, 6.92, 13.36, 29.47, 35.31, 46.3, 61.6
People disbelieve the Prophet's message	2.176, 2.91, 4.6, 5.104, 5.64, 6.81, 9.127, 9.97, 13.1, 16.24, 21.5, 36.15, 43.31, 47.2, 47.26, 47.9, 67.9
People must believe or face judgment	2.176, 2.91, 4.6, 5.104, 5.64, 6.81, 9.127, 9.97, 13.1, 16.24, 21.5, 36.15, 43.31, 47.2, 47.26, 47.9, 67.9
The revelation in the Qur'an is clear	2.159, 2.99, 16.44, 22.16, 24.1, 38.7, 57.25
Denial that "association" was revealed	3.151, 7.33, 12.40, 30.35, 39.65, 53.23
Scripture wards off evil	6.155, 7.26, 16.30, 20.113
The Arabs were the only ones who would believe the Qur'an	26.198
Revealed on the blessed night	44.3, 97.1
Revealed in the month of Ramadan	2.185
Gabriel revealed	2.97
Holy spirit revealed	16.102
The Qur'an revealed in parts and order	17.106, 25.32
Response to Christians	29.46
Challenge verse	2.23
Response of a convert	5.83
Day of discrimination	8.41
Surahs reveal what is in the hypocrite's heart	9.64
Surah increases faith	9.134
Allah could withdraw his revelation	17.86, 39.23
God gives knowledge to see revelation/believe	34.6, 34.50
Miscellaneous	2.1–2, 2.231, 3.154, 5.101, 6.145, 7.143, 9.86, 11.14, 13.19, 15.9, 21.1, 38.29, 42.17, 42.51, 57.16

The Qur'an itself is not clear whether the Qur'an was revealed all in one night or in parts later. A synthesis of the data and the common explanation from Muslims is that the blessed night marks the first revelation of the Qur'an, and the surahs (i.e., verses) were taught to Muhammad over a period of about twenty-two years. However, there is some disagreement in Muslim scholarship on exactly what

this process and initial revelation entailed.[4] Gabriel and the holy spirit[5] are typically considered synonymous. Nöldeke explains that "Muhammad claimed to have received his revelations from the divine spirit, روح القدس , الروح (Hebr.) and considered it to be an angel who, in the Medinan sūras, is also called جبريل , Gabriel."[6] Scholars disagree about exactly what are the various types of revelations that Muhammad received, and not all of them refer to Qur'anic revelations.[7] The basic consensus is that the surahs can be divided within the twenty-plus-year period into two general timeframes: those received during the Meccan period and those received during the Medinan period. The Qur'an warns that those who do not believe the message of Muhammad will suffer eternal punishment. If these claims were universally true, it would, of course, be of crucial importance for everyone to pay attention to the claims of the Qur'an to determine whether the Qur'an indeed contains revelation from God.

Inimitability

One of the proofs for inspiration given in the Qur'an and by Muslim scholars is the doctrine of inimitability. This doctrine teaches that the Qur'an is so unique in style and content that no one can produce a writing like it. This doctrine is rooted in Qur'anic teaching in the various "challenge" verses, as they have come to be called.

Table 2. Challenge Verses in the Qur'an

Reference	Verse
2.23	And if ye are in doubt concerning that which We reveal unto Our slave (Muhammad), then produce a surah of the like thereof, and call your witness beside Allah if ye are truthful.

[4] Muslim scholar Mansour Leghaei describes the various views: "In spite of the above evidences, some of the scholars—both from the Shi'a and the Sunni schools—claimed that the Qur'an addition to its gradual revelation has also come down all at once in the Night of Qadr (Decree) in the month of Ramadan. As for the recipient of this type of revelation they are of three different opinions: 1) Those of Sunni school claimed that the entire Qur'an has come down in the Night of Qadr from God to the heaven of this world and from there it has come down to the Prophet (S) gradually over 20 years. The basis of this opinion is a Hadith narrated from Ibn Abbas. 2) Of the Shi'a scholars who merely rely on the Narrations and are known as (al-akhbariyoun: Traditionalists) they claim that the entire Qur'an has come down to al-Baytul-Ma'mour (in the fourth heaven) and from there has come down gradually to the Prophet of Islam (S) over 20 years. The basis of this opinion is also some Narrations. 3) The late Allama Tabatabai while believing in gradual as well as the revelation of the Qur'an all at once asserts that the recipient of the Qur'an in its entire revelation similar to its gradual revelation was the Prophet (S) himself. However, he claims that there is a different reality for the noble Qur'an beyond its present format. The Almighty Allah sent down that 'reality' to the Prophet (S) in the night of Qadr and then throughout twenty three years or so, the detailed Qur'an was gradually revealed to him. The main proof of his eminence is the claim that the Arabic term 'NAZAL' (sent down) if used in the category of 'Ef'al' such as 'Enzal' it means 'sending down all at once' whereas if it is used in the category of 'Taf'eel' it means 'sending down gradually'." *Sciences of the Qur'an ("Uloom al-Qur'an"),* accessed March 17, 2025, https://al-islam.org/sciences-quran-uloom-al-quran-mansour-leghaei/lesson-2-was-holy-quran-sent-down-gradually-and-all#was-quran-revealed-gradually-and-all-once.

[5] The phrase *holy spirit* is in lower case here because the figure spoken of in the Qur'an is significantly different from the third person of the Trinity in Christian theology.

[6] Theodor Nöldeke, et al., *The History of the Qurʾān,* Texts and Studies on the Qur'ān 8, ed. and trans. Wolfganh H. Behn (Boston: Brill, 2013), 17.

[7] Ibid., 18–19.

Reference	Verse
10.38	Or say they: He hath invented it? Say: Then bring a surah like unto it, and call (for help) on all ye can besides Allah, if ye are truthful.
11.13	Or they say: He hath invented it. Say: Then bring ten surahs, the like thereof, invented, and call on everyone ye can beside Allah, if ye are truthful!
17.88	Say: Verily, though mankind and the jinn should assemble to produce the like of this Qur'an, they could not produce the like thereof though they were helpers one of another.
28.49	Say (unto them, O Muhammad): Then bring a scripture from the presence of Allah that giveth clearer guidance than these two (that) I may follow it, if ye are truthful.
52.33–34	Or say they: He hath invented it? Nay, but they will not believe! Then let them produce speech the like thereof, if they are truthful.

The word *surah* used refers to something like a chapter division. However, the surah divisions are, according to the Qur'an, part of the divine revelation. The context of the challenge verses is that the hearers of the Prophet Muhammad questioned whether he had indeed received revelation from God. Islamic scholar Mohammad Elshinawy argues that "the inimitable nature of the Qur'an continues to be the most compelling proof that Muhammad ﷺ was, in fact, the final prophet of God."[8] Elshinawy organizes the nature of inimitability into four aspects: literary features, historical information, preservation, and spiritual power.[9] Other scholars of the Qur'an identify three aspects of inimitability: "the literary, the scientific, and the moral and social."[10] However, the Qur'an itself in these verses is not clear on the exact nature of inimitability. The most natural inference from textual evidence is that inimitability has to do primarily with the actual speech or style of the writing, and indeed most scholars list the literary aspect first, as seen above.

Elshinawy asserts that "whether we consult the highest authorities of the Arabic language in early Arabia or its foremost experts among academics today, there is consensus on the literary uniqueness of the Qur'an."[11] Modern readers of the Qur'an in English or Arabic note the unique and abrupt shifts in topics and the poetic rhyme and meter in the original Arabic. The poetic nature of the Arabic text is incredible considering the fact that Muhammad was illiterate and memorized and recited the text without ever penning any of the text himself or having formal education.[12] Muslims point to this fact as proof of the miracle of inimitability.

Other scholars dispute that uniqueness means a *positive* extraordinary aspect of the text. Nöldeke points out that "the sacred book has not even the artistic form of poetry; which among the Arabs, includes a stringent meter, as well as rhyme. . . . The Muslims themselves have observed that the tyranny of the rhyme often makes itself apparent in derangement of the order of words and in the

[8] Mohammad Elshinawy, *The Inimitable Qur'an: The Revelation to the Prophet Muhammad* (n.p.: Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, n.d.), 2.

[9] Ibid.; Elshinawy provides 15.9 as proof for preservation.

[10] Muhammad Abdullah Draz and Adil Salahi, *The Qur'an : An Eternal Challenge* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2017), 43.

[11] *The Inimitable Qur'an,* 4.

[12] Ibid., 4.

choice of verbal forms which would not otherwise have been employed."[13] These changes include changes in place and people's names to conveniently match rhyme scheme and also insertions of content that are out of context in order to make the rhyme scheme and/or meter flow. These unique literary aspects could point either to divine inspiration or to a recension that forced certain characteristics on the text.

The Arabic Qur'an and Translation

The Qur'an teaches that the nature of the Qur'an is unique also in that its true form is in the Arabic language.[14] One interesting teaching is that the Arabs were the only ones who would believe in Muhammad's message, so Allah sent the Qur'an in Arabic (26.198).

Because the Qur'an is the Word of Allah only in Arabic, any alteration, even translation of the text into another language, corrupts the original words of Allah.[15] The translation may communicate similar meaning but does not constitute the accurate, preserved words of Allah. While some traditions would differ from the strict definition of the spoken Arabic as the actual Qur'an, one common position is that "God's Speech is identical to the Arabic Qur'ān in its sounds, letters, verses, and chapters (as well as other speech God has produced similar to the Qur'ān like the Torah and Gospel). The Qur'ān as speech is a created accident (ʿarad) and does not endure by itself but must inhere in a substrate. This means that the Qur'ān is oral speech essentially and not a physical book or scripture, as conceived in the Sunni tafsīr tradition."[16] In fact, the word *Qur'an* means "recitation." Therefore, the true Qur'an is the one memorized and recited by Muslims so that the recitation accurately preserves the exact "Lecture in Arabic" that Muhammad received from the angel.

Coeternal with Allah or Created?

Another aspect of inspiration is the Qur'anic teaching about the coeternality of the Qur'an with Allah. The Hadith (Muslim history and the sayings of Muhammad) and the Qur'an teach that Muhammad received the Qur'an from the angel Gabriel at a historical moment in time. However, the Qur'an has been understood to teach that the Qur'an is also coeternal with Allah. The Qur'an teaches that Allah possesses the "Source of Decrees," "the mother of the Book," and "a guarded Tablet [of the glorious Qur'an]" (43.4, 85.21, 13.39).

[13] Theodor Nöldeke, "The Koran," in *The Origins of the Koran: Classic Essays on Islam's Holy Book,* ed. Ibn Warraq (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1998), 45.

[14] The Qur'an passages that state this doctrine are as follows: 12.2, 13.37, 16.103, 20.113, 26.195, 39.28, 41.3, 42.7, 43.3, 46.12.

[15] Due to space limitations, treatment of the seven *ahruf* or *harfs* (dialects) of the Arabic Qur'an is not possible. See chapter 6 of Sayyid Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, *Al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, The Prolegomena to the Qur'an,* accessed March 17, 2025, https://al-islam.org/al-bayan-fi-tafsir-al-quran-prolegomena-quran-sayyid-abu-al-qasim-al-khoei/13-quran-created-or.

[16] Khalil Andani, "Revelation in Islam: Qur'ānic, Sunni, and Shiʿi Ismaili Perspectives" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2019), 298.

Theologians from the Ash'arite tradition argue that the Qur'an is uncreated or eternal. For anything to share eternality with Allah would seem to rival his position as the ultimate, one God. Thus, this doctrinal tension has been the source of much debate for Muslim theologians.

Because of this seeming violation of the unity of God, theologians in the Mu'tazilite tradition argue for the created Qur'an.[17] One line of reasoning to explain the doctrinal tension is that the above surahs are referring to the origin of the Qur'an in Allah himself, namely in the characteristic of Allah's justice. In 'Abd al-Jabbar's model, this doctrine is called the "revelatory principle."[18] Scholar Khalil Andani summarizes the major points of the debate and the various theories that have been offered to explain this doctrinal tension:

> As we saw in Chapter 3, the Muʿtazilī theologians Jaʿfar b. Harb and Jaʿfar b. Mubashshir held that the original Qur'ān was created in the Guarded Tablet and what humans recite as Qur'ān is a reproduction (hikāya) and likeness (mithl) of the original Speech of God. The Kullābī and Ashʿarī positions on this issue evolved over time: Ibn Kullāb saw the Arabic Qur'ān as recited, heard, written, and memorized as the impression (rasm), expression (ʿibāra) and recitation (qirā'a) of God's non-verbal eternal Speech; al-Ashʿarī followed him in maintaining that the Arabic Qur'ān as recited, written, and memorized was an expression (ʿibāra) and recitation (qirā'a) of the uncreated Speech of God. . . . al-Bāqillāni and his Ashʿarī successors rejected the concept of ʿibāra as inappropriate but retained the idea of the Arabic Qur'ān as the recitation (qirā'a) of God's Speech.[19]

In all of the views there is some aspect that the Qur'an is possessed by Allah and some aspect that the Qur'an was transmitted from Gabriel to the Prophet. Theologian and scholar Sayyid Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, who was a spiritual leader of the Shia Muslims, explains that "at any rate, what is well established among them is that they regard the speech [*al-kalam* = the Word = the Qur'an] as eternal [even though] . . . as stated earlier, those other than the Ash'arites scholars are in agreement that the Qur'an was created, and that the uttered speech of God is like His primordial commands: They were created by Him and a sign among His signs. No useful purpose is attained from the theological debate on this question."[20] Abu al-Qasim represents a third view in the scholarship that discussion and analysis of this theological question is of no profit. However, that Muslims hold the Qur'an in this high of a regard as far as its connection with the very being of Allah is an important cultural note to keep in mind when discussing the Qur'an with Muslims.

[17] For an excellent and simple summary of the history and points of debate about this issue, see Brother Daniel, "Is Divine Unity Compromised by the Eternality of the Qur'ān?," accessed March 17, 2025, https://ewnetlehulu.net/en/eternality-of-the-quran/.

[18] Andani, 303.

[19] Ibid., 303–304.

[20] *Al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an,* chapter 6.

The Bible as an Inspired Word from God

One common misconception about Muslims is that they reject the Bible as an authoritative spiritual text. While the Qur'an takes priority as God's Word, the Qur'an teaches that the Bible is supposed to be read by Muslims.[21] Because the people who doubt are told to consult the Jews and Christians who "had been reciting the Book before" (10.94–100), it appears that the Bible should confirm everything that the Qur'an asserts. The Qur'an also utilizes a significant amount of material apparently from the Bible. Allah says that he sent the Torah to Moses, the Injil (Gospel) to Jesus, and the Zabur (Psalms) to David. The Torah and Injil are both called "guidance and light" (5.41–53). The word *imam* "guidance" even means a criterion or standard. Jews and Christians are called "People of the Book" (e.g. 3.71) and are expected to believe the message of the Qur'an because of previous revelation that they had received.[22]

Overall, the Qur'anic testimony is very positive about the Torah and Injil and views Muhammad as the final prophet in the long line of prophets accepted by Christians (4.163–165). This fact can be confusing to those from a Christian or Jewish background because it would seem that reading the Gospels especially would contradict the doctrines of Islam and would not be encouraged.

Muslims believe that the manuscripts of the Old and New Testaments were corrupted through copying. Nickel's comprehensive work on this issue reveals that "Muslims believe that somehow, at some time in the past, Jews and Christians 'altered' or 'falsified' the revelations which God gave them, so that their scriptures are now 'corrupted.' The doctrine of scriptural corruption, known in Arabic by

[21] See the verses that address the pre-Islamic Scriptures: 2.75–82, 2.104–110, 3.2–4, 4.163–165, 5.41–53, 5.111–115, 6.154, 10.94–100, 11.17, 28.43–51. Gordon Nickel details the data further (*Narratives of Tampering in the Earliest Commentaries on the Qur'ān,* History of Christian-Muslim Relations, vol. 13 [Leiden: Brill, 2010], 39–40):

"Three particular earlier scriptures are mentioned by name in the Qurʾān: the Tawrāt, the Injīl, and the Zabūr. The names Tawrāt and Injīl first appear at the beginning of the third Sūra, together at Q 3:3. The name Zabūr first appears at Q 4:163.

"The term Tawrāt appears some 18 times in the Qurʾān. It appears six times in the third Sūra and seven times in the fifth Sūra, but not at all in Sūras one, two, four and six. Beyond the fifth Sūra, the word Tawrāt occurs only five times.

"The term Injīl occurs some 12 times in the Qurʾān. The pattern of its occurrence is similar to that of the term Tawrāt: three times in the third Sūra, five times in the fifth Sūra, and beyond the fifth Sūra only four other times. Indeed, in all but two of its occurrences, the term Injīl appears in tandem with Tawrāt.

"The singular noun Zabūr occurs some three times in the Qurʾān. The root *z-b-r* , however, appears a total of 13 times. Its pattern of occurrence is quite different from the other two names of scriptures: in the first five *sūras,* Zabūr appears only once and its plural form only once. The singular Zabūr never appears together with the other two names of scriptures. If [*sic*] fact, it does not even appear in the near contexts of the other names."

[22] "In a series of farmans made to Ismailis living in North America and Europe in 1983, the present Ismaili Imam reminded his community that Christians are the 'People of the Book' (ahl al-kitāb) and that this warrants warm relations between Ismailis and their Christian neighbors. Throughout these farmans, the Aga Khan shared his interpretation of 'the Book' (al-kitāb) as follows: 'The Book is the revelation which Allah has given to man through His Prophets and through the last and final prophet, Prophet Muhammad. That Book is the totality of Allah's revelation to mankind.' It is highly significant that the present Imam of the Nizārī Ismailis understands 'the Book' or al-kitāb as 'the totality of Allah's revelation' or 'the revelation which Allah has given to man' through all of the Prophets, as opposed to discrete physical scriptures like the Bible or Qur'ān. . . . The Aga Khan repeated this idea when asked about the relationship between Islam and other religions in an interview in Syria shortly after the events of September 11: 'Islam is a faith that recognises the preceding monotheistic interpretations, Judaism and Christianity, called the "People of the Book." It is one Book. So for me there is no doubt whatsoever.'" Andani, 739–40.

the term *tahrīf*, is all but ubiquitous in the Muslim world."[23] One would think that since this belief is held so widely by Muslims, the Qur'an would clearly teach this kind of corruption of the pre-Islamic Scriptures. However, the Qur'anic verses on the topic do not clearly say exactly what Scriptures were "corrupted" or what the nature of the change, tampering, or corruption was. This is partially due to the Arabic verb that is used for this idea.

Table 3. Qur'anic Verses on Tampering with the Pre-Islamic Scriptures

References	Topic
2.42, 2.146, 3.71, 21.110, 28.69, 36.76, 64.4	They conceal the truth.
2.79	They write and lie that it is Scripture.
3.78	They "distort the Scripture" and "speak a lie" about God.

As seen in the data here, Nickel explains that "the most frequent action of tampering in the Qur'an is concealing, indicated by the three Arabic verbs *katama*, *akhfā* and *asarra.*"[24] However, in these passages it is unclear who exactly the actors are and what they are doing. Concealing is certainly not the same thing as corrupting. However, the last two passages above are more convincing. But even some Muslim scholars admit this ambiguity in the text. Mahmoud Ayoub writes,

> Contrary to the general Islamic view, the Qur'an does not accuse Jews and Christians of altering the text of their scriptures, but rather of altering the truth which those scriptures contain. The people do this by concealing some of the sacred texts, by misapplying their precepts, or by "altering words from their right position." However, this refers more to interpretation than to actual addition or deletion of words from the sacred books.[25]

One issue with this accusation is that there is no manuscript evidence that the Bible was corrupted in the ways that the Muslims claim. In historical research, primary, eyewitness sources are to be preferred. The Qur'an came hundreds of years after the Torah and the Gospel accounts. And the Qur'an contradicts the Bible on multiple historical points.[26] Unless Muslim scholars can prove with manuscript evidence some sort of systematic corruption of the Old and/or New Testament texts, there seems to be no reason to believe that the Qur'an as a later writing should replace the earlier eyewitness testimony of the Old and New Testaments. The Qur'an's claims about Jesus' death, for example, call

[23] Nickel, 1.

[24] Gordon Nickel, "Interpreting Qur'an Verses on Tampering," accessed March 17, 2025, https://adlucem.co/quran/interpreting-quran-verses-on-tampering-by-dr-gordon-nickel/.

[25] Cited in idem, *Narratives,* 7.

[26] As Nöldeke points out, the reason may be that "there can thus be no doubt that Muḥammad's prime source of information was not the Bible but uncanonical liturgical and dogmatic literature. For this reason the Old Testament stories in the Koran are much closer to Haggadic embellishments than their originals; the New Testament stories are totally legendary and display some common features with the reports of the apocryphal Gospels, e.g., sūras 3:41 and 43 as well as 19:17 with *Evangelium Infantiae,* cap. 1, *Evangelium Thomasi,* cap. 2, and *Nativity of the Virgin,* chapter 9." *History of the Qur'ān,* 6.

into question the validity of any of the historical claims about Jesus. The Gospels' testimony provides eyewitness testimony, while the testimony of Muhammad clearly does not.[27]

In summary, the Muslim view of the inspiration of the Qur'an is that the true, inimitable, and final revelation from God is the Qur'an as recited by the Prophet Muhammad and transmitted to his Companions. This revelation was either created by Allah or coeternal with him in the Arabic tongue. God also revealed truth through the Judeo-Christian Scriptures in the Bible, but these religious groups have distorted understanding of these Scriptures. Upon studying the Muslim doctrines of revelation, several contrasts with the biblical view of revelation and inspiration surface.

First, in contrast to the oral transmission of the Qur'an and contrary to views of some liberal biblical scholars, the revelation of the Bible was not dependent on oral transmission and the memory of man but rather on written records. The human writers of the Old and New Testaments wrote God's words in common human languages as they were "carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 1:20–21). Thus, inspiration applies solely to the autographs of the Scriptures, not to the human writers themselves. In addition, scriptural authority is not limited to one language such as the Qur'an's Arabic. Erickson explains that "here Peter is affirming that the prophecies of the Old Testament were not of human origin. Rather the writers were moved or borne along (φερόμενοι—*pheromenoi*) by the Spirit of God. The impetus that led to the writing was from the Holy Spirit."[28] The Jews at this time considered "the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms" as the Scriptures under the Mosaic Covenant (Luke 24:44–45). God breathed out the OT Scriptures, and the Scripture writers were aware of this work of God as they were writing (Mic 4:4; Amos 3:1; Acts 3:18–21; 2 Sam 23:2). Peter refers to the writings of Paul as Scripture, and John and Paul are conscious of divine authority in their writings (1 John 4:6; Rev 22:18–19; 1 Thess 1:5; 2:13). The Old and New Testaments teach that the written component of the Scriptures of both Testaments is of the utmost importance as adding or taking away from the words of Scripture comes with a great warning (Rev 22:18–19; cf. Matt 5:18).

Second, in contrast to the Qur'anic doctrine of inimitability, the Christian Scriptures often appeal to the fulfillment of prophecy and the performing of miracles, rather than the irreproducibility of the exact style of the literature, as proof of God's revelation. God warns his people of false prophets that "prophesy for personal gain (Mic. 3:5, 11) and tell the people only what they want to hear (1 Kgs. 22:5-13; Jer. 5:31). Their predictions do not come true (1 Kgs. 22:12, 28, 34-35; *cf.* Deut. 18:22); their 'miraculous signs' are inferior or nonexistent (1 Kgs. 18:25-29; but see also Deut. 13:1-2)."[29] In contrast, the predictions of the OT consistently come to pass. For example, Joseph predicted that his bones would be carried out of Egypt (Gen 50:25; cf. Exod 13:19), the prophets predicted that Babylon

[27] It is hard to reconcile that the Qur'an appeals to the Torah and Injil as confirmation of the message of the Qur'an and yet denies the central biblical teachings on Jesus. I would argue for historical problems in the Qur'an's claims about Jesus because of this issue, especially considering the historical impossibilities of the swoon and replacement theories. If one accepts the miracle possibility that Allah could have made it only appear that Jesus was crucified, then the Qur'an's claims on that point could be valid. While I agree that God does have the power to do such a miracle, the implications concerning his character as a deceiver are very troubling.

[28] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology,* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 204.

[29] W. A. Grudem, "Prophecy, Prophets," in *NDBT,* ed. T. Desmond Alexander, et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 706.

would take Israel into exile,[30] and, most notably, many passages anticipated the coming of the Messiah and were fulfilled in Jesus Christ.[31]

Muslims take the prophecy of Moses that a final prophet would come and see its fulfillment in the Prophet Muhammad. Taking the storyline and teaching of the OT in context (Deut. 18:15, 18; cf. Acts 3:22; 7:37), Jesus more clearly fulfills this prophecy as he is from the line of Israel (not of Ishmael like Muhammad) and has also fulfilled the law of Moses (cf. Matt 5:17). Muhammad can make no such claim to fulfillment concerning the law nor the additional claim of Jesus Christ to the Davidic throne (Matt 1:1–17; Acts 2:30). In addition, the miracles of the Old and New Testament prophets and Jesus Christ himself serve as further proof of the revelation they received from God. Moses' signs during the time of the exodus and wilderness wanderings served to validate God's authority and words given through Moses (Deut 4:34–35). The power and authority of Jesus were recognized by the Jews as so powerful that two of the Gospels give testimony that he was confused with the OT prophet Elijah, known for some of the greatest "signs and wonders" of the OT outside of Moses (Matt 16:14; Mark 8:28). Grudem makes the point that the "stories [of Elijah and Elisha's miracles] are echoed in the stories of [Jesus] (*e.g.* Luke 7:15/1 Kgs. 17:23). . . . The miracle stories reveal Jesus as the Son of David, the Son of God, the new Moses who not only teaches but fulfills the hopes of Isaiah 53 and is thus the Messiah in word and deed."[32] The miracles as tangible proofs of the message of prophecy stand in great contrast with the only claim the Qur'an makes concerning its message, that the writing is just "inimitable." Not being able to be imitated pales in comparison with the proofs put forward in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures of the historical predictions that are verifiable in history and the revelation followed by signs and wonders. Though God provides such proofs, Jesus warns that demanding a sign can be wicked and explains that those who believe without seeing (the risen Christ—the greatest miracle of all) are actually more blessed (Mark 8:12; John 20:29).

Finally, in contrast with the doctrine of coeternality of the Qur'an, in biblical teaching the written Word of God is not coeternal with him. However, Christians believe that the entirety of the Scriptures serves to reveal the eternal Son of God, Jesus Christ. Jesus explained as much in a resurrection appearance to the two disciples who were disheartened after his death (Luke 24:27; cf. John 5:39–40, 46). Christ is said to be the Word of God himself (John 1:1–8) indicating further that the purpose of the Scriptures is to speak of him and his salvation to the world. Jesus Christ is the revelation of God the Father and the Word of God, himself coeternal with the Father (Col 1:13–17, 19), but the written word about him, the Scriptures, are not coeternal with the Godhead. At the same time, the plan of salvation as a plan in God's mind was "before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4). The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews sums up the OT law and prophets and explains that though "God . . . at

[30] See 1 Kgs 14:15; 2 Kgs 20:17–18; Isa 39:7; cf. 2 Kgs 24:15–17; Ezra 5:12.

[31] See Luke 24:27–49. Across all four Gospels, the writers reference OT prophecy to explain the events of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection. The connections to the Psalms and the Book of Isaiah are especially notable. See for example, Matt 8:17 and Isa 58:4; Matt 27:35 and Ps 22:18; John 12:38 and Isa 53:1. Helpful studies of this topic include Michael Rydelnik and Edwin Blum, *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy: Studies and Expositions of the Messiah in the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 2019); Robert L. Reymond, *Jesus Divine Messiah: The New and Old Testament Witness* (Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2001).

[32] "Prophecy, Prophets," 776.

sundry times and in divers manners [spoke] in time past unto the fathers by the prophets," he has "in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he [has] appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds" (Heb 1:1–2). Jesus is the final revelation of God to mankind. The OT prophesies of him and explains the history of his people up until his coming. The NT Gospels *manifest* him, Acts *proclaims* him, the epistles *explain* him, and John's Revelation *reveals the consummation* of his plan and person.[33] As shown previously, the Qur'an systematically accuses the Christians of distorting the meaning of the Old and New Testament Scriptures to "associate" Jesus Christ with God. If, however, the Scriptures do not point to Jesus' identity as God and the Messiah he has sent, then the Bible is not about much at all since this theme appears to be the main point. The Bible cannot be considered a conspiracy either for Jesus-worship as the Old and New Testament Scriptures were written by up to forty different authors over some 1,500 years. These aspects considered, the claims of the Qur'an about the Christian Scriptures appear to be a systematic effort to deny the truth about God, Christ, and divine revelation.

Inerrancy

The Qur'an and Inerrancy

Muslims claim that the Qur'an is inerrant because it is Allah's inspired message to mankind, and the Prophet perfectly memorized it for it to be perfectly recorded. It is important to note that Muslims typically speak of the infallibility rather than the inerrancy of the Qur'an. According to Muslim scholar 'Allamah Tabataba`i, infallibility is "the presence of a quality in a person that prevents him from committing any impermissible act such as a sin."[34] Therefore, infallibility refers most clearly to Muhammad as the infallible prophet and the text as an accurate record of his recitation from Allah. The Qur'an refers to itself as the truth from Allah multiple times.[35] Joseph Islam names seven descriptions of the Qur'an from the Qur'anic text: "a clear guidance (huda)," "clear proof (burhan)," "explained in detail (fussilat)," "clear explanation of all things (tiabiana lekulli shayin)," "the ultimate scale—balance (mizaan)," "discernment between truth and falsehood (furqan)," and "evidence absolutely clear (bayyina)."[36] These titles of the Qur'an speak to its claims of ultimate authority and its perfectly truthful nature. However, another scholar explains that

> this theological principle [of infallibility] is firmly based on the attributes of Allah (awj) himself. In particular it is based on His omniscience *('ilm)*, omnipotence *(qudrah)*, the purposefulness of

[33] Adapted from Tommy Nelson, cited in Matt Smethurst, "Your Whole Bible Is About Jesus," The Gospel Coalition, April 22, 2021, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/bible-about-jesus/.

[34] Cited in Ayatullah Mahdi Hadavi Tehrani, *Faith and Reason: A Compendium of Fifty Questions and Answers Related to Islamic Theology, Jurisprudence and Other Themes* (n.p.: The World Federation of KSIMC—Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri Muslim Communities, 2006), n.p.; available at https://al-islam.org/printpdf/book/export/html/9466.

[35] See the following passages: 38.84, 15.64, 43.78, 81.19, 2.147, 3.60, 23.90.

[36] Joseph A. Islam, "How the Quran Describes Itself," accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.quransmessage.com/articles/how%20the%20quran%20describes%20itself%20FM3.htm.

> His actions *(hikmah)*—both in creation and legislation—and in essence, on the fact that He is free from impropriety, injustice, and purposelessness. If a prophet were to make a mistake in receiving or conveying revelation, this mistake would demonstrate either ignorance, weakness, or incompetence in Allah's (awj) actions.[37]

The belief in the infallibility of the Qur'an is rooted most deeply in the character of Allah himself because the Qur'an is his revelation. Therefore, the Qur'an should be completely accurate in matters of science and history and be without contradiction.

A Sampling of Scientific and Historical Errors

Many Muslims find evidence of the inimitability and inerrancy of the Qur'an in what they consider to be amazing scientific accuracy for the limited knowledge at the time of its production. Stefano Bigliardi explains that Dr. Maurice Bucaille popularized this idea, and "the line of interpretation it follows reformulates the traditional doctrine of the formal inimitability of the Qur'ān (*iʿjāz*) in terms of 'scientific inimitability' or 'scientific miraculousness' (*iʿjāz ʿilmī*)."[38] Objections to the inerrancy of the Qur'an include its claims that babies are a clot of blood forming in the mother (Surah 23.14) and that the sun goes down into a hot, muddy spring of water (Surah 18.83–91). Scholars point out that these claims are problematic considering scientific knowledge today. In the case of the bloodclot passage, former Muslim Michael Germi observes that blood does not have generative properties (i.e., it is dead). Thus, whether it is imagery or a literal explanation, babies forming from blood clots does not make sense since blood cannot come to life.[39]

Some Muslim commentators argue that the passage concerning the sun is metaphorical from the point of view of the speaker in that "when Dhu'l Qarnayn reached the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, he saw the sun in that manner, since his vision would not see anything beyond the water. And this is alluded to in His words (Exalted is He), *'He found it setting.'* Allah didn't say, 'It was setting.' Indeed, the sun is in the sky and does not set in the earth."[40] However, the fact that a *sahih* (considered the most authentic *ahadith),* pictures the situation as Muhammad's literal answer to a literal question about where the sun goes seems to refute the suggestion of a metaphorical interpretation of the passage.[41] Therefore, this and other scientific errors in the Qur'an raise troubling questions about the claim that this book is revelation from God.

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[37] Tehrani, n.p.

[38] Stefano Bigliardi, "The 'Scientific Miracle of the Qur'ān,' Pseudoscience, and Conspiracism," *Zygon* 52, no. 1 (2017): 146.

[39] Michael Germi, "Major Errors in the Quran!," accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Luxy1zyGMQ.

[40] "Tafsir of Surah Al-Kahf, Verses 83–101: The Story of Dhu'l Qarnayn," Imam Ghazali Institute, accessed August, 24, 2025, https://www.imamghazali.org/blog/tafsir-surah-al-kahf-verses-83-101-dhul-qarnayn.

[41] See the hadith in question: "Narrated Abu Dharr: I was sitting behind the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) who was riding a donkey while the sun was setting. He asked: Do you know where this sets? I replied: Allah and his Apostle know best. He said: It sets in a spring of warm water (Hamiyah)." "Dialects and Readings of the Qur'an (Kitab Al-Huruf Wa Al-Qira'at)," accessed August 24, 2025, https://sunnah.com/abudawud/32.

The Qur'an also contains historical mistakes. For example, it places Moses with Pharaoh and Haman (Surah 28.38). Haman could not have possibly known Moses and Pharaoh as they lived a thousand years apart: Haman in Persia and Moses in Egypt. Another mistake occurs in Surah 20.95. Moses is said to speak to a Samaritan, yet the Samaritans were not a people group until some 800 years later. Gleason Archer explains that some Muslim scholars attempt to normalize the Arabic term *Samariyyun* as part of ancient Egyptian vocabulary. Nevertheless, "Samaritans did not come into being as a race until after the sixty century B.C., and so there could have been no Samaritan around as early as 1445 B.C.! . . . The word 'Samaritan' appears in standard Arabic dictionaries as *Samariyyu,* spelled exactly the same as it is in this verse of Sura 20. There is no word or name like *Samiriyyu* in the Egyptian lexicon."[42] Many of the anachronistic issues in the Qur'an seem to indicate that Muhammad had a general but still confused knowledge of the Old and New Testament books. Religious studies scholars Kaltner and Frechette conclude from their analysis that "the Qur'an generally reflects some awareness of narrative biblical traditions. It presents them for its own purposes by highlighting certain details or introducing details lacking in the biblical narrative. . . . Sometimes this indicates an effort to make the story more Islamic."[43]

Archer points out various additional problems with Qur'anic retellings of biblical narratives. In Surah 12.21–32 for example, Joseph goes to jail but it is not clear why since, unlike in the biblical account, Potiphar's wife admits publicly that her charges against Joseph were false.[44] In Surah 2.249, the account of Gideon's having his army drink from the river (Judges 7) is applied to Saul instead.[45]

One of the most confusing issues is the identity of Mary in the Qur'an. It appears there may be a conflation between Miriam the sister of Moses and Mary the mother of Jesus as both names are *maryam* in Arabic. In Surah 66.12, Mary the mother of Jesus is named as "the daughter of Imran [Hebrew Amram]," who is named as the father of Moses, Miriam, and Aaron in the OT (Num 26:59). Interestingly, Mary is said to also be married to a man named Imran (Surah 3.35). The biblical account explains that Mary is married to Joseph, and they are both of the tribe of Judah (Matt 1:16; cf. Luke 3:23–82). Archer emphasizes that "Jesus' [earthly] mother and father both descended from Judah and not from Levi (as Amram and Miriam did)" as the Qur'an suggests by conflating Miriam with Mary.[46] From a Christian understanding, the change in lineage from Judah to Levi is an alarming attack on Jesus' claim to the Davidic throne and thus an essential part of his Messiahship. This doctrinal change about Jesus specifically appears to be more than just confusion. Even scholars Kaltner and Frechette point out that the "Qur'an does something regarding [Jesus] that it does not do in its interpretation of Hebrew Bible characters and stories—it flatly denies central Christian beliefs about Jesus."[47]

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[42] Gleason L. Archer Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction,* rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 465.

[43] John Kaltner and Christopher G. Frechette, *How the Qur'an Interprets the Bible: Comparing Islamic, Jewish, and Christian Scriptures* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2020), 8–10.

[44] Archer, 463.

[45] Ibid., 464.

[46] Ibid.

[47] *How the Qur'an Interprets the Bible,* 13.

Chronology and Abrogation

Some object to the inerrancy of the Qur'an because of passages that contradict each other. Muslims explain these contradictions with the doctrine of abrogation. In Surah 2, Allah says that he will replace abrogated (i.e., cancelled) verses with better ones (Surah 2.106). The passages on abrogation often appeal to Allah's omniscience and omnipotence in connection with vindicating this doctrine and Muhammad's message (Surah 13.39; 6.38; 16.101). The latest verse chronologically abrogates any former revelation.

One significant example is the "satanic verses" in the Qur'an. The passage teaches that Muslims should appeal to three pagan goddesses instead of Allah, clearly contradicting the monotheism of Islam (53.19–25), and in Surah Hajj it is revealed to Muhammad that the verses were given by Satan instead (22.52–53). This incident is complicated for Islam, considering Islamic teaching on the infallibility of the prophets. Muslim scholarship teaches that "some verses describe a number of the prophets as *mukhlasin* (those who have been purified). For example, see 38.45–48. In these verses, one who is *mukhlas* is one who has not been and cannot be misguided by Satan."[48] The facts that the Qur'an claims that Muhammad was infallible (33.33) and that he was able to be influenced by Satan call into question Muhammad's infallibility and therefore the infallibility of the entire Qur'an, whether or not this section was abrogated in Surah 22.52–53.

Another example is Qur'anic teaching on Jews and Christians. The Qur'an teaches that "the believers, Jews, Christians, and Sabians—whoever truly believes in Allah and the Last Day and does good will have their reward with their Lord" (2.62). However, after this text chronologically, the reader is told that "whoever seeks a way other than Islam, it will never be accepted from them, and in the Hereafter they will be among the losers" (3.85). In other words, if a person is not a Muslim (confesses the *shahada* and submits), he will not go to heaven. But the final passage chronologically (5.69) reverts almost word for word to the first statement in 2.62. Thus, the Qur'an contradicts itself in teaching that only Muslims go to heaven and that non-Muslims can also go to heaven.

This kind of issue causes doubt about the ability to trust the commands and theology in the Qur'an, especially considering that different scholars date the surahs and their sections differently. In his in-depth study of four major chronology lists of the surahs, Zwemer found that "by actual count there were sixty-five among a hundred and fourteen possible instances where *two* agreed. There were only five instances where three agreed on the order of certain chapters. There were forty-five instances where all disagreed, *and there was not a single instance where all were agreed* as to the place of a Surah in chronological order."[49] Abrogation depends on accurate knowledge of the chronology of the surahs, and the fact that there is no authoritative chronology calls into question not only abrogation but also the infallibility of the Qur'an in general. Additionally, abrogation extends to the accepted Hadiths because of the Qur'anic command to obey the example of Muhammad (24.54). Thus, the traditions of the Hadiths must also be factored in when making final determinations of Islamic doctrine.

[48] Tehrani, n.p.

[49] Samuel M. Zwemer, *The Moslem Christ: An Essay on the Life, Character, and Teachings of Jesus Christ according to the Koran and Orthodox Tradition* (New York: American Tract Society, 1919), 42–43.

Textual Transmission of the Qur'an

In contrast with their claims about the corruption of the Bible, Muslims claim the inerrant transmission of the Qur'an—from Muhammad's perfect memorization of every part of the Arabic message from God to the perfect recording of that memorized word as Muhammad dictated the message to his companions. The main Qur'anic verse that supports the idea of perfect preservation of the Qur'an is 15.9: "Lo! We, even We, reveal the Reminder, and lo! We verily are its Guardian." Allah himself is supposed to have perfectly preserved the Qur'an.

The history of the transmission of the Qur'an certainly calls into question the reliability of the text. Muhammad himself apparently did not write the Qur'an or even a succession plan for after his death. The first caliph after Muhammad was Abu Bakr, whose daughter Aisha was the favored wife of Muhammad. Under Bakr's leadership, battles continued with those that opposed Islam. A man named Umar had been a companion of the Prophet, and one tradition says that "Umar, who himself was to succeed to the caliphate in 634, became worried at the fact that so many Muslims who had known the Koran by heart were killed during the Battle. . . . There was real danger that parts of the Koran [would be lost]."[50] So with Bakr's approval Umar commissioned another companion of Muhammad, Zaid, to collect bits of the Qur'an from random written scraps and from the memories of those he could ask.[51] Various scholars question this account, however, arguing that the story about compilation under Abu Bakr was contrived to utilize the saintly reputation of Abu Bakr in order to make the recension under Uthman, the third caliph, look like a copying of the Zaid/Bakr copy.[52]

In any case, the major recension of the Qur'an did take place under Uthman's leadership. The result was one standardized version, but the loss of the other textual witnesses since all variant forms were gathered and burned. To Nöldeke

> it . . . seems . . . highly probable that this second redaction took this simple form: Zaid read off the codex which he had previously written, and his associates, simultaneously or successively, wrote one copy each to his dictation. These, I suppose, were the three copies which we are informed, were sent to the capitals Damascus, Basra, and Kufa, to be in the first instance standards for the soldiers of the respective provinces. A fourth copy would doubtless be retained at Medina. Be that as it may, it is impossible now to distinguish in the present form of the book what belongs to the first redaction from what is due to the second.[53]

Whatever the process, "there are sufficient reasons for believing that the Koran as we have it today, though not necessarily falsified in any vicious sense, at any time, does not represent the *ipsissima verba* of Muhammad."[54]

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[50] Ibn Warraq, "Introduction," in *Origins of the Koran,* 11.

[51] Ibid.

[52] See ibid., 11–13; Leone Caetani, "'Uthman and the Recension of the Koran," in *Origins of the Koran*, 75.

[53] Nöldeke, "The Koran," 57.

[54] These are the words of R. F. McNeile in *Origins of the Koran,* 67, in summarizing Leone Caetani, "'Uthman and the Recension of the Koran," in *Origins of the Koran,* 67–75.

The belief in perfect preservation of the Qur'anic text depends on belief in the perfect memory of Muhammad, which at times appears to have failed him.[55] But according to the comprehensive manuscript study of Keith Small, "the available sources do not provide the necessary information for reconstructing the original text of the Qur'an from the time of Muhammad."[56] Therefore, the claim of an unbroken version going back to Muhammad is not tenable. This doctrine also depends on the complete and inerrant gathering of sources by Zaid, Umar, and Uthman. There was no master manuscript from Muhammad to work from. Rather, according to Islamic scholar Alphose Mingana, "it is quite possible . . . that the only source which Zaid had for the greater part of the text was 'the hearts of men' and some scattered scraps of parchment."[57] In addition, the Qur'an seems to suggest that there was corruption of the recitation even while Muhammad was alive.[58] How is anyone to know that none of those corrupted parts made their way into the final recension? One might suggest checking manuscript records, but unfortunately there are no manuscript records before Uthman to check. And it appears Uthman wanted it that way. Thus, the complicated textual transmission of the Qur'an calls into question the infallibility of the record of the text.

The Bible and Inerrancy

Like Muslim scholars, Bible scholars make the appeal for inerrancy as a deductive argument from the doctrine of inspiration and the nature of God. If God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and completely truthful and the writing in question is a record of his inspired revelation, it follows that this writing will also exhibit complete truthfulness. However, biblical scholars land on a spectrum between full/unlimited inerrancy and partial/limited inerrancy. Because there is great variation in Christian belief about inerrancy due to perceived contradictions and/or inaccurate information in the Bible,[59] in the 1970s the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy was formed, and it produced a summary statement on the doctrine of inerrancy:

[55] "In some instances, indeed, he may have relied too much on his memory. For example, he seems to have occasionally dictated the same sura to different persons in slightly different terms." Nöldeke, "The Koran," 40.

[56] *Textual Criticism and Qur'an Manuscripts* (Lanham: Lexington, 2011), 183. See chapter 12 of this work for a complete description of the stages of textual development of the Qur'an.

[57] "Three Ancient Korans," in *Origins of the Koran,* 84.

[58] "If we understand correctly the following verse of Suratul-Hijr (xv. 90-91): 'As we sent down upon (punished) the dividers (of the Scripture?) who broke up the Koran into parts,' we are tempted to state that, even when the Prophet was alive, some changes were noticed in the recital of certain verses of his sacred book. There is nothing very surprising in this fact, since Muhammad could not read nor write, and was at the mercy of friends for the writing of his revelations, or, more frequently, of some mercenary amanuenses." Ibid.

[59] Erickson defines inerrancy as "the doctrine that the Bible is fully truthful in all of its teachings" (189). He goes on to explain that the term *infallibility* has also been applied to the Bible as a sort of limited belief in the truthfulness of Scripture: "'infallibility' has in recent years been used as an alternative to 'inerrancy,' meaning in some usages that the Bible was not necessarily accurate in all of its factual references, but that it accomplished the divine purpose [i.e., is accurate in redemptive truths only]." I take the "full inerrancy" approach described by Erickson: though the Bible "does not primarily aim to give scientific and historical data, such scientific and historical assertions as it does make are fully true" (191).

> Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms: obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises. . . . Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives. . . . The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded.[60]

God's nature demands that his revelation be fully truthful, including on matters of science and history. Too many theologians sadly limit or disregard inerrancy because of perceived contradictions or perceived inaccurate scientific information. It has been clearly demonstrated time and again, however, that believers do not have to redefine the truth of Scripture in order to remain intellectually and logically satisfied, no matter what questions and arguments scholars push into the conversation.

Even though inerrancy is most clearly grounded in the doctrine of inspiration and the character of God, the doctrine is also drawn from direct statements in the Old and New Testaments about the nature of God's revelation.[61] Jesus calls the Word of God the "truth" that sanctifies believers (John 17:17–19). Belief in the truthfulness of God's Word is what sets God's people apart (sanctifies them) from the world, and Jesus himself appeals to the unbreakable (i.e., completely reliable) nature of the Scriptures as the basis of his argument and the reason that the Jews should believe in him (John 10:35). The Psalms describe the revelation of God as "perfect," "sure," "right," "pure," and "true and righteous altogether" (Ps 19:7–9). A number of times the words of God are spoken of as "pure" (**צרף** and **בַּר** 2).[62] The first term has the idea of trustworthiness demonstrated after trial under intense pressure, like a precious metal. The second means faultlessness or guiltlessness.[63]

Regarding the nature of inerrancy, the biblical claims are similar to those of the Qur'an except in terms of the described effect on believers. As discussed previously, the claims of the truthfulness of the Qur'an focus almost completely on the truthfulness of the words and the responsibility of the hearers to respond. Yet the Bible's testimony to itself also speaks of the transforming power of God's words to fulfill the needs of every person (Ps 19:6) and to provide sure guidance for life because of the

[60] "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy with Exposition," accessed August 24, 2025, https://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html.

[61] Without entering into a complex discussion of epistemology, this paper assumes that truth is knowable, that God has revealed truth about himself and the universe that is knowable by mankind, and that God holds people eternally accountable for the knowledge he has given even through general revelation (Rom 1:18–21). Every person not only *can* know but *does* know the truth about God already. Each person "holds [suppresses this] truth in unrighteousness" (v. 18).

[62] **צרף** in 2 Sam. 22:31; Ps 17:31 (MT); Ps 119:140; and Prov 30:5. **בַּר** 2 in Ps 19:8.

[63] *The Lexham Research Lexicon* defines **צרף** as "to be worthy of trust or belief, conceived of as being refined or pure." Rick Brannan, *Lexham Research Lexicon of the Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), s.v. "**צרף**." The definition given for **בַּר** 2 is as follows: "having no faults [or] . . . in a state of ritual cleanliness or free of guilt and sin." Ibid., s.v. "**בַּר** 2."

trustworthiness of God (Deut 32:4; Isa 25:1; Ps 40:11), and the focus of this testimony is on belief in Jesus Christ in the NT (John 1:14; 8:45; Eph 4:21).[64]

The claim of biblical inerrancy is sound as long as there is no error found in the Old and New Testaments, right? But it is important to define what is an "error." Geisler defines "error" as "something that is logically contradictory or else that does not correspond to the facts of the matter." But he qualifies the definition in that "as long as it is *possible* that the original text did not have an error, it would not be *necessary* to give up inerrancy. Furthermore, the error would have to be more than an alleged or apparent one; it would have to be an *actual* error. This means there are no *possible* explanations for the alleged error."[65] The previously cited anachronisms and contradictions in the Qur'an match this definition of error as there is no provable record back to the original manuscripts, and the only explanation of many contradictions is the convenient doctrine of abrogation.

But it is a legitimate question whether the Bible holds up to the same scrutiny. For example, parallel passages sometimes have differing details or apparent contradictions such as the case of the different wordings of the sign above the cross.[66] These kinds of discrepancies are usually not difficult to explain, however. Henry Morris explains that "John tells us (19:20) there were three inscriptions, in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, and it is possible they were each slightly different since the essential statement in each case would be simply 'The King of the Jews.' . . . Matthew would be likely to record the Hebrew inscription, Mark the Latin, and John the Greek. . . . Luke perhaps combined them."[67] These differing ways of recording the inscription provide a plausible explanation of the differences in the texts.

Another example of apparent contradiction in the NT is whether Jesus told the disciples to take nothing except a staff (Mark 6:8–9) or *not* take a staff at all (Matt 10:10 and Luke 9:3). Since this more clearly exhibits logical contradiction (A and not A simultaneously), the difficulty is more alarming. Ahern suggests various linguistic harmonizations of the text by "correction of the text by double interpretation of the two commands."[68] The verb in Matthew has the primary sense of acquisition, but the verb in Mark communicates retention. Thus, in the Luke and Matthew accounts, Christ is telling the disciples to buy nothing new for the journey, and in the Mark passage he is saying the same thing and telling them to use what staff they may already have. In any case, taking a staff or not on one journey of the apostles is nothing compared to the contradiction in the Qur'an about whether Christians will be included in those accepted into heaven or not, for example.

Some of the most troubling difficulties in the biblical text are the chronology and number reporting in the OT. For example, Erickson explains that "Stephen's chronology of the Israelites' stay

[64] Even a brief survey of the word *truth* in the KJV of the NT reveals that the word refers almost exclusively to belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[65] Norman L. Geisler, "Biblical Inerrancy, Inductive or Deductive Basis: A Response to William Lane Craig," in *Vital Issues in the Inerrancy Debate*, ed. F. David Farnell, et al. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 171.

[66] Matthew 27:37: "This is Jesus the King of the Jews." Mark 15:26: "The King of the Jews." Luke 23:38: "This is the King of the Jews." John 19:19: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

[67] Morris, *Many Infallible Proofs: Practical and Useful Evidences of Christianity* (San Diego: Christian Life, 1974), 226.

[68] Barnabas Ahern, "Staff or No Staff?," *CBQ* 5, no. 3 (1943): 332–37.

in Egypt (they were enslaved for four hundred years—Acts 7:6) does not coincide with the account in Exodus. . . . In parallel passages, 2 Samuel 10:18 speaks of 700 chariots where 1 Chronicles 19:18 has 7,000."[69] It is important, however, not to apply modern standards of data reporting to the ancient text. As Erickson points out, people make approximations in normal speech on a regular basis. On this principle, he argues that people should judge the assertions of the Bible "in accordance with the purpose for which they were written. . . . If the report is an official military document an officer is to submit to a superior, the number must be exact. That may be the only way to ascertain whether there were any deserters. If, on the other hand, the account is simply to give some idea of the size of the battle, then a round number like 10,000 is adequate, and in this setting is correct."[70] In the example above with the discrepancy of 700 and 7,000, the answer may be as simple as William Arndt explains, that it is likely due to "the error of a scribe, who specially if letters were used as numerals could easily write seven thousand instead of seven hundred, or vice versa."[71] Works such as Arndt's provide helpful scholarship to address such difficulties, and most are not difficult to explain given an appreciation for the context of each biblical passage in view.[72]

The issue of scribal errors raises the question of textual transmission of the Old and New Testament Scriptures. While treatment of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper, some comparisons with the Qur'anic textual transmission history demonstrate the superiority of the biblical text's claim to be true revelation from God. First, the biblical textual tradition demonstrates careful scribal work to accurately and precisely transmit the Scriptures from the beginning of their writing. Rooker explains that

> the variant readings that do exist [in the OT] are certainly not so numerous as to destroy the text's credibility. On the whole the incidents of scribal errors are very few. Ninety percent of the texts contain no variants, and none affects any doctrinal issue. . . . The same kind of variants we observe today existed in the first century, and yet Christ and the apostles did not waver in their clear affirmation of the authority of Scripture.[73]

In contrast with the Qur'an, careful documentation rather than oral tradition transmitted the OT text. In addition, there are so many copies of manuscripts and such careful records of textual errors that mistakes can be tracked down through comparative study of the manuscripts. For this reason, the

[69] Erickson, 198.

[70] Ibid., 204.

[71] William Arndt, *Does the Bible Contradict Itself? A Discussion of Alleged Contradictions in the Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955), 34.

[72] For other helpful resources on this topic, see Gleason L. Archer Jr., *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011); Walter C. Kaiser Jr., et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010); and Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).

[73] Mark F. Rooker, "The Transmission and Textual Criticism of the Old Testament," in Eugene H. Merrill, Mark F. Rooker, and Michael A. Grisanti, *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H, 2011), 109–110.

variant manuscripts are a healthy part of the biblical textual transmission rather than a liability. Such comparative study of the Qur'an meets a point of impossibility because of the destruction of all variant manuscripts by Uthman mentioned previously. In contrast, Rooker points out that "scribes are mentioned as early as the time of David and Solomon as part of the royal chanceries (2 Sam 8:16–18; 1 Kgs 4:1-6)." More specifically, Israelite scribes "indicated errors by dotting letters above the script or alternatively they made corrections in the margin. Their main task was to preserve the text by faithfully copying the Hebrew manuscripts."[74] The preservation of the original text was of ultimate priority, and the scribes left a paper trail so that a reconstruction of the text remained possible.

The testimony of the NT textual tradition is equally impressive. Carson and Moo counter the view that "there was a long period of oral tradition before anything substantial about Jesus or the early church was written down. The evidence is against such a stance: the world into which Jesus was born was highly literate."[75] The Gospels of Matthew and John were written by apostles who were eyewitnesses of Jesus and the events of his life.[76] Luke interviewed eyewitnesses and took pains to explain that he carefully documented these accounts (Luke 1:1–2). Though "most early Christian copies of the New Testament were doubtless done by laypeople . . . of all the works that have come down to us from the ancient world, the New Testament is the most amply attested in textual evidence."[77] Whereas an unbroken chain of manuscript tradition going back to Muhammad for the Qur'an is unavailable, the overwhelming amount of manuscripts provide what is needed to reconstruct the original biblical text.

Conclusion

Christian students find Islamic revelatory claims very distinct from the biblical narrative. Muhammad asserts that he received a revelation from God that is inimitable, a recitation in Arabic and coeternal with Allah. Muslim scholarship is diverse in its interpretation of the surahs and agrees that the text is often vague. The pre-Islamic Scriptures are supposed to confirm the Qur'an. However, the differences in accounts of major events and doctrinal points make a reconciliation between the two difficult unless corruption of the pre-Islamic Scriptures can be substantiated. The Qur'an claims that its words and the prophets are infallible, but there are various historical, scientific, and textual issues that cause doubt about these claims. Because of these issues, Allah appears to contradict himself at will. And the fact that a large portion of the Qur'an deals with a reinterpretation of the pre-Islamic Scriptures and lacks evidence of biblical corruption seems to indicate that perhaps the Qur'an is the source "concealing" the truth of the earlier revelation.

The Bible presents mankind with a fundamentally different religious idea than the works-based religions of the world, including Islam. The library of the two Testaments testifies of its divine inspiration to tell the story of the salvation of mankind through the Messiah and Son of God, Jesus

[74] Ibid., 115.

[75] D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 24.

[76] Ibid., 140–49 and 229–30.

[77] Ibid., 26.

Christ. The manuscript tradition presents a remarkable wealth of knowledge to reconstruct the original text and faithfully communicate a record of the message of the original. Has God spoken through Muhammad? Muhammad may have spoken on God's behalf, but that does not mean he spoke at God's request. God has spoken in these last days through his Son, Jesus Christ.

A Proverb in the Hand Is Worth Two in the Bush: A Hermeneutical Proposal for Handling Biblical Proverbs

by Layton Talbert[1]

It is a truism to say that a cardinal theme of the book of Proverbs is wisdom. After all, the word appears in the collection 118 times in all its forms; that's approximately once every eight verses on average. The contrast in Proverbs between the *wise* (חָכָם, 41x) and the *fool* (כְּסִיל, 49x) echoes throughout the collection.[2] But another, less noticed emphasis also runs through the book. A major theme pervading the Book of Psalms—the running contrast between the *righteous* (צַדִּיק, 46x)[3] and the *wicked* (רָשָׁע, 81x)—dominates Proverbs as well. In fact, the contrast in Proverbs between the *righteous* (צַדִּיק, 64x) and the *wicked* (רָשָׁע, 77x) is essentially *tripled* over what one finds in Psalms, since Psalms (2,641 verses) is nearly three times the size of Proverbs (915 verses).[4] The assumption that Psalms juxtaposes the *righteous* and the *wicked* whereas Proverbs primarily juxtaposes the *wise* and the *foolish* is inaccurate; the sages of Proverbs value wisdom over foolishness, but the contrast between the *righteous* and the *wicked* predominates in Proverbs even *more* than in the Psalms.

A proverb, however, is a very different kind of literary animal than a psalm, or a command, or a letter, or a historical narrative pericope. And just as laws of nature govern the behavior of natural animals, laws of literature govern the behavior of literary animals. A proverb is a distinctive species of literature, so our exploration of this topic needs to begin there, however generally and briefly.

Biblical Wisdom

The English word *wisdom* has a fairly narrow range of customary usage focusing primarily on intellectual aptitude.[5] Usage of the Hebrew terms (חָכְמָה, חָכָם) demonstrates that biblical wisdom has less to do with intellectual aptitude and more to do with practical aptitude. It involves the application of theory to practice to describe *adeptness, proficiency, skill* in whatever area is under consideration in the context.[6] As such, biblical

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[2] Other words, of course, descriptively designate both of these categories; but these are the primary terms for the two kinds of people set in opposition to one another.

[3] Again, other words also describe both of these categories, but these are the major terms. Also, the frequencies noted include only references to people, not God.

[4] I.e., on average, צַדִּיק occurs once every fifty-seven verses in Psalms versus once every fourteen verses in Proverbs (4x as frequently); רָשָׁע occurs once every thirty-three verses in Psalms versus once every twelve verses in Proverbs (2.75x as frequently).

[5] The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists two primary senses: (1) soundness of judgment, and (2) knowledge or enlightenment. "Wisdom"; accessed October 24, 2025, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/wisdom_n?tab=meaning_and_use#14118620.

[6] Those areas can be quite diverse: textile craftsmanship (Exod 35:30–33), social craftiness (2 Sam 13:3), play-acting talent (2 Sam 14:2), diplomacy (2 Sam 20:16, 22), tactical warfare (Isa 10:13), sailing and ship-caulking (Ezek 27:8–9), and even such unlikely activities as snake-charming (Ps 58:4–5), professional funerary mourning (Jer 9:17–18), and doing evil (Jer 4:22). This

wisdom is not a matter of genetic material or innate IQ; it is learned, and increases with practice and experience—and that is good news for all of us. Put simply, proverbial wisdom is *skill at living life in the presence of God.* That's why Waltke can say, "A person could memorize the book of Proverbs and still lack wisdom, if it did not affect his heart, which informs behavior."[7]

Wisdom Literature[8]

Wisdom literature is a unique, ancient, diverse, and culturally ubiquitous literary genre with its own rules of interpretation. It constitutes "a family of literary genres common in the Ancient Near East (ANE) in which instructions for successful living are given or the perplexities of human existence are contemplated."[9] Two characteristics set biblical wisdom literature apart from its contemporary ANE expressions: (1) the biblical worldview that informed the thinking of its authors was shaped by a unique divine revelation—particularly the Pentateuch, along with other early historical writings—that made them who they were; and (2) concursive inspiration, which set down God's thoughts through their pens. "God used the sage's keen observations of creation and humanity and his cogent reflections upon them, informed by faith in Israel's covenant-keeping God, to produce the wisdom literature" of the Bible.[10]

"The wisdom literature in Scripture is similar to extrabiblical wisdom literature in many ways, but unlike" the wisdom literature of other cultures, biblical wisdom is rooted in "the conviction that 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'" (Job 28:28; Ps 111:10; Prov 9:10; Eccl 12:13).[11] Biblical wisdom literature, in

flexibility explains how Solomon can depict "wisdom" in such contrasting terms. On the one hand, he counsels, "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore, get wisdom" (Prov 4:7); on the other, he bemoans that "in much wisdom is much grief" (Eccl 1:18). The common denominator is a certain kind of skill, but what explains the apparent contradiction is context. The former is primarily theological/sociological/practical skill in its contextual coloring; the latter is predominantly philosophical and investigative skill in its orientation.

[7] Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 1:77.

[8] The label "wisdom literature" as denoting a definitive literary genre in the Bible has been recently reweighed in the scales and found wanting by some. See Will Kynes, *An Obituary for "Wisdom Literature": The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). Kynes identifies German theologian Johann Bruch (1758–1828) as the first to use this label to denote Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes as a discrete literary genre. Kynes's historical investigation is eye-opening and his proposal revolutionary—that the genre label "wisdom literature" should be abandoned and that we learn to view these books as a mixture of multiple genres with intertextual connections that reach far beyond each other to many other biblical sections and genres. I am, however, not entirely convinced of his proposal in all its ramifications. As long as one maintains an awareness of the broad intertextual connections of these books across the entire span of Scripture and avoids viewing them in isolation from the rest of the canon, one can avoid the major pitfalls that Kynes critiques and yet still see major formal and thematic affinities between these three books in distinction from most others.

[9] D. A. Hubbard, "Wisdom Literature," *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. I. Howard Marshall, et al. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1996), 1245.

[10] Waltke, 1:55. In the specific case of Solomon, of course, an additional dynamic was the unique endowment of divine wisdom (1 Kgs 4:29–34).

[11] John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2015), 1; cf. 51. The language of *fearing Yahweh* occurs at least seventeen times in Proverbs, far more than any other biblical book. John A. Kitchen notes that "while the words of Proverbs may, at times, sound very much like those of other ancient wisdom writings, the underlying essence of them is fundamentally different. The 'fear of the Lord' is the beginning—the first principle—of all wisdom (Prov. 1:7; 9:10). The writings of the nations establish no such moral, spiritual, and ethical foundation to their wisdom." *Proverbs* (Ross-shire, Great Britain:

other words, is not grounded in human intelligence or ingenuity or observation; it is grounded in and bounded by a specific worldview context, particularly the theology of the Pentateuch. "Pagan wisdom, though it, too, may be religious, has no anchor in the covenant God."[12] This rooting of biblical wisdom in the relational language of fearing Yahweh actually establishes "wisdom as a relationship"[13] with this covenant God; therein lies both its uniqueness and the necessary context for interpreting and applying it.

> Proverbs' similarity to pagan literature is part and parcel of Scripture's incarnation within its historical milieu. Its theological significance does not depend on the originality of its individual sentences or sayings. . . . The theological significance of the OT rests rather on the connection of all its literature with the LORD, the God of Israel. The theological significance of Proverbs lies in its affirmation that the LORD brought "wisdom" into existence, revealed it to humanity, and, as Guarantor, upholds its revealed moral order.[14]

It is that scriptural worldview lens on life that lends biblical wisdom its theological significance and distinctive authority. The similarities—in both form and even occasionally sentiment—between biblical wisdom literature and contemporary pagan wisdom literature[15] do not undermine its value or authority. Since the fall, pagan philosophy has had to poach many of its ideas from the King's forest.[16] That more accurately explains similarities between biblical and other ANE laws, stories, or wisdom tropes, rather than biblical writers borrowing ideas from their pagan neighbors. Being as wise as he is recorded to have been, Solomon most certainly would have displayed a keen interest in ANE wisdom literature; wise men do not isolate themselves from the wisdom of others.[17] But we are also informed that Solomon's wisdom schooled the sages of the surrounding nations (1 Kgs 4:34), who surely learned and borrowed from him.

Mentor, 2006), 14. Cf. also Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2017), 92–93.

[12] Hubbard, 1244.

[13] Tremper Longman III, "Proverbs, Book of" in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry, & Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 549.

[14] Waltke, 1:66. Likewise, House: "This insistence on the one God who reveals wisdom distinguishes Israelite thinking from that of its ancient counterparts. . . . The forms of the literature are similar to those of other nations, but the most important detail, Yahweh as its only stated source, is not." Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1998), 449.

[15] See, e.g., Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1964), 16–21; cf. Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985), 125–41.

[16] The only way for the unbeliever to make sense of life and function in a reality created by a God whom he knows but suppresses (Romans 1) is by adopting principles and procedures that may not logically coalesce with the rest of his unbelieving worldview.

[17] "That Solomon knew of, and appreciated, such writings appears quite likely (1 Kings 4:29–31). Israel's physical location placed her at the crossroads of trade routes between Mesopotamia and Egypt, a fact that heightens the likelihood of not only shared commerce but intellectual and cultural pursuits as well. . . . Solomon's court had an international flair to it. . . . Therefore, given Solomon's appetite for wisdom and the comparisons that exalt him above neighboring wise men (1 Kings 4:30), it seems certain that he knew of, studied, and was influenced by these foreign wisdom writings." Kitchen, 12.

Types of Wisdom Literature

Wisdom literature is innately poetic (in a broad sense), with all the challenges of the typically terse language that characterizes most poetry. The exegetical rules of the game are shaped not only by the poetic form but also by how proverbs are designed to work and what they are meant to do. Not all wisdom literature is proverbial in form, however.[18] Some is *reflective* or investigative in character—discourses that explore the enigmas of life and faith, ponder the meaning of existence, or probe the nature of the relationship between God and man. This reflective wisdom may take the form of extended *monologues* (e.g., Eccl 1–6, 7b–9, 11b–12)[19] or even *dialogues* (e.g., Job 4–27). The other major kind of wisdom literature is *proverbial* or aphoristic in nature—brief, terse, pithy sayings that articulate principles for welfare and success (e.g., Eccl 7a, 10a, and 11a; Prov 10–29).[20] It is their self-contained terseness—usually expressed without the benefit of explanation, qualification, or context—that can often make them challenging to decipher.

Within the book of Proverbs, however, interpreters further differentiate between two forms of expression. *Admonition* is "characterized by the imperative and second-person form of direct address (Prov 1–9; 22:17–24:22; 31:1–9)" and may be stated either positively (command) or negatively (prohibition).[21] *Wisdom sayings*

[18] The categories described in this paragraph are drawn from Hubbard, 1245. I have, however, substituted Hubbard's term *speculative* with the word *reflective,* which carries less conceptual baggage than *speculative.* Hubbard clarifies that "this speculative wisdom is practical and empirical, not theoretical"—which, oddly, is precisely what *speculative* implies.

[19] Ecclesiastes is a heterogenous mixture of reflective and proverbial wisdom literature, only more so. Qoheleth frequently inserts isolated or grouped proverbial observations into larger sections of more contemplative, first-person, reflective wisdom.

[20] For the sake of simplicity, I use Prov 10–29 as shorthand to refer to the "proverbial" segment of Proverbs. More precisely, however, the "proverbs" proper appear in Proverbs 10:1–22:16 and chapters 25–29. The material in 22:17–24:34 is immediately distinguished by the multiplicity of 1MS pronouns of direct address to the reader (22:17–21; 23:15–19; 23:26ff; 24:13ff; 24:21ff; 24:30–34), which occur dozens of times in chapters 1–9 but disappear until 22:17ff (with the sole exception of 19:27; cf. 27:11). Similarly, the expression of direct address ("my son") that peppers chapters 1–9 (15x) likewise disappears until 22:17–24:34 (6x), again, with the sole exception of 19:27 (cf. 27:11). If Proverbs 1–9 functions as a prologue to the collection of Solomon's proverbs, Proverbs 22b–24 might almost serve as an epilogue to that collection. Proverbs 25:1 introduces yet another collection of "the proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah, copied." Not coincidentally, the most concentrated segment by far of negative admonitions (prohibitions) in the book appear in Proverbs 1–9 (29x) and 22b–24 (24x), compared to only 8x in Proverbs 10–22a. See below under the section entitled "Proverbs Express a General Life Observation."

[21] This is entirely peripheral to the focus of this paper, but it is curious that Solomon would begin with such an earnest appeal and warning about something so painfully obvious as committing highway robbery and homicide (1:10–16). One might have expected an opening topic more subtle, more devotional, more political even. But warning the young prince, right out of the gate, to avoid companions who would entice him to murder and pillage innocent subjects hardly seems the most intuitive tone to set. Waltke suggests that "the young man is most vulnerable to easy sex and easy money, for his sexual passions are now strongest and his tendency to be wise in his own eyes—and paradoxically to have group approval—has not yet been tempered by reality"—hence the warnings regarding "the invitations of the gang and of the temptress" (1:182). Similarly but more pointedly, Garrett notes, "Apparently in ancient Israel, no less than in the modern world, the comradeship, easy money, and feeling of empowerment offered by gangs was a strong temptation to the young man who felt overwhelmed by the difficulties of the life he confronted every day." Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs,* NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 2003), 69. When one thinks in terms of not merely the modern world, but the modern Middle Eastern world, the point is well taken. Still, one might expect that a prince living in the royal palace would be insulated from such companions. In Act 1 of Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part I, however, "Prince Hal—Henry IV's son and heir—carouses in a tavern" with "the roguish Sir John Falstaff and his henchmen, who are planning a highway robbery." In that context, "Prince Hal and Sir John Falstaff taunt each other, Hal warning Falstaff that he will one day be hanged as a thief and Falstaff insisting that, when Hal becomes king, thieves will have a friend in court" ("Henry IV, Part 1"; accessed October 23, 2025, https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/henry-iv-part-1/read/). However fictional the scene may be, it illustrates the sort of temptation that could confront someone in the position of Solomon's son, with all manner of shady characters

are "generally in the third person and nonimperative (Prov 10:1–22:16; 24:23–34; 25–29)."[22] The wisdom sayings would be equivalent to the category of proverbial wisdom literature described above.

Interpreting Wisdom Literature

In giving to us an inspired revelation, God could have provided a textbook of theology in purely propositional form—a list of duties to perform and of doctrinal truths to be believed. Instead, he revealed his mind in words communicated through a wide variety of humanly invented literary genres.[23] We understand intuitively and experientially that not all forms of written communication are the same or handled the same. No one reads and interprets poetry in the same way they read and interpret a car-repair manual, or Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* vs. a history of the Third Reich, or a book of philosophy vs. a recipe for lowcountry hoppin' john.

Consequently, how we interpretively handle any given passage of Scripture depends very much on what sort of literature it is and what rules govern the interpretation of that sort of literature. When we handle any genre of Scripture, we need to handle it in keeping with the "rules" that naturally govern that particular genre. We invented genres and their rules (with the exception of prophecy). Different genres work in different ways, because we designed them to do so. Otherwise, there is no point of different genres at all—in either human or biblical literature. "Genre does not determine whether the Scriptures are true; it merely shapes how that truth is formulated into text."[24]

Proverbial wisdom literature is a distinctive literary subgenre. When we read a collection of proverbs (aphoristic wisdom), we should not expect to find an account of historical events, or a prophecy, or an unconditional covenant promise; that is not how the proverbial genre functions in any culture. Again, literary genres function according to their design and need to be interpreted according to their own rules. Not only do the rules change when you step into wisdom literature; they can vary even within wisdom literature itself. That brings us to the primary focus of this article.

Nature of Proverbs

We use the word *proverbs* to refer to both a specific literary form and to a book of the Bible (which, as it happens, is not limited to that specific literary form). We tend to think of the whole Book of Proverbs as a collection of independent topical wisdom sayings. But that misconception will skew our understanding,

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hoping to get in good with a wealthy young prince, for the prestige and protection of the association and in hopes of riding his coattails into the court when he becomes king (cf. 1 Kgs 12:8–11ff.).

[22] Ernest C. Lucas, *Proverbs*, THOTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 8–13. T. Hildebrandt, "Proverbs, Genre of," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry, & Writings,* 534. Greg W. Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Proverbs," in *Learning from the Sages: Selected Studies on the Book of Proverbs,* ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 154–55. Lucas and Hildebrandt label the categories as *instruction* and *sentence* or *saying*; Parsons identifies the two categories as *admonition* and *wisdom sentence*.

[23] Genres represented in Scripture include allegory, apocalypse, autobiography, biography, chronicle, creed, discourse, drama, fiction (parable), genealogy, historical narrative, hymn, law, letter, love song, philosophical treatise, poetry, prophetic oracle, proverb, riddle, sermon, suspense, testimony, theological treatise—not to mention multiple subgenres under some of these headings.

[24] Hildebrandt, 531.

interpretation, and application of certain parts of the book. The Book of Proverbs is comprised of divisions distinguished by the two distinctive subgenres already mentioned, each governed by distinct hermeneutical rules.

Proverbs 1–9 comprises a series of discursive, extended, admonitory monologues expressed in the first-person singular and aimed directly at the second-person singular (1:8; 2:1; 3:1; 5:1; 6:1; 7:1) or occasionally plural (4:1; 5:7; 7:24; 8:32)—a feature that reappears only in 22:17–24:34 (with the sole intervening exception of 19:27) and 30:1–31:31 (with the sole intervening exception of 27:11). The verses in these sections of Proverbs are extended discourses of a predominantly admonitory nature, not proverbs in the technical or formal sense; consequently, they are not framed in a way that admits exceptions (as discussed below).[25] Proverbs 10:1–22:16 and 25:1–29:27, by contrast, are compilations of aphorisms, observations, and maxims in the form of epigrammatic sayings. The verses in this section of the book are the *proverbs* of Proverbs, and they need to be understood according to the rules that govern that specific sub-genre of wisdom literature. These chapters, and the verses in them, generally have only limited continuity and localized contextual connections. "The words of Agur" (Prov 30) comprise an autobiographical collection (as noted above, the first-person singular pronouns are again conspicuous) of several categories of mostly numerical sayings,[26] while "the words of Lemuel" (Prov 31) mostly comprise an acrostic monologue on a single subject—finding a wife who bears some intriguing resemblances to Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9.[27]

Defining Proverbs

The primary focus of this paper is the *proverbs* of Proverbs. A proverb may be defined in terms of four constituent characteristics: (1) *a portable saying*, (2) *in poetic form*, (3) *expressing a general life observation*, which is (4) *conditioned by a cultural worldview.*[28] By extension, a *biblical* proverb is (1) *a portable saying*, (2) *in poetic*

[25] Isolated examples in these non-proverbial sections that seem to admit exceptions are, in my opinion, better resolved contextually. For example, 3:16 may seem to promise wealth to the wise, but since the preceding verses exalt wisdom as *better* than material wealth (3:14–15), it seems unlikely that the subsequent verses are trying to link wisdom as the source of wealth; a preferable explanation would be to view 3:16 as non-material wealth, a euphemism for life success in God's economy (cf. 8:18). Again, 6:9–11 is not a guarantee that every lazy person becomes poor; it is not promissory, but admonitory in the same sense that a father might warn his teenage son, "If you keep driving like that, you're going to end up in a ditch!" On the other end of the book, Proverbs 31 does not promise that every virtuous woman's husband will be wealthy (31:11) or famous (31:23), nor that her children will properly appreciate her (31:28), any more than it necessitates that she engage in real estate or gardening (31:16) or stay up all night (31:18) or sew clothes for her household (31:19, 22) and for selling on Etsy (31:24). The passage is an acrostic poem (apparently from a woman, 31:1) in praise of an idealized woman of virtue. See also fn 27.

[26] These include two requests (30:7–9), four generations (30:11–14), four things never satisfied (30:15–16), four wonders (30:18–19), four disturbing inversions (30:21–23), four things small but wise (30:24–28), and four things of stately stride (30:29–31).

[27] Note 31:10 (cf. 3:15; 8:11) and 31:26. It is intriguing that the collection as a whole would conclude with an epilogue in praise of a woman who echoes the female personification of wisdom that dominates the book's prologue. Cf. Thomas P. McCreesh, "Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10–31," in *Learning from the Sages,* 391–410.

[28] Garrett defines a proverb as "a short, artistically constructed ethical observation or teaching" that is "easily remembered and readily popularized" (29, 38). These features are reflected in the first three components of my definition. Though my fourth component is rarely included in a formal definition of *proverb*, it is self-evident and demonstrable from the fact that (a) proverbs are frequently connected with folk literature, which implies distinctive cultural worldviews ("proverb"; accessed October 24, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/art/proverb); and (b) though many proverbs translate internationally, some are expressed in unique cultural terms that would not translate universally. E.g., Eskimo proverbs that turn on references to ice reflect a cultural life

form, (3) *expressing a general life observation*, which is (4) *conditioned by a biblical worldview*. In other words, in definition and function, a biblical proverb is exactly like any other proverb. If either the definition or function of proverbs in the Bible differs from those outside the Bible, then biblical proverbs *cease to be proverbs at all*. The key point of distinction, as we will see, is the fourth component—the informing worldview.

Proverbs Are Portable

Portable means short. A proverb is usually one sentence, sometimes two; a paragraph is not a proverb.[29] Portable also connotes a saying that is concise, compact—"a saying which opts for the power of brevity over the clarity of verbosity."[30] A proverb's "aim is to make an insight permanent . . . by stripping it down to its essence and cutting away all that is irrelevant" or distracting—such as qualifications or exceptions—and relying on "imagery, metaphor, tighter-than-normal syntax."[31] "Brevity is the soul of wit." "Character is what you are in the dark." "Open rebuke is better than secret love" (Prov 27:5). Portable also implies memorability—a "pithy sentence packed with thought-provoking punch." A clever or arresting expression makes a lasting impression. "Eagles may soar, but turtles don't get sucked into jet engines." "A beautiful woman without discernment is like a gold ring in a pig's nose" (Prov 11:22, my rendering).

Proverbs Are Poetic

In many contexts and cultures, *poetic* may mean rhymed and/or metered syntax.[32] "Truth that is told with bad intent can beat any lie that you can invent"; or "Early to bed, early to rise . . ." (the fact that I do not need to finish it testifies to its poetic memorability). *Poetic* may also refer to balanced structure: "To be humble to superiors is duty; to equals, courtesy; to inferiors, nobleness." In English, *poetic* often means utilizing "sound techniques": "All's well that ends well," or "His bark is worse than his bite."[33] Most commonly in biblical proverbs, however, poetic form usually manifests some variety of parallelism.[34] Moreover, poetry is known for its verbal economy.

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experience not shared by nor expressed in the proverbs of desert-dwelling Bedouins ("Top 26 Eskimo Proverbs About Life (WISDOM)"; accessed October 24, 2025, https://graciousquotes.com/eskimo-proverbs/). Likewise, proverbs about the gods from a polytheistic culture would not mesh with those from a monotheistic culture, either in terms of the nature of God's being or his character (cf. Kidner, *Wisdom*, 127).

[29] For a discussion of the technical literary structure of proverbs, see Garrett, 33–38. Occasionally folded into the collection of proverbs proper you will find a technically distinct wisdom literary form—e.g., an *example story,* a poetic paragraph that functions as an extended reflection (e.g., Prov 24:30–34—at the tail end of the first collection of Solomonic proverbs). But these are exceptions in an otherwise simpler, standard proverbial format.

[30] Kitchen, 17.

[31] "Proverbs as Literary Form," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery,* ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grover: IVP Academic, 1998), 679.

[32] Rhyming is not unheard of in Hebrew (cf. Prov 25:27, אָכֹל דְּבַשׁ הַרְבּוֹת לֹא־טוֹב וְחֵקֶר כְּבֹדָם כָּבוֹד).

[33] "It is clear that the sages who originally crafted proverbs were keenly sensitive to the sounds of their sayings." Hildebrandt, 531. As a biblical example he cites the Hebrew reading of Prov 10:9a: הוֹלֵךְ בַּתֹּם יֵלֵךְ בֶּטַח.

[34] Major forms of parallelism include synonymity, progression (synthetic), and proverbial merismus (antithetical). For a discussion of these and others, see Garrett, 33–38; Waltke, 1:41–45.

> Hebrew poetry, like all poetry whatever the culture, tends to be more terse . . . than prose, and the relationships and transitions between the lines tend to be unexpressed. . . . In Proverbs terseness becomes even more acute; it is the hallmark of its lines. . . . They [proverbs] concentrate or distill truth and so by their nature cannot express the whole truth about a topic. . . . A lack of recognition of the genre characteristic of terseness and its function to assert truth baldly has led to many errors in interpreting Proverbs. . . . To avoid overstating truth or teaching half-truths through isolated proverbs, sages call on their disciples to learn all of them (22:18).[35]

Finally, a poetic form also tends to mingle simplicity with profundity.[36] "Necessity is a hard nurse, but she raises strong children." "Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of a gift he does not give" (25:14 ESV). And "poetic" combines specificity with universality. "Confidence in an unfaithful man in time of trouble is like a bad tooth and a foot out of joint. Like one who takes away a garment in cold weather . . . is one who sings songs to a heavy heart" (25:19–20).

Proverbs Express a General Life Observation

This is, perhaps, the most commonly misunderstood characteristic of biblical proverbs. "General truths are the stock in trade in Proverbs."[37] Those general truths may take different forms. Observational proverbs are the "most common form of Old Testament wisdom" and depict "human behavior without an explicit moral evaluation" (e.g., 18:16). Didactic proverbs include "an explicit moral evaluation" in which (for example) one action is identified as wise or righteous and another as foolish or wicked (e.g., 14:1).[38] Directive proverbs—whether negative (prohibitions) or positive (commands)—are conspicuously uncommon among proverbs proper.[39]

Read the first nine chapters of Proverbs, and directives leap out like rabbits from a brushpile (e.g., 3:1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 25, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, etc.); twenty-five percent of the 266 verses in Proverbs 1–9 include commands. The same maxim that applies to real estate (location, location, location) also applies to hermeneutics. Proverbs 1–9 is not a collection of isolated proverbs in the specialized sense, but cautionary discourses on wise living. Read the next thirteen and a half chapters, however, and you will discover *only seven admonitions* (14:7; 16:3; 19:18, 20; 20:13, 22; 22:6); that's less than two percent of the 375 proverbs in

[35] Waltke, 1:38.

[36] The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* highlights some of the same characteristics of the proverbial form: "memorable," "simultaneously simple and profound," "both specific and general, both particular and universal," and having "poetic form." Qoheleth's proverb about leaky roofs (Eccl 10:18), for example, "speaks to a universal principle of life, not simply a fact of negligent building maintenance," and as such, "covers a whole category of similar events and speaks to a general tendency of life." Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman III, 679.

[37] Garrett, 57.

[38] Ibid., 29–30. The latter category would include what Garrett labels "better sayings"—comparative statements that make a moral evaluation (e.g., 12:9).

[39] Garrett's term for this category is "admonitions," but I have chosen to reserve that label for one of the specific categories of wisdom literature in Proverbs discussed above. The details of the next paragraph bear out the legitimacy of admonition as a major category with Proverbs.

Proverbs 10:1–22:16.[40] Like the Solomonic Prologue (Prov 1–9), the Solomonic Epilogue (22:17–24:34)[41] is also peppered with admonitions (mostly negative); thirty-three out of eighty-two verses contain admonitions (forty percent). Finally, the Hezekian supplemental collection of Solomonic proverbs includes a deposit of fourteen admonition proverbs (ten percent of the 138 verses in Proverbs 25–29),[42] followed by two admonitions in the words of Agur (30:6, 10) and five admonitions in the words of Lemuel (31:3, 6, 8, 9, 31). The point remains that within the technical category of aphoristic proverbs (Proverbs 10–22a and 25–29), directives are extremely rare, constituting only four percent of all the aphoristic proverbs in Proverbs; ninety-six percent of the proverbs are either descriptive or didactic observations. This confirms the above discussion regarding the major categories within Proverbs as *admonition* and *wisdom saying*.

One of the ramifications of the foregoing discussion is that, as general observations, biblical proverbs may admit exceptions.[43] We understand, intuitively and experientially, that non-biblical proverbs have exceptions. Not every son is like his father, sometimes an apple can fall pretty far downhill from the tree, and most cats die not from curiosity but from old age. Biblical proverbs, too, are susceptible to exceptions, not because they are fallible but because they are *proverbs*.[44]

> Correctly understood, the individual proverb presents a *typical* relationship between events, and any such proverb admits exceptions and is situation-dependent. The classic example is what at first looks like the contradictory instructions in 26:4–5. The proverbs are to be viewed as paradigms rather than precepts, and the book does not claim to be a manual on how to do this or that and always succeed in what one attempts. . . . [T]he book is more subtle than often thought and does not provide simplistic or formulaic answers to the complex issues of life.[45]

"Except after *c*" prevents "*i* before *e*" from being an absolute rule in all cases; but it does not negate the broad validity of the rule. Likewise, exceptions prevent a proverb from being an absolute, but exceptions do not negate the validity of the general observation.

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[40] For the significance of this division, see note 20 above, which addresses the implications of the admonitions that suddenly dominate 22:17–24:34.

[41] See note 20 above.

[42] Proverbs 25:4, 5, 6, 8, 9; 26:4, 5, 25; 27:1, 2, 10, 11, 23; 29:17.

[43] "Put simply, proverbs teach probable truth, not absolute truth. By nature, proverbs are not absolute promises from God that guarantee the promised outcome if one follows them. . . . [Rather,] they offer general principles for successful living." In other words, "a proverb expresses a truth observed to work in most cases. . . . It does not deny that exceptions occur; it merely omits them from consideration." William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 496–97. Such clarifications are ubiquitous in the literature on Proverbs.

[44] "It is important to realize that [proverbs] are not universal truths that apply equally to all situations. . . . Instead, the proverb intends to cover most cases without claiming that it fits every conceivable instance of things that appear alike. To claim that it does fit everything everywhere is to overextend the genre [i.e., it's no longer a proverb] and to treat it as if it were a form of expositional prose!" Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 86–87.

[45] Andreas Köstenberger and Gregory Goswell, *Biblical Theology: A Canonical, Thematic, and Ethical Approach* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2023), 293.

> Promises and threats [in the form of proverbs] appear to be categorical, but in reality they are situational at the human level and subject to divine sovereignty. . . . Instead of absolutizing the sayings into principles, we must recognize the complexity of life and the situations in which a saying applies or does not apply.[46]

To be sure, "Proverbs speaks with divine authority in every verse"[47]—the proverbs of Proverbs are divinely directed observations of the way things typically work within the context of a divinely revealed worldview. "By their very nature they are generalized statements, intended to give advice rather than to establish rigid codes by which God works."[48] The intersection of this quality of proverbs and the one that follows creates the conundrum that this article aims to address.

Proverbs Are Culture-Conditioned and Worldview-Reflective

Proverbs are culturally universal and historically ubiquitous, reflecting "the human urge to classify, generalize, and codify experience, filtered through a culture's ideals and values."[49] That is why they may vary widely from culture to culture. Some proverbs transcend cultural boundaries because they reflect universal human characteristics or experiences. Other proverbs may be immediately sensible and understandable in one culture but seem nonsensical in other cultures; so, an understanding of the culture of origin can help clarify the meaning.[50] The same is true of biblical proverbs. But the cultural worldview that shapes biblical proverbs is not *merely* ethnic (Hebrew) or geographical (Middle Eastern), but religious, ethical, theological, and above all, covenantal.[51]

> The authors of Proverbs viewed the creation through the lens of faith consistent with Israel's world-and-life views. The book's title identifies its author specifically as "king of Israel." Israel's covenant-keeping God commanded him as Israel's king, on his assuming the throne, "to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites" (Deut 17:18). . . . The authors of Proverbs

[46] Willem Van Gemeren, "Proverbs," *A Biblical Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, ed. Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 380. Though Van Gemeren is making the same point as the other writers cited in this section, his language is susceptible of improvement. What appear to be "promises" may, in fact, not be *promises* at all; and the problem is not viewing proverbs as "principles" (they are), but "absolutizing" or dogmatizing them *beyond* the category of general principle.

[47] Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 623.

[48] Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 247. On the issue of inspired biblical "advice," cf. Paul's differentiation between inspired divine revelation and inspired apostolic opinion in 1 Corinthians 7. Paul is Spirit-directed to pen 7:25 and 40 in the form of a *gnōmē,* an *opinion*. As such, it is intended to function as *counsel, advice, opinion* to be weighed and seriously considered as apostolic opinion by individuals in similar circumstances, but not as a command to be compelled in all cases without exception. God could easily have revealed these directives to Paul as commands and had him pen them as commands if that was his intent; he did not.

[49] Hildebrandt, 529.

[50] "Culture impacts how proverbs are interpreted, and one must make an effort to understand both the culture of origin and the current culture of usage." Ibid., 531.

[51] E.g., an Egyptian proverb reads: "Make monuments for the god; this is what preserves the name of him who does it." A Babylonian proverb says: "Reverence begets favor, sacrifice improves life, and prayer dispels guilt." Kidner, *Wisdom*, 127. Neither of those could have emerged from a people shaped by a Pentateuchal worldview with a very different view of God.

> drew inspiration through keen observation and cogent reflections on creation, but they brought to their task Israel's world-and-life view and used the creation to confirm it.[52]

The worldview that shapes biblical proverbs is a culture informed by scriptural revelation and specifically contextualized by a covenantal relationship between Israel and Yahweh—a covenant that establishes certain conditions and expectations for blessing and success in a theocratic society. Proverbs took shape within that religiously specific context and was addressed to a religiously specific audience. Its mores, counsels, and observations emerge from a particular and unique covenantal arrangement with very specific covenantal promises, warnings, and expectations. "To listen to a proverb without at the same time hearing its covenantal background is to pry a gem from its setting."[53] Failure to keep that setting in mind may lead one to mistake a legitimate covenantal expectation for a generic and universal principle that is demonstrably false. See, for instance, the first example in Table 1 below. The linkage between being a faithful tither and experiencing material blessing from God is a clear echo of a solemn covenantal promise from God to the individual Israelite (both verses are addressed to the second person singular). In other words, this is a Jew under the Mosaic Covenant counseling Jews how to live successfully under the Mosaic Covenant, and confirming a promise of the Mosaic Covenant to those who fulfill their obligations under the Mosaic Covenant. Is it an absolute? I am compelled to say yes, *in that covenantal context,* since it is reiterating God's own covenantal oath that is part of the biblical worldview in which Solomon's wisdom is grounded. In any case, however you interpret Proverbs 3:9–10 must be equally applicable to the blessing pronounced on Israelites by God himself in Deuteronomy 28:1, 8.[54]

The most foundational theological truths of a Judeo-biblical worldview echo throughout the book of Proverbs. God is the Creator of the cosmos (3:19–20) and the Maker of all people (22:2) who observes and assesses all human actions and judges human sins (5:21–22).[55] Even beyond such theological fundamentals, however, the wisdom of Proverbs is steeped in a decidedly Pentateuchal, and often particularly Deuteronomic, worldview.[56] The following chart offers only a partial but adequate demonstration of the biblical worldview that informs and shapes the sages' observations throughout the entire book of Proverbs.[57]

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[52] Waltke, 1:82.

[53] Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 59.

[54] To wax hypothetical for a moment, however, suppose a man is a blaspheming, adulterous, covetous Jew who nevertheless tithes meticulously and faithfully (cf. Matt 23:23); is God nevertheless obligated to materially bless such an individual? Both Proverbs and Deuteronomy have plenty to say about hypocrisy and presumption, as well as the consequences of those other sins as well. To assume a mechanical correspondence between certain acts of righteousness and certain rewards is not only unrealistic but also covenantally uninformed. Likewise, to dismiss the possibility that God reserves the right to suspend material blessings even on the faithful for his own good and sovereign purposes is equally unrealistic and covenantally uninformed.

[55] For a more thorough theology proper of Proverbs, see Robert D. Bell, *The Theological Messages of the Old Testament Books* (Greenville: BJU Press, 2010), 249–55. See also Waltke, 1:67–76.

[56] The primary Hebrew word for *law* (תּוֹרָה) occurs in Proverbs 1–9 almost exclusively with reference to parental instruction (1:8; 3:1; 4:2; 6:20; 7:2), but in the later collection with unarguable reference to the Sinaitic Covenant law (28:4, 7, 9; 29:18).

[57] For more detailed study of Proverbs-Deuteronomy intertextuality, see William P. Brown, "The Law and the Sages: A Reexamination of Tôrâ in Proverbs," in *Constituting the Community: Studies on the Polity of Ancient Israel in Honor of S. Dean McBride Jr.*, ed. John T. Strong and Steven S. Tuell (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 251–80. Though positioned within less than conservative parameters, Brown nevertheless disputes the alleged absence of any intersection between these two books, concluding that "Levinson's claim that Deuteronomy comprehensively includes 'matters of cultus, justice, political administration,

Table 1. Deuteronomic Foundations for Proverbs

Proverbs	Deuteronomy
3:10—So your barns [אֲסָמֶ֑יךָ] will be filled with plenty and your vats will overflow with new wine.	28:8—The LORD will command the blessing upon you in your barns [אֲסָמֶ֑יךָ] and in all that you put your hand to, and He will bless you in the land which the LORD your God gives you.
3:11–12— My son, do not reject the discipline of the LORD or loathe His reproof, for whom the LORD loves He reproves, even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights.	8:5—Thus you are to know in your heart that the LORD your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son.
3:33—The curse of the LORD is on the house of the wicked, but He blesses the dwelling of the righteous.	11:26–28—See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you listen to the commands of the LORD your God . . . and the curse, if you do not listen to the commands of the LORD your God.
7:1–3—My son, keep my words and treasure my commandments within you. . . . Bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart.	6:6–9—These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. . . . You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and . . . you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.
11:1—A false balance is an abomination to the LORD. 20:10, 23—Differing weights and differing measures, both of them are abominable to the LORD. . . . differing weights are an abomination to the LORD, and a false scale is not good.	25:13, 15—You shall not have in your bag differing weights, a large and a small. . . . You shall have a full and just weight; you shall have a full and just measure, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you. Cf. Lev 19:35, 36
18:5—To show partiality to the wicked is not good, nor to thrust aside the righteous in judgment. Cf. 24:23	1:17—You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not fear man, for the judgment is God's. Cf. 16:19; Lev 19:15
19:5—A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who tells lies will not escape.	19:16–19—If a malicious witness rises up against a man to accuse him of wrongdoing, then both the men who have the dispute shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who will be in office in those days. The judges shall investigate thoroughly, and if the witness is a false witness and he has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother.
19:17—One who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD, and He will repay him for his good deed. Cf. 22:9; 28:27	15:7–8, 10—If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks. . . . You shall generously give to him . . . because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings.
20:20—He who curses his father or his mother, his lamp will go out in time of darkness.	27:16—Cursed is he who dishonors his father or mother. Cf. Exod 21:17; Lev 20:9

family life, sexuality, warfare, social and economic justice, and theology' applies also to Proverbs!" (280). Cf. also Bernd U. Schipper, "'Teach Them Diligently to Your Son!': The Book of Proverbs and Deuteronomy," in *Reading Proverbs Intertextually*, LHB/OTS 629, ed. Katharine Julia Dell and Will Kynes (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2018), 21–34; and Bernd U. Schipper, "When Wisdom Is Not Enough! The Discourse on Wisdom and Torah and the Composition of the Book of Proverbs," in *Wisdom and Torah: The Reception of 'Torah' in the Wisdom Literature of the Second Temple Period, SuppJSJ* 163, ed. Bernd U. Schipper and D. Andrew Teeter (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 55–79. While Proverbs-Deuteronomy intertextuality lies more on the periphery of this study, I am indebted to colleague and friend Phil Brown (professor at God's Bible School & College) for drawing my attention to these resources.

Proverbs	Deuteronomy
20:22—Do not say, "I will repay evil"; wait for the LORD, and He will save you.	32:35—Vengeance is Mine, and retribution, in due time their foot will slip; for the day of their calamity is near, and the impending things are hastening upon them.
22:28—Do not move the ancient boundary which your fathers have set.	19:14—You shall not move your neighbor's boundary mark, which the ancestors have set, in your inheritance which you will inherit in the land that the LORD your God gives you to possess. Cf. 27:17
25:2—It is the glory of God to conceal [סָתַר] a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter.	29:29—The secret [סָתַר] things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.
28:13— He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion.	4:31—For the LORD your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them.
30:6—Do not add to His words or He will reprove you, and you will be proved a liar.	4:2—You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. Cf. 12:12
30:9—Lest I be full and deny You and say, "Who is the LORD?"	8:10–19— . . . lest, when you have eaten and are satisfied, . . . then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God.

The Proverbial Challenge

Compact, poetic, general, and culturally conditioned—a proverb is insight in capsule form, perception combined with potency and portability. Compactness is what defines a proverb and makes it memorable. As previously suggested, however, compactness also defines a proverb's limitations. That's by design. We understand instinctively that proverbs are universals but not absolutes. "In short, proverbs are true but are encapsulated and focused on just one aspect of a diverse reality."[58]

> Naturally they generalize, as a proverb must, and may therefore be charged with making life too tidy to be true. But nobody objects to this in secular sayings, for the very form demands a sweeping statement and looks for a hearer with his wits about him. We need no telling that a maxim like "Many hands make light work" is not the final word on the subject, since "Too many cooks spoil the broth."[59]

Some might object that *secular* proverbs may conflict or admit exceptions, but *biblical* proverbs cannot because they are inspired and inerrant and, therefore, they must always state universal and absolute truths. They are, however, inspired and inerrant *proverbs*. Again, once we insist that all biblical proverbs must be universal absolutes without exceptions, they cease to be proverbs at all. It is precisely because they *are* proverbs that they are *not* necessarily absolutes; their applicability ebbs and flows with the changing circumstances of life (e.g., 26:4, 5), the mysteries of divine providence (e.g., 11:31; 12:21), and other considerations.[60]

[58] Hildebrandt, 531.

[59] Kidner, *Wisdom*, 26.

[60] For example, another biblical principle to factor into proverbial equations is that often "the righteous remnant suffers along with [and because of] the wicked, a fact Moses, Joshua, Caleb, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and others discover firsthand. Their righteousness does not shield them from adversity." House, 449.

Interpreting Proverbs

The Book of Proverbs has often been mischaracterized as presenting the world in predictable terms of an unvarying, black-and-white moral order, while Job and Ecclesiastes allegedly overthrow the simplistic, sanitized view of Proverbs via a rebellion of realism.[61] This, however, is a misreading of all three books, which are "canonical partners, not canonical and theological opposites."[62] "Job and Ecclesiastes are not battling a rigid retribution doctrine propounded by Proverbs."[63] In reality, a threefold theological worldview cord runs through all three of these core wisdom books: (1) Yahweh is the Sovereign who governs the fallen world in keeping with his character;[64] (2) because of human fallenness and finiteness, God's ways and purposes are sometimes inscrutable to us;[65] and, (3) a fear of Yahweh that takes him seriously, trusts him implicitly, and submits to his words and ways is, therefore, the path of wisdom in this life "under the sun."[66] This theological core is important not only for a correct reading of the book itself, but for placing it solidly within the larger, overarching metanarrative of a holistic biblical theology.

Interpretational Challenges in Proverbs

The first hermeneutical principle for interpreting Proverbs is to recognize and remember the literary difference between Proverbs 1–9, 22:17–24:34, 30–31 as discursive admonition, and the rest of the book as a collection of isolated wisdom sayings (proverbs). The focus of this section is specifically on interpreting the proverbs within the Book of Proverbs. Because of their distinctive characteristics as a genre, interpreting and applying proverbs in the larger context of a reliable and authoritative divine revelation poses some challenges that need to be navigated with care.

Proverbs and Inspiration

Proverbs 1:1 introduces "the proverbs of Solomon," but chapters 1–9 form an extended prefatory discourse to Solomon's collection of proverbs themselves. In it Solomon repeatedly counsels the posture of the reader not only towards the values urged in these chapters but also towards the proverbial wisdom that will follow. The preface is a railed boardwalk designed to orient the reader before depositing him or her onto what Kidner aptly describes in coastal terms.

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[61] "Reading proverbs as a literary whole has shown this interpretation to be too simplistic. Wisdom *does* teach that wise acts generally lead to success and blessing. . . . However, this general truth is not worked out in every individual case, and in the later chapters the exceptions come more clearly into focus (cf. Prov 15:16; 16:8)." C. Bartholomew, "Wisdom Books," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 121.

[62] House, 450.

[63] Köstenberger and Goswell, 292. "Job and Ecclesiastes are not to be viewed as 'wisdom in revolt,' nor as 'protest wisdom.' Their authors are not seeking to correct or counter Proverbs, for the placing of the books side by side more likely assumes or asserts their compatibility." Ibid.

[64] Prov 3:18; 5:21; 15:3; 16:4, 33; 19:21; 21:1–2, 30–31; 25:2; Eccl 3:14; 6:10; 7:13; 9:1; Job 38–42.

[65] Prov 20:24; 25:2; Eccl 3:11; 8:17; 11:5; Job 5:9; 9:10; 11:7.

[66] Prov 1:7; 3:5; 9:10; Eccl 5:7; 7:18; 12:13; Job 1:1, 8; 28:28; 42:6.

> To be faced abruptly with the hundreds of individual sayings . . . like a great stretch of pebble beach to make one's way along, would be more than daunting: it could be disorienting. What kind of wisdom, at bottom, and what kind of folly, are pictured in those terse . . . remarks? . . . So we can be grateful to encounter this readable stretch of nine chapters before arriving at the "beach"—glad not only of their smooth going as miniature essays, but also of their clear notices and signposts. Here at the outset, in 1:1–7, we are alerted to the kind of approach that awaits us in the main collection, and the kind of wisdom that will be offered us. The approach is neatly summarized in the four terms of 1:6, which the New English Bible translates as "proverbs . . . parables . . . sayings . . . riddles"—all of them designed not to spoon-feed the reader but to prick him into thought, whether by their vivid pictures and analogies or by the sharpness of their brevity and their teasing refusal to explain themselves. It will be very different than the preaching and appeals that launch the book on its way in these preliminary chapters.[67]

The contextualized and extended counsel contained in Proverbs 1–9 does not function as *proverb* and is, consequently, not subject to the same hermeneutic that governs individual aphorisms (like the fact that they may admit exceptions).[68] The proverbs of Proverbs are divinely inspired guidelines given to govern our thinking and acting—broad principles and general observations that affirm the presence of a scripturally informed value system. The exceptions we may experience living in a fallen world do not cancel the validity of the generality; it is those anomalies with which Job and Ecclesiastes grapple.

Proverbs and Exceptions

No one thinks the "early to bed, early to rise" trope is a foolproof path to health, wealth, and wisdom—but it's still a smart, industrious, responsible way to live. "A proverb does not give guarantees; rather, it indicates the best route to a desired end."[69] Proverbs, by definition and function, do not convey infallible promises. "A proverb is an instructional statement about what is generally true—not an ironclad promise of what is universally true."[70] Even biblical proverbs do not necessarily guarantee infallible outcomes. What about the following? "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your path." Is that universally true and timelessly reliable? Absolutely, in part because it's not a proverb; note the location (3:5–6). This is not hermeneutical sleight of hand; it is attention to context and genre distinctions. The statement in 3:5–6 is one in a sequence of direct admonitions that are grounded in a covenant relationship with the Lord.[71]

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[67] Kidner, *Wisdom*, 18–19.

[68] The interpretation of this or any other contextualized genre, of course, takes that context into account—including issues of genre, setting, purpose, audience, etc.

[69] Longman III, 545.

[70] Randy Jaeggli, "Interpreting Proverbs 22:6," *Biblical Viewpoint* 32, no. 2 (November 1999): 41. House makes a similar statement but over-qualifies it: "It must be remembered that *proverb* does not mean 'absolute promise' in every specific context." For confirmation he cites his own previously established definitions of the Hebrew terminology, which in no case ever define *proverb* as *promise*, let alone an *absolute promise*. "A proverb," he continues more accurately, "is a comparison that teaches *principles and expected outcomes* in life." House, 448 (emphasis added).

[71] Embedded in each admonition in the sequence is a relational imperative (3:5, trust the Lord; 3:7, fear the Lord; 3:9, honor the Lord; 3:11, do not reject the discipline of the Lord). It's also not obscurantist to point out what the statement affirms when we

What about this one: "The fear of the LORD prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be shortened" (10:27)? Is that true? Generally, yes—a fear of God often prevents one from engaging in risky behaviors. More than that, it echoes a covenantal principle for Israelites living in the land under the law (Deut 4:40). But is it an infallible rule for all believers anywhere without any exception in human history and experience? If this is an absolute guarantee, how does one square it with the remarkably "shortened" life of a David Brainerd or a Robert Murray M'Cheyne—two godly ministers who died at age twenty-nine almost exactly one century apart.[72] And as for "the years of the wicked," one must explain why Manasseh was Judah's wickedest yet longest-reigning king, and why Job grappled with the incongruity of the prosperity and longevity of the wicked (Job 21:7–15). The exceptions don't mean the proverb is erroneous; it simply means the proverb is a *proverb*.[73]

"There shall no evil happen to the just: but the wicked shall be filled with trouble" (12:21). Joseph, Job, and Jesus spring to mind as exceptions of the first statement. One cannot deflect the difficulty by arguing that what befell Job wasn't "evil," merely calamity or adversity. For one thing, he was the victim of the moral evil of theft; for another, the same Hebrew word is used to describe "all the evil that happened to him" (Job 42:11; cf. 2:10). To absolutize such a principle as a health-and-wealth guarantee for the righteous, as Job's friends did,[74] would undermine the clear teaching of the Book of Job as a whole, not to mention the real-life experiences of uncounted numbers of God's righteous people.[75] That doesn't mean the proverb is wrong; it is simply reflecting an observable norm in God's world.[76]

"Behold, the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth: much more the wicked and the sinner" (11:31). Some interpret this "recompense" in the positive sense of reward for the righteous in contrast to the certainty of negative recompense (punishment) for the wicked. Others see the recompense as negative retribution for *both* the righteous and the wicked: if God chastises even the righteous, how much more the wicked.[77] Taking this view, Waltke argues that the verse "probably implies a distinction between the present remedial punishment of the righteous 'in the earth' and the future penal punishment of the wicked" in eternity.[78] But

commit our way to him; it does not say such a person will have sudden clarity or flawless judgment in a decision, nor that nothing "bad" will happen. What it assures is God's sovereign, gracious, and providential supervision of one's path.

[72] The seemingly pious assumption—in order to defend the infallibility of the proverb—that such people "obviously" must have had some secret sin for which God judged them is neither charitable nor realistic, and places one in the uneasy company of Job's erroneous friends.

[73] Waltke (1:477–78) places the fulfillment in the future, contrasting eternal life (cf. v. 30, "the righteous will never [not for eternity] be toppled") with a reference to eternal death (cf. v. 25, "is no more"); but the antithetical parallel between long life and short years seems clearly to be commenting on the earthly sphere, not eternity.

[74] "The rigid application of this law was the mainstay of Job's comforters." Kidner, *Proverbs*, 98.

[75] Even the exceptions, however, do not negate a corollary truth—affirmed by both Joseph (Gen 50:20) and Paul (Rom 8:28)—that even the evil inflicted by man may be turned by God to good; but that does not negate the evil of evil.

[76] DeRouchie notes, "Many proverbs address ultimate and not immediate truths" (DeRouchie, 86). Waltke understands the "evil" in the proverb as *ultimate* evil and interprets the proverb in the light of eternity; this is possible but seems to read too much into the simplicity of the proverb's statement.

[77] The negative view is bolstered by Peter's allusion to this verse from the LXX (1 Pet 4:18, "if the righteous scarcely be saved"). That does not alter the fact that the Hebrew verb is שָׁלַם; sin and evil may indeed be recompensed (20:22), but it is an odd verb to use negatively of the righteous with no reference to their sin in the context.

[78] Waltke, 1:514. Waltke's assertion that the "preceding proverbs leave no doubt that their eternal death is in view" is not entirely convincing either.

this seems to sidestep the proverb's apparently intentional parallelism in terms of sphere—just as the righteous will be recompensed *in the earth* so the wicked will receive their just deserts *in the earth*—which clearly has exceptions.[79] The exceptions, however, don't negate the general principle: there are earthly consequences for both righteousness and wickedness, but that does not mean that those earthly consequences are either full or final.

"The appetite of the sluggard craves but gets nothing, but the desire of the diligent will be abundantly satisfied" (13:4, NET)—a pre-Aesopian proverbial version of the fable of the ant and the grasshopper. But we are all too aware of exceptions: non-producers who have learned how to game the welfare system, while many a hard-working farmer in a subsistence culture barely survives. Nevertheless, few would contest the normally expected outcomes of both slothfulness and industry. "The righteous eat to their hearts' content, but the stomach of the wicked goes hungry" (13:25, NIV) is similarly subject to exceptions.

> Of course, so rosy a view of things is asking for trouble. To say that the more honestly you live and the harder you work, the better you will fare, is to state a very salutary general truth. But it may blind the dogmatically minded to the glaring exceptions to that rule, as it blinded Job's three comforters.[80]

"Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old he will not depart from it" (22:6, KJV). This proverb has fortified many young parents and confused (if not unduly guilted) many old ones. Even on the most basic exegetical and translational level, much of the proverb's interpretation and application is debated.[81] For the purpose of this article, the point is simply to note that even though the principle admits exceptions virtually regardless of how it is explained, that does not negate the fundamental importance and long-term value of pedagogy.

Proverbs and Observations

The foregoing discussion requires important clarification. The fact that proverbs, by definition, may admit exceptions does not mean that most of the proverbs in Proverbs are vague generalities that must be constantly qualified. First, the proverbial subgenre that admits exceptions does not apply to significant sectors of the book (chapters 1–9, 22:17–24:34, and 30–31).

Second, even among proverbs proper, only a small minority of proverbs are the kinds of statements that even invite exceptions. For most biblical proverbs—like most secular proverbs—exceptions simply do not compute. For example, nearly half of the fifty-six verses in Proverbs 25–26 are proverbial similes, while the intervening ones typically offer advice either explicit or implied. Note this sampling from Proverbs 25:

> [13] Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest is a faithful messenger to those who send him, for he refreshes the soul of his masters.

[79] On the view of recompense as reward, if a premillennialist wishes to argue (not without merit) that the righteous will, indeed, find their recompense "in the earth" during the millennium, then the same interpretation would have to be applied to a this-earthly recompense to the wicked—which is theologically much harder to defend, whether in the millennium or the new earth.

[80] Kidner, *Wisdom,* 27.

[81] Jaeggli identifies five different ways this verse is interpreted: a moral upbringing view, an "ironic" view, an "individual aptitude" view, a "chronological development" view, and an "induction into adulthood" view. See Jaeggli, 41–48.

14 Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of his gifts falsely.
15 By forbearance a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue breaks the bone.
16 Have you found honey? Eat only what you need, that you not have it in excess and vomit it.
17 Let your foot rarely be in your neighbor's house, or he will become weary of you and hate you.
18 Like a club and a sword and a sharp arrow is a man who bears false witness against his neighbor.
19 Like a bad tooth and an unsteady foot is confidence in a faithless man in time of trouble.

How does one find an exception to the observation of 25:13 or 14, or the common-sense advice of 25:16? While it is important to qualify that the proverbial genre is not designed to provide absolute guarantees, it is equally important to clarify that many proverbs are simply not framed in such a way as to entertain exceptions. Indeed, it is not irreverent to suggest that some observational proverbs intentionally evoke a humorous image.[82]

Proverbs and Deity Affirmations

Here is the nub of the problem: What about a proverb that affirms something about the character of God?

The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good. (15:3)
The sacrifice of the wicked is detestable to the LORD, but the prayer of the upright is his delight. (15:8)
The LORD detests the way of the wicked, but he loves the one who pursues righteousness. (15:9)

If these are proverbs proper—and they are—and proverbs by nature and definition are susceptible to exceptions, then does that imply that God is aware of what's going on only most of the time? Or that God only sometimes delights in the prayer of the upright? Or that God may at times be ambivalent about the righteous and the wicked? Can we affirm that *these* proverbs are timelessly and universally true? If so, how does that square with the general and non-absolute nature of the proverbial genre that scholars keep emphasizing?

I have cited numerous works on Proverbs and hermeneutics that assert that proverbs admit exceptions. Ironically, however, those same works seem to pass over this rather glaring problem. None of them would argue that deity proverbs are arbitrary; but neither do they provide any kind of paradigm for explaining this significant exception to the hermeneutical rule—namely, that *some proverbs are absolutes*. How, then, do we explain this apparent hermeneutical inconsistency? The solution is not particularly profound; it's just rarely if ever explained.[83]

Remember the fourth component of a proverb: *proverbs are culture-conditioned and worldview-reflective.* And a central component of the covenantal worldview that shapes the culture from which biblical proverbs

[82] "Perhaps the proverb is cited simply for pointed humor, such as the sluggard who is too lazy to raise his hand up to his mouth (Prov 19:24; 22:13)." Hildebrandt, 531.

[83] E.g., Hildebrandt identifies "Yahweh Sayings" as one of nine different proverbial forms (535) but does not address whether they succumb to the non-promissory qualification of the proverbial genre. Similarly, one of the five categories of proverbial authority is the "universal mandate (Prov 3:5)" (531); again, however, he never discusses why or on what basis such a statement may be considered a universal mandate as opposed to a general observation that admits exceptions. Likewise, Longman asserts (without explanation), "we must admit that that certain proverbs are always true," citing Proverbs 11:1 as an example along with the ambiguous qualification, "If there are exceptions to this proverb, they are so rare as to be unimportant." Longman, 543.

emerge is the immutability of the character of their covenant God, Yahweh. Proverbs uses the distinctive personal name of Israel's unique covenant God—Yahweh—almost exclusively.[84] Even though they are among other proverbs and in proverbial form, these proverbs affirm *moral absolutes about the character of Israel's covenant God, which never changes.* A proverb that affirms a truth about Yahweh's person or character is an *exception* to the rule about proverbs admitting exceptions.[85]

Nestled in among the hundreds of general observations and proverbial principles for navigating life wisely in a fallen world that is nonetheless ruled by a righteous and sovereign God are dozens of reminders of the character of the unchanging God to whom we can tether our total trust.

> A false balance is an abomination to the LORD, but a just weight is His delight. (11:1)
> A good man will obtain favor from the LORD, but He will condemn a man who devises evil. (12:2)
> Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who deal faithfully are His delight. (12:22)
> The LORD is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous. (15:29)
> All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, but the LORD weighs the motives. (16:2)
> Commit your works to the LORD and your plans will be established. (16:3)
> The LORD has made everything for its own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil. (16:4)
> The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous runs into it and is safe. (18:10)
> The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes. (21:1)
> To do righteousness and justice is desired by the LORD more than sacrifice. (21:3)
> There is no wisdom and no understanding and no counsel against the LORD. (21:30)
> The horse is prepared for the day of battle, but victory belongs to the LORD. (21:31)

The approximately fifty-five proverbs in chapters 10–29 that say something about the immutable being or attributes of God do not admit exceptions—not because we impose on Proverbs a systematic-theological construct based on what the rest of the Bible teaches about God, *but because the conviction of an immutable God was an inherent component of the worldview of the biblical wisdom writers themselves, based on God's self-revelation in the Pentateuch that shaped and defined their worldview*. As such, these proverbs express absolute theological realities grounded in the covenantal worldview from which they emerge. Amid all that is devious or merely unpredictable in this world, the person and character of God are unchanging (Num 23:19).

This assertion, however, necessitates a clarifying caveat. Greg Parsons discusses two interpretational guidelines back-to-back: "Beware of the Erroneous Assumption That Proverbs Are Unconditional Promises" (a principle already covered under "Proverbs and Exceptions" above) and "Realize That Some Proverbs Are Unconditionally True"—which is where we are now. In explaining the latter guideline, Parsons notes that

[84] Yahweh is referenced by name 87x in the book as a whole, 66x in chs 10–29; the more generic title אֱלֹהִים appears only 5x in the book (along with אֱלוֹהַּ 1x). By contrast, Job references Yahweh 33x and various forms of אֵל 118x. Ecclesiastes, for what I would argue are rhetorical reasons, never refers to Yahweh, but references אֱלֹהִים 39x.

[85] At the risk of lapsing into banality, it is the proverbial hermeneutical equivalent to "*i* before *e* except after *c*, or when sounding like *a* as in *neighbor* or *weigh*": *proverbs admit exceptions except when about God, or when structured in forms to which you would just nod*. The final phrase is an admittedly lame attempt to find a rhyming way to match the spelling trope after which it is modeled, by incorporating the clarification in "Proverbs and Observations" above.

> some proverbs may always be true. Frequently these are connected to an attribute or action of God (11:1; 12:22; 15:3; 16:2, 33; 22:2). However, this does not mean that because the name of the Lord is used in the proverb there is a "blank check" to use in an unconditional fashion. For instance, 15:25 and 16:7 must not be forced to apply to all situations.[86]

I have tried to choose my words carefully, however, in specifying that proverbs are absolutes if grounded in the *person or character* of God. Contrary to Parsons's combination of God's "attribute or action" as the distinguishing factor, I would suggest that deity proverbs that isolate a divine *attribute* are absolutes, but deity proverbs that describe God's *actions* may *not* necessarily be absolutes. To be sure, God's actions are always consistent with God's character; but that does not mean that God's character always expresses itself in the same actions in every circumstance. I observed earlier (under "The Proverbial Challenge") that the applicability of proverbs may be conditioned on the changing circumstances of life or the mysteries of divine providence. Likewise, God's *actions* may vary depending on circumstances and his secret providential purposes.[87] In short, *God's being and character never vary; his actions may often vary, though they are never inconsistent with his being and character*.[88] Consequently, I would suggest that the deity proverbs Parsons cites above (15:25; 16:7) are conditional and non-absolute precisely because they describe *not* God's unchanging and absolute *character* (like the nearby 15:26; 16:5) but God's conditional and non-absolute *actions*, which may vary even in similar circumstances depending on his own sovereign will and wisdom.[89]

Table 2. Theology Proper in Proverbs 10–29

Theology	Proverbs	Pentateuch
God is the Maker of all men.	14:31; 17:5; 20:12; 22:2; 29:13	Gen 1; Deut 28:8
God is glorified in the selectivity of his revelation.	25:2	Deut 29:29
God judges the proud but cares for the needy and the righteous.	10:3; 15:25; 22:14	Deut 11:26–28
God is the source of blessing.	10:22	Gen 24:35; Deut 8:18
God abominates deception.	11:1; 12:22; 20:10, 23	Lev 19:35, 36; Deut 25:13, 15
God abominates arrogance.	16:5	Lev 26:19
God abominates justifying evil and condemning the righteous.	17:15	Deut 19:16–19
God repays generosity to the needy.	19:17; 25:22	Deut 15:7–8, 10

[86] Parsons, 157–160. Parsons's helpful hermeneutical directives remind the interpreter to take into account (1) "the overall structure, purpose, and 'motto' of the book of Proverbs"; (2) "various literary forms and devices"; (3) "the erroneous assumption that proverbs are unconditional promises"; (4) "that some proverbs are unconditionally true"; and (5) "the historical-cultural context of extrabiblical wisdom literature." 153–61.

[87] This fact should hardly require corroboration, but one obvious example is God's divergent providence in not delivering James from execution (Acts 12:1–2) and yet orchestrating Peter's miraculous deliverance from the same fate (Acts 12:3ff.).

[88] So, for example, per Table 2, God is the Maker of all men without exception, is always sovereign, and always abominates deception and arrogance; those qualities and values reflect God's unchanging being and attributes. As we have seen, however, God does not always choose to intervene on behalf of the godly nor judge every act of ungodliness in this life.

[89] Other deity proverbs that could fall into this category of divine actions that may vary with the circumstances include 10:3, 22; 20:22; 21:12; 28:25. Note that Table 2 is by no means exhaustive, only suggestive; the point is merely to demonstrate that God's Pentateuchal self-revelation—via both propositional statements and historical example—informs Israelite wisdom literature in general and technical proverbial wisdom literature in particular.

Theology	Proverbs	Pentateuch
God is the security of the righteous.	18:10	Exod 34:5–7
God intervenes for those who wait for him.	20:22	Deut 32:35
God delights in the good and the upright, and condemns the perverse and the wicked.	11:20; 12:2; 15:9, 26	Deut 28
God is omniscient regarding the thoughts and actions of all men.	15:3, 11; 21:2	Exod 3:19; Deut 31:21
God detests false/hypocritical worship and accepts only genuine worship.	15:8, 29; 21:3	Exod 34:14; Deut 6:13
God is sovereign over all.	16:4, 33; 19:21; 20:24; 21:1, 30; 21:31	Exod 4–15
God evaluates the motive of all people.	16:2; 17:3	Deut 8:2

A Paradigm for Interpreting Proverbs

The issues explored in this paper confront the kinds of questions Proverbs is likely to raise. Many readers wonder about the discrepancies between certain proverbial statements and the realities they see around them—whether in their own experience, in historical record, or in the Bible itself. We set up ourselves (and others) for disappointment and confusion when we nourish assumptions that God does not offer in Scripture. This happens when we fail to read our Bibles (as Kidner put it) "with our wits about us."

That is not to say that God is tricky with the fine print; but he does expect us to read intelligently, thoughtfully, and thoroughly, not simplistically or selectively. When misread, Proverbs can be a breeding ground for bewilderment. It is our fault if we forget that we are reading *proverbs.* Sometimes God graciously overlooks our innocent ignorance and condescends to honest but ignorant faith. But that does not justify simplistic reading and careless interpretation.

Considerations for determining how to view a statement in Proverbs include the following:[90]

- Is it located in the admonition section (1–9, 22b–24, 30–31) or the aphoristic wisdom sayings section (10–22a, 25–29)?
- Is it a theological statement regarding the being or character of the unchanging God?
- Is it a theological statement regarding the actions of God, which may vary depending on God's wisdom or will?
- Is it a generally operable principle within a biblical worldview that may be subject to the providences of God?
- Is it a saying that circumvents exceptions—a sagacious observation, a pedagogical principle, a word of advice, a qualitative analysis, or an illustrative comparison?
- Is it a direct command or prohibition that circumvents exceptions?

[90] Do we parse the contents of any other book of the Bible in this way? A legitimate question to raise is whether any other book in the Bible is comprised of more than one genre that requires such different hermeneutical handling within the same book. The answer is yes. For example, historical narrative frequently weaves in bits of poetry, prophecy, parable, and even proverb—all of which require hermeneutical handling in keeping with the rules of that genre and in distinction from the rules that govern historical narrative itself.

Table 3 attempts to lay out a hermeneutical paradigm that recognizes the variety of proverbial statements in Proverbs 10–29.[91]

Table 3. Hermeneutical Paradigm for Proverbs 10–22a, 25–29

Category	Examples	Exceptions?
Deity Affirmations		
Yahweh's Person, Attributes, Character	12:22—Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who deal truthfully are His delight. 15:26—The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the LORD, but the words of the pure are pleasant. 16:5—Everyone proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD; though they join forces, none will go unpunished. 21:2—The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good. 21:3—To do righteousness and justice is desired by the LORD more than sacrifice.	No *They are grounded in the self-revelation of the unchanging God which undergirds and informs the Israelite culture.*
Yahweh's Actions	10:22—The blessing of the LORD makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow with it. 15:25—The LORD will destroy the house of the proud, but He will establish the boundary of the widow. 16:7—When a man's ways please the LORD, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him. 20:22—Do not say, "I will repay evil"; wait for the LORD and he will save you. 21:1—The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever he wishes.	Sometimes *They are subject to other considerations in the providence of God.*
Sayings		
General Principles of Operation within God's Moral Universe	10:27—The fear of the LORD prolongs days: but the years of the wicked shall be shortened. 11:31—Behold, the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth: much more the wicked and the sinner. 12:21—There shall no evil happen to the just: but the wicked shall be filled with mischief.	Sometimes *They are subject to other considerations in the providence of God.*
Observational Sayings	14:5—A trustworthy witness will not lie, but a false witness utters lies. 29:20—Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.	Not Applicable *Framed in a way that circumvents exceptions.*
Didactic Sayings	13:20—He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm. 25:27—It is not good to eat much honey, nor is it glory to search out one's own glory.	
Advice Sayings	19:2—Also it is not good for a person to be without knowledge, and he who hurries his footsteps errs. 25:17—Let your foot rarely be in your neighbor's house, or he will become weary of you and hate you.	

[91] Garrett "builds on" the work of von Rad, Gottwald, and Murphy to identify the various species of proverb (29–32), though the only relevant major categories for Proverbs 10–29 are Sayings and Admonitions. I am, in turn, building on the work of Garrett in identifying a few more species.

Category	Examples	Exceptions?
Qualitative Sayings	19:1—Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity than he who is perverse in speech and is a fool. 25:24—It is better to live in a corner of the roof than in a house shared with a contentious woman.	
Comparative Sayings	26:1—As snow in summer and rain in harvest, so honor is not fitting for a fool. 26:11—Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.	
Admonitions		
Commands	23:12—Apply your heart to instruction, and your ears to words of knowledge. 23:22–23—Listen to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old. Buy the truth, and do not sell it, also wisdom and instruction and understanding.	Not Applicable *Framed in a way that circumvents exceptions.*
Prohibitions	22:24–25—Make no friendship with an angry man, and with a furious man do not go, lest you learn his ways and set a snare for your soul. 22:28—Do not remove the ancient landmark which your fathers have set.	

Conclusion

In raising the question "Does Proverbs Promise Too Much?" Bruce Waltke recognizes the same hermeneutical conundrum this paper seeks to address. Because his is one of the more thorough works on Proverbs, it merits evaluation and interaction.

> These heavenly promises of life, health, prosperity, and honor seem detached from earth's harsh realities. The promises seem false to human experiences under the sun, as Job and Qoheleth complained, and contrary to sound doctrine. . . . The popular evangelical solution that these are not promises but probabilities, though containing an element of truth, raises theological, practical, and psychological problems by stating the matter badly. According to this wording, the human partner is expected to keep his obligations perfectly (3:1, 3, 5, 7, 9), but God may keep his obligations imperfectly (3:2, 4, 6, 8, 10). . . . Moreover, a sober person would like to know the probabilities, and a psychologically well person could scarcely trust God with all his heart (3:5) knowing that he usually, but not always, keeps his obligations.[92]

Waltke raises a valid concern. If this is the practical interpretational/applicational outcome of one's treatment of Proverbs 3, then there is a serious problem. But I have already suggested two observations that mitigate this apparent problem. (1) His example is drawn from the *non-proverbial* segment of Proverbs; chapters 1–9 do not feature proverbs proper but, rather, extended, contextualized wisdom discourses which deal in absolutes. (2) Deity affirmations *even in technical proverbial literature* are exceptions to the normal rules governing aphoristic proverbs, because they echo truths about the unchanging God at the center of the covenantal culture that informs all Israelite wisdom literature. Consequently, proverbial deity affirmations are

[92] Waltke, 1:107–8.

not merely probable, because they are part of the absolute theological worldview that underwrites all of Proverbs.

> Other steps, however, can be taken toward a resolution. First, the promises are partially validated by experience. The sober not the drunkard (23:29-35), the cool-tempered not the hothead (15:18; 19:19; 22:24; 29:22), and the diligent not the sluggard usually experience health and wealth.[93]

Waltke's own resolution, however, is still forced to fall back on *probabilities* (note his use of "partially" and "usually"), which inherently assumes exceptions—the very problem he is attempting to resolve. Also, none of the sample passages he describes as "promises" here even use promissory language; they are merely observations about the tendencies of certain human characteristics or behaviors. In other words, Waltke has "solved" passages that need no solution, while leaving the problem passages untouched.

> Second, the epigrammatic nature of the proverbs [i.e., their terseness in dealing with only a single thought or side of an issue] often causes the audience to overlook the counter-proverbs that qualify these promises. . . . Without these qualifying sayings, one could legitimately accuse Solomon of being guilty of half-truths.[94]

To identify proverbs as "promises" that need to be "qualified" by "counter-proverbs" is precisely what perpetuates the confusion. This paper has attempted to offer a more consistent, thorough, theologically objective, and biblical-theologically robust solution to the problem of proverbs, exceptions, and absolutes. Once one simply understands the inherently non-promissory nature of a *proverb,* however, one cannot in any case accuse Solomon of being guilty of half-truths. By definition, a *proverb* is not a "promise" nor a "truth" so much as a "truism"—a generally valid observation of how life tends to work in God's world. The exception to that is when a proverb ventures onto the holy ground of the unchanging person and character of Yahweh.

[93] Ibid., 108.

[94] Ibid.

Ash, Christopher. *The Psalms: A Christ-Centered Commentary*. 4 vols. Wheaton: Crossway, 2024. 2,346pp. + 311pp. (back matter).

At $150, Christopher Ash's four-volume commentary on the Psalms is hardly an impulse buy; at 2,657 pages, it is hardly a source of quick answers. The poor or rushed reader might wish for Derek Kidner again. But this new set is entirely worthy of the cost both in dollars and in time because it offers more than mere comments—it offers an entire method of reading the Psalms.

After serving as a church planter in Little Shelford, UK, Ash is now resident author at Tyndale House. His other books include a commentary on Job (2014), *Zeal Without Burnout* (2016), and a number of practical counseling books. But the Psalms have been a recurring theme in his writing, including a work on Psalm 119 for teachers and readers (2011), *Psalms for You* (2020), *Teaching Psalms* (2021), and a Psalms Bible study (2025). The present commentary (2024) may be rightly viewed as his climactic work thus far.

The organization is clear enough. Volume 1 (427 pages) is prolegomena, setting out Ash's vision for the Psalms; each of the subsequent three volumes cover fifty psalms (750 pages each). The central thesis of volume 1 and therefore the entire set is that "the Psalms are essential to the life of the Christian church and that Christ is central to the Psalms" (1:xiii). Ash argues that Ephesians 5:18–20 mandates and guides our regular use of the Psalms (vol. 1, Introduction), and he shows how the Psalms cry out for fulfillment (ch. 1). Chapter 2 is arguably the most important chapter for Ash's Christocentric reading by tracing "how the New Testament understands the Psalms in their relationship to Jesus Christ" (57). Part 2 examines the Psalms in light of worship (ch. 4), prophecy (ch. 5), prayer and praise (ch. 6), Christology (ch. 7), and the righteous (ch. 8), and it includes a focus on the penitential (ch. 9) and imprecatory (ch. 10) psalms. The final section of volume 1 traces how the Psalms have been interpreted historically (chs. 11–12) from the Patristic Era (ch. 13) through Medieval (ch. 14), Renaissance and Reformation eras (ch. 15) to the present (ch. 16). There is also a helpful argument for singing the Psalms (Conclusion) and a vigorous case that "the superscriptions are faithful to the original authorship and historical origins of a psalm and are thus significant for interpretation" (300, Appendix 1).

Ash's program for reading the Psalms in light of Christ is persuasive but at times exorbitant. The history of interpretation brings both argumentative heft and a raft of problems. The weight of data from the NT's use of the OT is inescapable, and even readers who are familiar with the Psalms will discover many new and rich connections from this survey. Ash maintains that "it is absolutely *always* the case when a text of Israel's Scripture is quoted in the New Testament that the writers, guided by the Holy Spirit, open up to us the true, the full and the original meaning of the text" (47). And yet he also believes that the pattern of intertextuality leads us to look for a "messianic maximum" (51, quoting Dale Brueggemann). This seems like an invitation to excess.

All of these patterns can be seen in the commentary of volumes 2–4. Each psalm begins with several opening quotes from historical commentators. "Orientation" places the psalm in the context of history, the canon, and its arrangement within the collection of the Psalms, emphasizing links through quotations, allusions, or echoes. This is followed by "The Text," discussing structure, the

superscription, and each stanza. These comments are not overwhelmingly technical. Most exegesis that depends on Hebrew is restricted to the footnotes, and the bulk of the comments are accessible to English readers. Nor are the comments highly engaged with literary analysis as in Goldingay (2006–2008). Ash is clearly aware of the underlying linguistic details but chooses to focus on canonical links, tracing the conceptual flow and theology. The writing throughout is concise, clear, and enjoyable to read, making it useful for scholars, preachers, or devotional readers. "Reflection and Response" offers five to ten unstructured devotional or practical applications. This section includes highlights from historical commentators and never failed to yield multiple insights that enriched my preaching and challenged my life.

One of the greatest strengths of these commentaries is that the Psalms are not isolated to the OT context or offered as a literary masterpiece without practical application. This is because Ash does not view Christocentric links as a later step to be extended after we have already finished our exegesis in the original context. His readings are canonical from the very beginning. And yet, in nearly every psalm, I also found myself troubled that his approach extended too far. Should we read the waters of Psalm 22:2 as "an image of cleaning and of the Spirit of God" and the food as "an image of the word of God" given to us throughout all seasons of life (2:269)? Is Psalm 125 speaking "God's promises to a mixed church, in which wheat and weeds grow together" (4:381)? Is "the primary reference of [Psalm 126] to the church" (4:399)? Reading the Psalms Christocentrically is a badly needed corrective, but Ash's comments too often lose the first horizon. Ash is also inclined towards chiasm, but the recognition of such structure is not always persuasive, such as in Psalm 122 (4:353).

This commentary quickly became my favorite resource on the Psalms, particularly when paired with Craigie (WBC, 2004) for technical details and Goldingay (2006–2008) for literary analysis. Ash completes the exegetical process, offering exactly the canonical, theological, and Christocentric context that these works badly lacked. Besides the ways that volume 1 challenged my entire approach to the Psalms, I most often benefitted in the commentary from the "Orientation" sections and "Reflection and Response." I rarely completed a psalm without encountering comments that overread the canonical links, nor did I complete a psalm without being profoundly enriched and helped. I would caution readers from relying on Ash alone for their interpretive approach, while also maintaining that these are the single most helpful volumes in my library on the Psalms.

Crossway has formatted the books beautifully, making them a delight to read. Considering the quality of the binding, a slipcase might have been a nice improvement. But at $38 per beautiful hardback volume, this set is already an excellent value. Every student of the Psalms will be richly rewarded by carefully and attentively consulting this excellent work.

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Beale, G. K., et al., eds. *Dictionary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023. 890pp. + 28pp. (front matter) + 74pp. (back matter).

Evangelical scholarship on biblical intertextuality reached a high watermark with the 2007 publication of the *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (*CNTUOT*).[1] Its companion *Dictionary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (*DNTUOT*) should be considered equally significant to the discipline. Arranged alphabetically, the dictionary's 160 articles fall into five categories: (1) surveys of biblical books, (2) biblical-theological topics, (3) Jewish exegetical traditions, (4) inner-biblical exegesis, and (5) systematic theology. These categories cover a vast array of specific subjects, summarizing the latest research and theories in an ever-expanding field that encompasses multiple subdisciplines.

First, the surveys of Bible books assume the detailed diachronic analyses in *CNTUOT* and provide synchronic summaries of how each book uses earlier Scripture. Yet these analyses helpfully include what *CNTUOT* omits: how each *OT* book uses the OT. Thus, for example, the article on the Book of Ezekiel (J. Daniel Hays) discusses not only how the NT authors utilize Ezekiel but also how Ezekiel himself employs themes from the Torah, the Former and Latter Prophets, and the Psalms. In particular, he draws on the exodus, the presence of Yahweh and the Temple/Tabernacle, and shepherd imagery and the New Covenant, among several other OT concepts and images (242–45).

Second, the biblical-theological articles do thematic analysis over the entirety of the canon. For instance, Dana M. Harris traces the Day of the Lord throughout each Bible section in which it occurs, from the preexilic prophets through Revelation (161–65). Harris also follows the theme of "priest" along the storyline of Scripture, showing how Christ brings together the various strands of this concept (625–30). Themes that do not lend themselves to a storyline approach are organized under synthetic headings. David G. Peterson's article on worship provides an illustration (870–75). After discussing key OT terms, he explores OT perspectives such as "saved to serve" and "apostasy and division." The NT terms lead to perspectives such as "Jesus replaces the Temple" and "Jesus provides direct access to the heavenly sanctuary."

Third, the pieces on Jewish exegetical traditions cover a variety of sources relevant to the Bible's use of the Bible. *DNTUOT* includes multiple articles on each of the following: the Apocrypha; the Dead Sea Scrolls; the Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrashim; the writings of Philo; the Pseudepigrapha; the Septuagint; and the Targums. These articles focus especially on Jewish interpretive methods and how they are similar to and different from the methods of the NT writers. Such discussion naturally enters controversial areas. For example, in "Septuagint, NT Use of," Karen H. Jobes posits that as a new divine speech-act the NT may authoritatively use the LXX in ways that differ from the intent of the Hebrew text of the OT (765–66).

Fourth, the articles on inner-biblical exegesis are diverse, covering everything from letter couriers to literacy in the Greco-Roman world to orality to the history of interpretation to typology. But if anything, some of these studies are among the most useful in the dictionary because of their treatment

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

of methodology. Beale writes an entire article on "Method" for studying the NT use of the OT. Updating his earlier book on the subject (520–25),[2] he lays out a solid nine-step process.

Fifth, the inclusion of articles on systematic theology is a bit unexpected in a volume of this nature, as is the classification of an article on biblical theology under the heading of systematic theology (x). Yet these studies are valuable in showing how biblical intertextuality intersects with and contributes to broader theological concerns. Stephen J. Wellum shows how the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon are consistent with the Bible's own presentation of Jesus Christ ("Christology," 91–92). And in a different vein, those bewildered by the contemporary approach known as Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS) may be helped by Kevin J. Vanhoozer's article on the subject (837–44).

The breadth and depth of *DNTUOT* are truly impressive. The work includes contributions from nearly one hundred scholars with expertise in intertextuality. One could quibble at the theological bent represented. I counted on one hand the authors I recognized as dispensational. The preference for Reformed/covenantal authors has, of course, been standard fare in evangelical publishing for years. But it might have been more even-handed to allow a dispensationalist to represent his own position rather than having an opponent describe and then counter dispensational views (Oren Martin, "Literal Fulfillment," 474–80). On that point, consistently literal interpreters can expect to object to the drift of some entries such as Brandon D. Crowe's endorsement of prosopological exegesis (641–48). Regardless of disagreements, however, *DNTUOT* remains unparalleled as a one-stop shop for all things intertextual.

As such, the work holds value for the preacher as well as the scholar. Some time ago I completed a sermon series on Exodus. Looking at Nicholas G. Piotrowski's article (235–41), I can see that I would have benefited from the retrospective connections he shows between Exodus and Genesis as well as the many connections with later OT books such as Isaiah and NT books such as John and 1 Peter. The commentary literature brings out such connections, but seeing them all in one place gives a richer perspective—even when one might not come to all the same theological conclusions from these connections. Thus, in my current preaching on 1 Corinthians I'm motivated to make use of Brian S. Rosner's article on the epistle (127–33). Though this letter does not contain nearly as many OT quotations as other Pauline writings, OT history and theology permeate its teaching. Rosner traces the intertextual themes of Temple worship (Malachi), divine wisdom (Isaiah), the grace of God (Deuteronomy), and the authority of Jesus Christ (Psalms). From these he argues that Paul is not merely responding to problems at Corinth. Instead, the apostle has given the Church a master class in how OT revelation shapes our understanding of our identity, message, and purpose.

For material like this, I commend *DNTUOT* to the reader, and I thank Beale and his coeditors for their prodigious work in pulling it together. I expect that their dictionary will deservedly become a staple in theological libraries.

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[2] See G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

Bird, Michael F., and Scott Harrower, eds. *Unlimited Atonement: Amyraldism and Reformed Theology*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2023. 240pp.

Many theologians today hold to the idea of unlimited atonement while also holding to the other key points of traditional Reformed soteriology. Motivated by a lack of teaching resources supporting unlimited atonement from a Reformed perspective, Michael Bird and Scott Harrower edited this work on unlimited atonement. Fourteen scholars and pastors participated in this endeavor to explain Amyraldism[1] and unlimited atonement, survey its historical development, and describe its role in the Reformed tradition. The majority of the contributors appear to represent the Anglican tradition, though some represent Baptist, Wesleyan, and Episcopalian traditions. Harrower states that the purpose of the book is to promote "a more decidedly theological account of the atonement" that will aid our interpretation of the death of Christ on the cross (16).

Because each chapter has a different author, some key themes recur throughout the book, including summaries of Amyraldism. Some scholars have equated Amyraldism with four-point Calvinism. Unlimited atonement among Reformed theologians, however, preceded Amyraut and has historically been held by theologians who have been unaware of Amyraut or his teaching. The chapters by Crisp, Bird, Woznicki, and Fisher (chs. 1, 2, 3, and 7) most clearly delineate the Amyraldian distinctives. What is (typically) distinctive about four-point Calvinism is a belief in unlimited atonement, as opposed to limited (or definite) atonement. Amyraldism is one of several versions of four-point Calvinism. All views of unlimited atonement overlap to some degree, but they argue for the concept in specific ways.

One primary distinctive of Amyraldism is its ordering of decrees. Amyraut rejected the supralapsarian and infralapsarian order of decrees (Bird, 43) and proposed a different account of divine decrees: (1) to create humans; (2) to permit the fall; (3) to ordain Christ to make satisfaction for all; (4) to elect certain persons to salvation through faith (Woznicki, 63–64). The key here is that "satisfaction" in the third decree "on its own does not lead to salvation; satisfaction only leads to salvation on the fulfillment of the condition of faith" (67). For Amyraut, God is motivated in salvation primarily to display his goodness to all men, rather than primarily to display his glory (Bird, 46–47). By sending Christ to die for the sin of all, he is seeking to "overwhelm the whole world with his mercy" (47). Subsequently, then, to ensure that some will in fact be saved, God elects some to salvation by giving them the gift of faith (48–49). It should be noted that in chapter 11 Allen refers to this ordering of decrees as "allegedly" characterizing Amyraldism, which suggests that Allen has doubts about the role of these decrees in Amyraldism (205).

Another Amyraldian distinctive is Amyraut's idea of God's two covenants to undergird his hypothetical universalism. Bird discusses this concept in chapter 2. The first covenant is "an absolute and unconditional covenant whereby God saves the elect out of sheer grace." The second is "a hypothetical covenant whereby God saves anyone upon the condition of faith" (Bird, 44). The first covenant reflects God's "electing will" and the second refers to his "saving will." There is an "objective

[1] The subtitle of the book refers to "Amyraldism," but some authors in the book refer to "Amyraldianism." This review will use "Amyraldism."

grace for all" that is necessary for anyone to come to Christ, but the "subjective grace of salvation" is based on the condition of faith. These two covenants correspond to two wills in God, a universal will to save all, and a particular will to save only the elect (Bird, 44). In chapter 7, Fisher also discusses Amyraut's argument relating to covenant theology, but Fisher presents it as a "threefold covenant." The first two covenants are covenants with Adam and with Israel, each requiring obedience. The third covenant is a covenant of grace requiring faith. This covenant is divided into particular and universal aspects (Fisher, 150). The third covenant presented by Fisher aligns with and includes the two covenants delineated by Bird.

Each chapter provides its own unique discussion relating to the topic of unlimited atonement. In chapter 1, Oliver Crisp presents Anglican hypothetical universalism. The term *hypothetical universalism* is used to indicate that "Christ's saving work is in principle sufficient to save all of humanity" (28). Crisp believes Amyraut's ordering of decrees is "questionable" (32). Crisp's Anglican hypothetical universalism argues that the atonement "is *ordained to be really* sufficient for all humankind" and "not merely notionally sufficient" (33). This atoning work requires faith in order to be effectual. Crisp then discusses the "most significant conceptual objection" to unlimited atonement: the double payment objection. Crisp responds that because unbelievers do not have faith, they die without receiving the benefits of Christ's work, but they do not "pay" for their sins. They merely receive the consequences of their sin.

In chapter 2, Michael Bird discusses Amyraut's presentation of bi-covenantal universalism, explaining Amyraut's concept of two covenants and his unique ordering of decrees. Amyraut sought to return to an "authentic Calvinism" in contrast to the "ultra-orthodox" version of Beza and Turretin. For Amyraut, the compassion of God extends to all mankind because all people are equally depraved, and they are all equally represented by the Redeemer who took on their humanity. Whereas God chooses to give the gift of faith to some, he "predestines everyone to saveableness" (50). Overall, Amyraut's goal is to emphasize God's mercy and grace to humanity. Though the title of this chapter focuses on "Amyraut as exegete," the chapter includes almost nothing that qualifies as "exegesis" of Scripture. Also, it is somewhat difficult to see how God out of his goodness predestines all to "saveableness" while God's universal goodness determines to give the gift of faith only to certain individuals.

In chapter 3, Christopher Woznicki addresses one of the key objections to Amyraldism, which is the apparent incompatibility of an unlimited atonement with penal substitution. In regard to the objection that unlimited atonement and penal substitution are incompatible because together they would lead to universal salvation, Woznicki treats this as a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. Woznicki then addresses the double payment objection to Amyraldism. For the Amyraldian, "satisfaction on its own does not lead to salvation. Satisfaction only leads to salvation on the fulfillment of the condition of faith" (67). Woznicki argues that "satisfaction" rather than "atonement" is the more precise word to refer to the work of Christ on the cross. Furthermore, if even the elect are under God's wrath prior to exercising faith in Christ (cf. Eph. 2:1–3), then they are under condemnation and subject to judgment until they believe. But according to the double payment objection, this would be unjust, since their sins were already punished in Christ. Therefore, the satisfaction of Christ's death is applied

only upon the exercise of saving faith. This chapter seems to be the most important chapter of the book because of its helpful discussion of unlimited atonement in relation to penal substitution.

In chapter 4, R. T. Mullins examines the problem of how in unlimited atonement God does not get what he desires. After much discussion about the attributes of God's greatness, his rationality, the general and meticulous nature of his decrees, and the relation of human freedom to divine decrees, Mullins questions how to account for God's unfulfilled desires for all to be saved (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9). Mullins suggests that God's purpose for creating the universe is "that creatures can enjoy everlasting friendship with God" (85). He concludes that if one accepts his view of the universalist desire, "it would be incredibly difficult to affirm a theory of salvation that does not offer unlimited atonement" (88). The weakness of the argument is in Mullins's assumption that all would agree that "everlasting friendship with God" is God's primary purpose for creating the universe. Unfortunately, as engaging and interesting as his argumentation is up to this point, the conclusion is unsatisfying.

In chapter 5, Jonathan Curtis Rutledge seeks to "provide a framework from which one can more easily evaluate or discern the appeal of a doctrine of unlimited atonement" based on the nature of the concept of forgiveness (90). Rutledge suggests that if forgiveness is unilateral and not dependent on the cooperation of the wrongdoer to respond with repentance, then it could be argued that God forgives every sinner (if the atonement is unlimited). Unilateral forgiveness does not necessarily entail "that all human persons will eventually reside in the new creation" (99). This depends on the gift of faith. Rutledge then compares forgiveness to the atonement. The act of atonement is finished and complete in the death and resurrection of Christ, in spite of the stubbornness and sinfulness of man. For the limited atonement view, atonement for sins will certainly entail one's presence in the new creation. The unlimited atonement view holds to "a difference between *efficient atonement* and *merely sufficient atonement*" (102). Rutledge's argument is rational and interesting, but not likely convincing enough to sway proponents of limited atonement.

In chapter 6, Joshua R. Farris and S. Mark Hamilton examine the arguments of Peter Lombard, Edward Polhill, and William Ames to understand various concepts of the mechanism of the atonement, particularly in relation to the double-payment objection. Farris and Hamilton "argue that penal substitution is parasitic upon claims of unlimited atonement and as such will either admit of universal salvation or interminably suffer under the burden of a double payment" (109). Peter Lombard is the first theologian to assert that Christ's satisfaction is "sufficient for all humanity but efficient only for the elect" (110). Edward Polhill (1622–1694), an Anglican jurist, argues that Christ pays two separate debts in his death, one to the moral law, and an eternal debt to God (117). Christ suffered physical death in the place of sinners, but he could not have suffered eternal punishment in place of sinners. In relation to the double-payment problem, Polhill simply argues that God determined that Christ's death would absorb the penalty for all humanity while only being effective for those who exercise faith. William Ames (1576–1633) upholds the idea that Christ was in fact punished for our sin. However, "he is not describing a punishment that is absorbed (i.e., a debt of punishment) by Christ that brings the redemption of humankind" (126). Rather, he paid the price of redemption for us, which is the punishment of the curse that falls on all humans—he suffers bodily death. Christ's achievement is one of merit whereby he cancels (not absorbs) the eternal punishment

due to us. Christ's death satisfies God, resulting in God providing benefits to humanity. In the end, Ames avoids the double-payment objection because Christ pays the full debt of honor owed to God for human sin. "The infinite merit of the sacrifice of his infinite self offsets the infinite demerit of human sin" (129). It does seem that Ames successfully avoids the double-payment objection. The concern is the rejection—or perhaps, the redefinition of the concept of penal substitution.

In chapter 7, Jeff Fisher briefly surveys Amyraut's life and theology. Amyraut wrote a treatise in 1634 defending the Reformed doctrine of predestination, in which he highlighted God's universal grace to all humanity. Amyraut continued to assert that his views on predestination and universal grace were consistent with both Calvin's views and with Scripture. Though some (like Turretin) accused him of being Arminian, Amyraut's position was consistent with the Canons of Dort, which left the teaching on the extent of the atonement ambiguous enough for Amyraut's view. The Westminster Assembly was called during Amyraut's lifetime, and a number of members of the assembly upheld the views of Amyraldism or hypothetical universalism. Fisher points out that Amyraldism represents just one narrow version of hypothetical universalism. Fisher acknowledges that few theologians have actually held to hypothetical universalism while holding the same distinctives as Amyraut.

In chapter 8, Rory Shiner examines D. B. Knox's presentation of hypothetical universalism. Knox taught at Moore College in Sydney, Australia, from 1959–1985 and is "the father of modern Sydney Anglicanism" (154). Knox wanted preachers to be able to present Christ's sacrifice as available to all their hearers without qualification, and he believed limited atonement would push adherents away from Reformed theology. Shiner elaborates on Knox's influence among Australian Anglicanism during his lifetime and through the present day.

In chapter 9, Joshua McNall interacts with four different authors who present different variations of unlimited atonement in the twenty-first century: Andrew Louth (Orthodox), Matthew Levering (Roman Catholic), Fred Sanders (Wesleyan), and Tom Greggs (Christian Universalism). McNall seeks to demonstrate that though these agree on the extent of the atonement, this "unity does not imply a uniformity" (170). McNall concludes the chapter with three cautions from these authors: (1) Resist the urge to favor the particular or the universal. Both are in the Scriptures. (2) Rather than just recognizing the tension, also seek to address the tension. (3) Be open to ways in which the atonement provides at least some benefit for all humans. McNall points out that unlimited atonement "is, in one form or another, the consensus viewpoint of the Christian tradition" (181). This does not make unlimited atonement correct, "but it does matter."

In chapter 10, James Arcadi discusses the Anglican tendency to pursue a "middle way" between various theological topics, citing the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion as an example of this tendency in sixteenth-century Anglicanism. Anglican views on universal atonement developed prior to and independent from Amyraut's influence. Arcadi then argues that because of the sacrifice of Christ for all, humans have a dispositional property to be saved when influenced by the appropriate stimulus. The gift of faith is that necessary stimulus. Arcadi shows how this idea is similar to Crisp's view (see chapter 1), though Arcadi's presentation avoids the potential problem of accounting for the salvation of those who are mentally or cognitively unable to exercise saving faith. Arcadi concludes that infant

baptism perhaps provides this impetus of saving faith to an infant or to those who are cognitively challenged.

In chapter 11, David Allen demonstrates that the Baptist tradition has included various forms of Calvinism for most of its history. He demonstrates that rather than representing a "softening" of limited atonement, unlimited atonement was a trajectory long recognized as an orthodox view among the Reformed since the beginning of the Reformation. A limited-atonement view was not articulated prior to Beza in 1586. Allen then focuses on the influence of English hypothetical universalism on Baptist thought. All Calvinists agree that the "effectual purpose" of Christ's death is to save the elect alone, and this results in an "eventual limited effectual application" (209). Allen believes unlimited atonement is consistent with Reformed theology, and he classifies both Calvin and Amyraut in this category. Allen then discusses Andrew Fuller's hypothetical universalism. Fuller was the most influential particular Baptist in the early nineteenth century and argued that a genuine offer of the gospel to all requires an unlimited atonement. Fuller strongly influenced the founding of the SBC.

In chapter 12, Michael Jensen works to explain how the particular and universal aspects of the atonement ought to provide a resource for thinking clearly about the church's relationship with the world. Jensen argues that both Augustine and Bavinck's account of the Cross's impact for the common good are inadequate, and he examines three key NT passages that relate the Cross to the common good: 1 Corinthians 1:1–2:5; Colossians 1:15–23; and 1 Peter 2:11–3:22. Jensen concludes with three primary observations. (1) The atonement "establishes a community of people eager to seek the common good" (230). (2) The atonement unites people from varying nations together into one common people. (3) The Cross provides the foundation for people to stand against the sin and evil brought about by the world and to demonstrate mercy and grace to the world.

In the book's concluding chapter, the only female contributor, Amy Peeler (an Episcopal Rector), provides a sermon on John 13. She emphasizes the fact that Jesus had chosen the twelve, and John comments on Jesus' love for the twelve, though Judas would eventually betray him. This demonstrates the universal and particular love of Christ.

Bird and Harrower have compiled a mostly helpful collection of essays clarifying distinctives of Amyraldism and hypothetical universalism. A careful reading of the book reveals that though each author holds to unlimited atonement, it is probable that most of the authors of the book would not hold to Amyraldism in a proper sense. While all the chapters are generally helpful, some are especially valuable in understanding key arguments of hypothetical universalism. This volume is particularly useful for clarifying the distinctives of Amyraldism in comparison to other views of unlimited atonement (particularly chapters 1–3). Additionally, Woznicki's argument in chapter 3 provides helpful groundwork for understanding the coherence of penal substitution with unlimited atonement. Chapters 1 and 3 satisfactorily deal with the double-payment objection.

Some portions of the book leave more to be desired. (1) The use of Scripture throughout the book is quite sparse, which is surprising since it is presenting a view that can be supported by many Scripture passages. Also, there is no Scripture index or subject index. The authors seem to approach the topic with the assumption that the readers are aware of key texts supporting universal atonement, and their focus is to argue for the logical and theological coherence of the unlimited-atonement view. (2) A

challenge with many edited compilations with multiple authors is the repetition of certain concepts, creating overlap among the chapters. Most authors are giving a summary of their view of Amyraut's contributions, and some topics are covered multiple times. (3) It was disappointing that the authors do not interact meaningfully at all with John Hammett's "multiple intentions" view, which was put forward in 2015, several years prior to the publication of this book.

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Kennedy, Simon P. *Against Worldview: Reimagining Christian Formation as Growth in Wisdom.* Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2024. 126pp. + 12pp. (front matter) + 8pp. (back matter).

In 1985 Al Wolters published *Creation Regained,* a little book on worldview that has proven to be seminal for many over the ensuing years.[1] In around one hundred pages Wolters outlines basic concepts that help Christians analyze, evaluate, and act in the world. Forty years later, in about the same number of pages, Simon Kennedy, an Australian scholar of history, religion, politics, and theology, wrote *Against Worldview*. He is especially concerned about the pervasive use of the concept of worldview in education. Kennedy levels the following charges: the worldview concept is vague, difficult to put into practice, too dogmatic, too deductive, reductionistic, and overly focused on apologetics.

To demonstrate the critique of vagueness, Kennedy surveys a series of worldview definitions. This survey, however, reveals the kind of misunderstanding that bedevils Kennedy's book. Al Wolters's understanding of worldview, to take one of the thinkers cited by Kennedy, cannot be reduced to a single sentence and then pronounced vague. Kennedy could come to this conclusion only by neglecting the totality of Wolters's book. Kennedy never engages with Wolters apart from citing and dismissing his definition of worldview. There is no interaction with basic worldview concepts (such as structure and direction), with the thinkers who influenced Wolters (such as Dooyeweerd), or with Wolters's heirs (such as Bartholomew, Goheen, and Koyzis). The failure to engage major worldview thinkers with specificity is a major weakness of this volume.

In arguing that the worldview concept is difficult to put into practice, Kennedy observes that at his college he needed to have a learning outcome tied to worldview for each of his courses. He protests: "How do you frame a Christian worldview learning outcome for a course on, for example, Greek and Roman poetry? Or what about a course on the history of World War II?" (9). There are academic disciplines in which worldview shaping is difficult, but the questions Kennedy poses are not difficult. Are there no ethical, moral, or theological issues raised in a history course on World War II? Does Hesiod's *Works and Days* provide no opportunity to discuss the origin of suffering or the meaning of work? Does Lucretius's *De rerum natura* offer no opportunity to contrast naturalism with biblical supernaturalism? To ask these questions is to answer them.

Kennedy repeatedly criticizes worldview thinking as "dogmatic" and "deductive" whereas, in his view, education should be primarily inductive. This is a curious critique. How would this critique land if the term *worldview* were substituted with the term *theology*? To be sure, since worldview concerns itself with general revelation as well as special revelation, there are certainly areas of worldview thinking that should be taught more provisionally. But as stated, Kennedy's critique applies only to the misuse of the worldview in education; it does not apply to proper use.

Finally, Kennedy repeatedly calls worldview a "combat concept." He maintains that worldview is too apologetically oriented to be useful in education. Kennedy seems to be trading in a false dichotomy. Worldview can be used to highlight the differences between a Christian worldview and non-Christian

[1] For the most recent edition, see Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

worldviews, but this does not mean that this is its only function. This alleged problem is pronounced in Kennedy's analysis due to his own selection of worldview thinkers. He chose to highlight people who use worldview as a "combat concept" while ignoring those who use it more constructively. This selectivity especially mars the chapter that purports to provide a history of Christian worldview. A focus on different figures in the latter part of the chapter would complicate his thesis.

Herman Bavinck is one worldview thinker that Kennedy appreciates. Kennedy draws appreciatively on Bavinck's defense of realism. However, he dissents from Bavinck's worldview approach, citing three objections. "First, the assertion that knowledge of the world depends on a unifying overarching religious belief does not help us make sense of the educational project." Second, "Christians and non-Christians do not have a different epistemological status when it comes to the sciences and scholarship. Nor is a Christian closer to the truth than a non-Christian in the study of any subject, other than theology and ethics." Third, "There can be a Christian worldview without elements of that view becoming necessary for true access to knowledge" (56). These three negations reveal that Kennedy is not simply opposed to the politicization of worldview or the reduction of worldview to apologetics. He is opposed to the idea of Christian worldview because he is opposed to the idea that Christianity is comprehensive in its claims across the academic disciplines and that it stands in an antithetical relationship to competing non-Christian claims across those disciplines.

When Kennedy outlines his alternative to worldview, he proposes that *wisdom* can replace *worldview*. He gets some important things right. For instance, he concludes, "The world is made with wisdom as a part of its structure, meaning that human action needs to be concurrent with the structure of reality in order to be wise" (80). Nonetheless, there are two fundamental flaws in Kennedy's approach. First, wisdom already plays a significant role in the thought of major worldview thinkers. For instance, Al Wolters's *Creation Regained* devotes a significant portion the chapter on creation to unpacking the Bible's teaching about wisdom and to identifying its significance for a biblical worldview. Craig Bartholomew is a noted scholar of both OT wisdom literature and worldview. His writings often relate the two. But Kennedy failed to recognize the significance that wisdom has for the worldview concept, and he does not interact with any of this literature. Second, Kennedy distinguishes between "practical wisdom" and "spiritual wisdom." He acknowledges that both are united in Christ, but he claims that in "life under the sun" they are often separate (85). Education outside religious instruction is focused on practical wisdom. This distinction, so fundamental to Kennedy's rejection of the worldview concept, is foreign to Scripture. Kennedy cites many verses in Proverbs as examples of practical wisdom, but Proverbs 1:7 signals that this practical wisdom cannot be separated from the fear of the Lord.

Kennedy then relates his *wisdom not worldview* approach to education. He argues that teachers should be free to teach their disciplines according to the best recognized standards of those disciplines without asking how those disciplines can be taught from a Christian worldview. On the one hand, Kennedy says that he is not arguing for the secularization of Christian education (103). On the other hand, he denies that "the Bible speaks to everything that we may teach about in the classroom" (105). He claims, "Aside from the teaching of the Bible and doctrine, the Scriptures offer limited resources for the Christian teacher. Because of this fact, we need to use the Bible with great care. It is not

something we should force into space where it doesn't fit" (105). Kennedy provides an example of the Bible's alleged irrelevance to parts of life: "I distinctly remember the day when someone pointed out to me that the Bible does not mention this thing called a 'Nintendo 64'" (105). This comment reveals a superficial understanding of how the Bible relates to life. The Bible also doesn't mention genetic engineering or artificial intelligence, but this does not mean that the Bible has nothing to say about these technologies. It seems that Kennedy is reacting to superficial, proof-texting approaches to faith and learning without really understanding deeper worldview approaches to education. In other words, his rejection of worldview does not seem to be fully informed.

This failure to understand basic worldview concepts also displays itself in Kennedy's misunderstanding of the role of Creation, Fall, and Redemption in worldview analysis. Kennedy says that teaching civics, biology, Greek mythology, and history can be ruined by forcing them to conform to a "theological narrative framework" such as Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation (104). This statement reveals a misunderstanding of how the Creation, Fall, Redemption categories serve as an analytical tool. Kennedy wants to replace worldview with wisdom, but a fundamental aspect of wisdom is asking how given artifacts, sociofacts, and mentifacts conform to or deviate from the creation order (Creation and Fall). The wise person also needs to discern how best to conform to creational norms in a fallen world (Redemption). Far from imposing an alien "theological narrative framework" onto various academic disciplines, this kind of analysis is inescapable for faithful Christian engagement of the academic world.

Simon Kennedy is correct that the term *worldview* has proliferated in discussions of Christian education. There is certainly much that flies under the banner of worldview that deserves critique, and some of Kennedy's critiques legitimately apply to some who claim the worldview label. Nonetheless, Kennedy's critique falls short on three grounds. First, he has not substantively engaged the thought of the best worldview thinkers. Second, his protest against the intrusion of worldview into the academic subjects and his assertion of the Bible's irrelevance to much of academic life reveals a superficial approach to the application of the Bible to life as well as lack of awareness regarding the theological issues raised in the teaching of the various academic disciplines. Third, Kennedy's rejection of the antithesis between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world is an overreaction to the apologetic emphasis of some worldview thinkers.

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Doriani, Daniel M., ed. *The Death of the Deadly Sins: Embracing the Virtues That Transform Lives*. Phillipsburg: P&R, 2025. 162pp. + 15pp. (front matter) + 22pp. (back matter).

In *The Death of the Deadly Sins*, nine contributors address the seven capital sins—price, greed, anger, envy, sloth, gluttony, and lust—and the virtues with which the Holy Spirit replaces them. The book does not propose to break new ground theologically, but it brings a balanced, formal discussion of the necessity of virtue to bear on an audience that might otherwise treat such a discussion as a shibboleth of legalism. The basic premise of the contributors is that the gospel transforms. It always has. It always will. Therefore, pursuing virtue as directed by the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures is not legalism. It is the expected growth of every child of God into the image of God.

In the introductory chapter, Daniel Doriani defines virtue as "the *reliable* disposition to *desire* what is good, to *discern* what is good, and to *practice* it faithfully, even when that is difficult" (5). By this definition, Doriani distinguishes virtue (the settled disposition) from the single act (a good deed). This leads to a clear articulation of the fact that individual failures and sins do not negate a believer's progress in sanctification. Doriani rejects "virtue skeptics" among both the philosophers and influencers of the modern age (2)—exposing in modern culture what I call *aretephobia* (a fear of or disgust with virtue).

In chapter 2, Doriani addresses both the reasons and paths to virtue. He surveys secular recommendations (be virtuous in order to gain pleasure, be virtuous to avoid guilt and shame, be virtuous to exhibit your superiority or good sense) and exposes them as inadequate. Secular reasons for virtue neither please God nor have staying power. Doriani discusses several ethical theories (golden mean, categorical imperative) as representative secular determinants of what is virtuous and finds them similarly lacking. The chapter concludes with an appeal to use the divinely ordained means of grace and disciplines of grace to cultivate virtue.

Robbie Griggs surveys virtue and vice through church history. He shows how biblical virtues do not match their secular Greek and Roman counterparts (28). Then he addresses the rise of the concept of deadly (capital) sins as those that lead to many other sins (30). Several early church theologians identified the ultimate virtue as love (38).

In chapter 4 Dustin Messer calls for replacing pride with humility. Vice, and especially the vice of pride, is "the natural state of mankind" (47). Fallen humanity exhibits autonomy from God (47). Apart from the reality of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, the world is about power and self-exaltation (49). Humility comes only through Scripture and its transformative work in the gospel. Finally, Messer rejects a crucial flawed understanding of humility (that humility is self-contempt) that is often mistaken as the virtue (52).

Philip Ryken moves the reader "from greed to generosity" in chapter 5. He shows how greed is a "disordered affection," or one that warps the use of gifts God has given by turning the gifts—not the Giver—into the object of affection (58). Ryken nuances greed by showing how it appears in both the miser and the prodigal. One is so greedy that he will not let go. The other is so greedy that he lets go too quickly to grab for something even more attractive (59). In the middle of his chapter, he drops several gems: "Anger is one of the most accurate indexes to our idolatries" (61), and "Generosity grows most rapidly in the good soil of gratitude" (68). In the second half of the chapter, Ryken shows how

generosity—specifically, giving cheerfully, consistently, increasingly, and sacrificially—transforms a person's affections and replaces vice with virtue.

In chapter 6, "From Anger to Graciousness," Michael Kruger observes that anger is the one deadly sin that is not always sinful (77). However, the righteous use of anger is rare and nearly foreign to fallen humans. Instead, we are far too often angry for the wrong reasons and in the wrong ways (78). Rather than positing secular mechanisms for stress relief or detachment, Kruger points to the grace found in Scripture as the solution (82). We must recognize the grace of God toward us. Then we must reflect God's grace onto others.

Melissa Kruger addresses one of the most pernicious of the deadly sins in chapter 7, "From Envy to Contentment." The chapter equates envy and covetousness (91) and does not develop the malice that seems to be inherent in *invidia*. The latter part of the chapter shows one of the primary solutions in contentment.

In chapter 8 Trent Casto covers the transformation from sloth to diligence. He faces several challenges in this chapter. First, the modern use of *sloth* is nearly equivalent to laziness, but this understanding does not pair well with the traditional deadly sin. Second, because the vice lists changed from person to person (Evagrius to John Cassian to Gregory), sloth came to include both *acedia* (torpor) and *tristitia* (melancholy) in a single word. Casto's subsection on "the evidence of sloth" helpfully demonstrates that sloth is not merely laziness but is found in hopelessness, fear, and even restlessness. He summarizes these as "avoiding the demands of love" (117). The solution, then, is to return to the demands of love with vigilant perseverance and fervent diligence.

Doriani contributes another chapter, "From Gluttony to Thanksgiving," in which he observes, "The connection between gluttony and a global lack of direction and self-control is so common in Scripture that theologians call gluttony a gateway vice, one that easily leads to additional sins" (121). Doriani lists "five virtues that displace gluttony: service, thanksgiving, stewardship, restraint, and beauty" (128). As presently grouped, the list is puzzling since it undermines the chapter title somewhat by blending thanksgiving into a smattering of virtues, disciplines, and practices that all correlate inversely to gluttony. The chapter concludes with practical counsel on defeating inordinate desire for self-indulgence.

Christine Gordon takes up "From Lust to Love" in chapter 10. Gordon treats lust broadly in terms of any kind of inordinate desire including a desire for power, pain avoidance, and sexual sins. This accords more with John Cassian's *luxuria* than with Evagrius's *porneia*—illustrating just how hard it is to nail down what the "deadly sins" really are. In either case, whether one takes a broad or narrow definition of this vice, the solution remains the same—biblical love.

A final chapter by Jen Michel urges believers to pursue an organic growth of virtue in their lives through small, repeated, biblically informed decisions. She cautions against modern pseudo-values and false virtues that crowd out the true.

While several contributors make brief reference to the connections among the deadly sins, they do not develop this point in detail.[1] Given the mutually reinforcing nature of the capital sins and their impact on other "lesser" sins, this development could be stronger. Additionally, the references to "disciplines of abstinence" in chapter 2—involving solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, and sacrifice—feel less theologically precise than the rest of the book and seem to favor (given the shoutout to Foster and Willard) the Renovaré movement, which is known for ecumenism, asceticism, and traditionalism. Finally, Ryken seems to affirm Aristotelian virtue with the statement, "The virtue of liberality walks the fine line between miserliness and 'spendthriftiness'" (66). Defining virtue negatively as a midpoint between two vices inverts the moral order by treating vice (and the necessity of knowing it) as antecedent to virtue. While such an appeal might demonstrate ways in which a virtue may be corrupted, it must be heavily cautioned against as an actual mechanism for determining what is virtuous. Christian definitions of the moral order stem directly from what God has revealed in his Word, not from speculative philosophy that defines virtue primarily in antithesis to vice.

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[1] Significantly, the authors overlook Brian R. Hand, *Web of Iniquity: The Entangling of Sins* (Greenville, S.C.: BJU Press, 2016), which treats the capital sins in greater theological detail and would have been highly germane to their study.

Bingham, Matthew. *A Heart Aflame for God: A Reformed Approach to Spiritual Formation*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2025. 332pp. + 13pp. (front matter) + 20pp. (back matter).

A Heart Aflame for God: A Reformed Approach to Spiritual Formation by Matthew Bingham is a comprehensive treatment of spiritual formation drawn from the heritage left to the church by the Reformers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Bingham's goal is to motivate within the current confessional evangelical Christian community a retrieval of "divinely appointed means that God has clearly given in Scripture and that the Reformed tradition has consistently commended as unambiguously biblical and therefore consistently edifying" (40). Bingham's work is also a warning shot to the church that much of what is written about spiritual formation from various evangelicals offers, at best, a muddled view of means and terminologies cobbled together from quasi-religious or even secular methodologies. At worst, this piecing together of various sources is not only confusing when attempting to understand spiritual formation but, as Bingham points out, it is dangerously heretical. To right the ship, Bingham focuses on the Reformers' understanding and practice of the means of grace as a guide to help the confessional evangelical church advance toward Christlikeness.

Matthew Bingham is vice president of academic affairs and associate professor of church history at Phoenix Seminary in Scottsdale, Arizona. He authored the book *Orthodox Radicals: Baptist Identity in the English Revolution* and served as a pastor in the United States and Ireland. He is also a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, and his research and writing focus primarily on the history and theology of post-Reformation England. Bingham's background and experience give him a well-earned voice to address the spiritual practices of the Reformers.

Just as surveyors measure and map areas of land, Bingham begins his work by measuring and mapping the landscape of spiritual-formation practices among the Reformers and that of the Roman Catholic Church to lay out a distinct boundary line that separates the two. The Reformers, having navigated the land from within Roman Catholicism, recognized that certain practices, particularly in late medieval Catholicism, were at odds with Scripture and ultimately stemmed from a theology that taught self-righteousness. As Bingham argues, the Reformers, alarmed by these practices and their intended destination, chose spiritual-formation practices defined by Scripture that would lead to conformity to Christ as the outcome. As he demonstrates, the Roman Catholics of today have continued in the tradition of their medieval counterparts and continue to posit that spiritual formation is a means of salvation. These two distinct destination points clearly defined the borderline between the land of the Reformers and that of the Roman Catholic Church.

Bingham warns that much modern scholarship on the topic of spiritual formation borrows from Roman Catholic practices and beliefs that the Reformers deliberately rejected. Central to these beliefs is the Catholic doctrine that merges justification and sanctification as means of salvation. The Reformers viewed this linkage as diminishing the believer's active role in sanctification—the process of becoming more like Christ—and further fueled a form of self-righteousness. In Catholicism, sanctification is viewed as a mystical, grace-infused process mediated through sacraments, minimizing personal transformation. The Reformers, by contrast, emphasized that justification leads to an active, heart-driven pursuit of Christlikeness (Prov 4:23), not mere ritual observance. Bingham cautions that

the mystical elements adopted by some evangelicals echo Catholic and Orthodox traditions, promoting self-righteousness over genuine spiritual growth.

Bingham defends the Reformers' view on spiritual formation, centered on three core disciplines: the Word, meditation, and prayer—what he calls the "Reformed Triangle." Reformed spirituality emphasizes the sufficiency of Scripture for soul care, rejecting church traditions and extrabiblical practices that do not foster spiritual growth (81). This focus on Scripture is seen as a response to criticisms from some in the evangelical church who view it as spiritually shallow compared to the more liturgical Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. As Bingham notes, while seeking greater spiritual depth, some evangelicals have erroneously turned to Catholic rituals, such as "mass . . . confession . . . penances . . . relics . . . and pilgrimages" (81). In contrast, the Reformers upheld *sola Scriptura,* arguing that spiritual fulfillment is found in God's Word alone, not in human-made rites and rituals. Bingham writes, "For the psalmist, spiritual plentitude and fulness is found in God's word, and one need not look beyond it for an imagined spiritual 'more'" (80).

In addition to the transformative work of the Word, Bingham highlights the invaluable means of meditation and prayer. Biblical meditation, as practiced by the Reformers, is rooted in "directing one's attention toward God and his promises as revealed in Scripture with the aim of stirring up God-honoring affections" (131). Bingham is primarily focused on the nature of meditation as Word-focused, as opposed to Eastern mystics who seek to clear the mind to achieve a state of zero-consciousness, thereby becoming one with the divine. The Reformers understood that the mind must be fully engaged on the Word in meditation if one hopes to reflect Christ in his life. As the Reformers would argue, it is the practice of meditation that "unlocks" happiness for the believer (133). This happiness produced by meditation is rooted in what it evokes: "praises, thanksgivings, lamentations, and supplications" (132). Meditation, as the Reformers saw it, was not a suggestion, but a biblical duty (Pss 1; 119:48) (133). John Ball (1585–1640) suggested that "the most holy" men "abounded in meditation" (134). Their understanding of the seriousness of meditation as a practice is best summed up in Ball's *Treatise of Divine Meditation*. Bingham explains, "Without meditation 'a Christian life cannot stand'" (135). This is due in part to the fact that "thinking about divine truth" has an aim, as the Reformers maintained, of "kindling" or "stirring up" godly affections (136–37). As Bingham suggests earlier in his book, one objection among believers today toward Reformed Christianity is that it is doctrinally heady, dry, and wooden. Here Bingham points out that this was not the case among the Reformers. The Reformers' attention to Scripture was rooted in the belief that "ideas about God are transformed into love of God" (160).

Meditation fuels love, and prayer is the expression of that love. As the personal God leaps from the pages of Scripture to the heart of the believer through meditation, one is moved to speak to God in a straightforward natural way (171). Simply, the Reformers believed that "prayer is real communication with a God who is actually there and really does listen" (165). Medieval Catholicism's practice of prayer was rooted in the belief that the *words* being uttered produced power (177). Opposed to this, the Reformers saw God's power, through meditation on his Word, as producing affections in the heart and mind that provoked "an earnest talk with God" (171) that was "thoughtful, heartfelt, and rightly tethered to Scripture" (175).

In the third section of his work, Bingham builds on the Reformed triangle and widens his scope to address the practices of self-examination, the natural world, and Christian relationships. Bingham unpacks and explores these essential practices of the Reformers, clearly showing a line of practice that extends to the Puritans and early evangelicals. Bingham gives weight to the outside influences that can infect these three practices, robbing them of the grace found in spiritual formation. He notes that self-examination may lead to an overt preoccupation with the self (220). This preoccupation leads to selfishness rather than personal holiness, as intended. Additionally, reflecting on nature as a means toward understanding God and man can morph into a preoccupation with the environment where "managing nature is a 'form of worship' and environmentalism is 'a kind of religion'" (227). Whereas nature is a means to point to God, the current thrust in culture is toward a view of "the natural world as sacred." Elevating nature to the divine does not point man to God but ultimately replaces the Creator with creation. Lastly, Bingham notes that the Reformers emphasized the importance of forming strong Christian relationships: relationships both within the home and in the church. The stress, of course, is placed on relationships rooted in a common bond of fellowship with Christ—where fellowship meets the believer's need of affirmation in Christ, encouragement, and the meeting of practical needs bounded within a covenant of love. Bingham is pointing out that the Reformers viewed biblical fellowship as distinct and of a richer value than relationships formed around temporal interests or activities. In other words, to the Reformers, forming a stronger bond with others rooted in something or someone outside of Christ would be sin (269).

In the final section, Bingham addresses two criticisms of the Reformed-Protestant view of spiritual formation: first, it neglects the body's role (280), and second, it is disconnected from the experiences of ordinary Christians (311). He responds to the first by acknowledging that some view Reformed spirituality as overly cerebral, neglecting the senses and leading to shallow spiritual formation (282). Bingham wrestles with this critique, noting that the tradition is often accused of turning faith into a disembodied, intellectual exercise. To address this, he examines the Reformers' view of biblical anthropology, arguing that their approach avoids unhelpful practices such as man-made liturgies that create an atmosphere of spirituality but fail to truly shape the heart. He further points to the spiritual practices of the Reformers, such as communion, baptism, worship, application in preaching, and the role of sanctuaries to house the worship of the church body, as evidence that the body's participation in spiritual formation was not dismissed but integrated within their view of spiritual formation. The second criticism—that Reformed piety is out of touch with the common believer—is, according to Bingham, unfounded. Bingham quotes John Flavel: "To keep the heart from sinking in such a day as this, to enable it to maintain its own sincerity, is a matter of great difficulty" (311). Bingham argues that the Reformers did not dismiss melancholy or spiritual lethargy but instead spoke of how the human condition is at times weak in piety, emphasizing the great difficulty of keeping one's heart close to the Word (311–12).

From a Protestant perspective, Bingham's book is a bold, winsome, and scholarly work that clearly defines the differences between the Roman Catholic and Reformed/Protestant traditions of spiritual formation. As such, his work lays out a clear boundary line that, as he argues, is being blurred within the current evangelical church. At times Bingham is not shy about naming those in modern

evangelicalism who advocate for an admixture of mystical and Word-centric practices. Thus, this book could negatively arouse the sensitivities of those who feel their own personal walk with God has been shaped by these authors. As one humbly approaches Bingham's work, however, he will see that his warnings are meticulously defended and worthy of consideration. Overall, Bingham's book is a masterpiece. It is both a tool to help one better understand spiritual formation and a means to gain greater insight into the body of theology that undergirds the heart of the Reformers. Bingham is both unassuming and unpretentious, carefully guiding the reader to his salient conclusion that what the Reformers believed, practiced, and handed down to the evangelical church over the centuries is eroding into mysticism. Without intentional effort and practice, Bingham argues, the disciplines of grace may continue to fade away. Overall, his book is a must-read for anyone serious about his own personal piety and the impact that piety has on the church of Christ, as well as for those interested in safeguarding spiritual practices for future generations.

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Lawson, Kenneth. *George Whitefield's Ministry in New England, 1740–1770.* Greenville, SC: Ambassador International, 2024. 487pp. + 29pp. (back matter).

Christians have long appreciated and studied the career of evangelist George Whitefield (1714–70). There are numerous valuable works about him, such as Arnold Dallimore's classic two-volume devotional biography (1970, 1980) as well as his one-volume abridgement (1990). More recently, Thomas Kidd has written a compact and sympathetic biography, *George Whitefield: America's Spiritual Founding Father* (2016). Now Kenneth Lawson has added to the literature, with a focus particularly on Whitefield's ministry in New England.

The author has had a long-time interest in Whitefield, and in fact he expanded this work from his master's thesis. The result is an extremely thorough account. Lawson explores Whitefield's visits to New England year by year, month by month, day by day, and town by town as much as he can from the surviving evidence. For each location Whitefield visited, Lawson combs through all available sources for details. Indeed, the book shows a wide acquaintance with literature old and new on Whitefield. The author uses primary sources (such as Whitefield's journals and letters and the accounts of other eyewitnesses), modern sources (to a degree), and local histories from New England with dates ranging from Whitefield's time to the present.

A valuable aspect of the work is the attention to the people Whitefield encountered. Regarding each location Whitefield visited, the author notes the people, friend and foe, whom the evangelist encountered, and he provides a biographical sketch of each. The author even gives due place to Whitefield's critics, quoting their arguments against Whitefield. The book is also profusely illustrated, with historic pictures and modern photographs, most of which were taken by the author.

The book seeks to be exhaustive, which can be both daunting and beneficial. The account is so full that most readers will want to read it in segments over several sittings, but the design of the book makes sampling in this way a good option. The chapters are relatively short and self-contained. Likewise, the extensive use of block quotations can slow the reading, but they also expose the reader to primary accounts from Whitefield and others that are not readily available for modern readers.

The author says his book is "essentially, a travelogue" as it journeys the roads with Whitefield. I recall how before I visited the British Museum I received a copy of Peter Masters's *Heritage of Evidence in the British Museum,* which took me room by room through the museum and described the exhibits that related to biblical history. In the same way, this book could serve as a guide to someone visiting New England to see what Whitefield did in each location and perhaps even highlighting places that one may still visit.

The book unsurprisingly displays an evangelical sympathy with Whitefield that makes for good devotional reading. However, there is also a valuable original historical contribution. Lawson provides descriptions of previously little-studied aspects of Whitefield's career such as Whitefield's tour of Rhode Island in 1745. The work also conveys the challenges of Whitefield's labors, his indefatigable travels even through foul weather and illness, and the human opposition he faced.

Lawson's book describes Whitefield's preaching, both the manner and its effects. Lawson conveys the evangelistic burden Whitefield felt as the evangelist sought, like Paul, to become "all things to all

men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor 9:22). Students of Whitefield in particular and of revival and evangelism in general will profit from this book.

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McGever, Sean. *Ownership: The Evangelical Legacy of Slavery in Edwards, Wesley, and Whitefield.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2024. 196pp. + 35pp. (back matter).

I have mixed feelings about this book. It is an excellent guide to the views of Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, and George Whitefield about slavery. Furthermore, it provides excellent background on slavery and Christian attitudes toward that institution in the transatlantic world of the eighteenth century, and it is accurate about the general failure of Christianity's approach to slavery in history.

Yet there remains a sort of distortion, perhaps not so much from the author's intent but from a selective focus. Edwards and Whitefield had no problems with slavery, and Whitefield unfortunately actively supported the institution as a means of enriching Georgia and funding his own ministry there. Wesley opposed slavery later in life, but the author faults him for not doing so earlier. Slavery, admittedly an important issue, is the be-all and end-all of this presentation. The book's tone is far from harsh; so, I commend it as an informative study. The chief failure, which results from its design, is to look at the whole ministry of these men in relation to one distinct failing. McGever, for example, relates the encounters of these men with slaves and faults them for not reckoning (or at least not commenting on) their enslaved condition. Yet each man preeminently saw all the people they met as sinners in need of salvation more than any other aspect of their condition. One could note, for example, the correspondence between Whitefield and Benjamin Franklin in which the evangelist turned the conversation to the gospel wherever he could, regardless of what topic they discussed. There is a danger of skewed perspective. Many Christians who have admired the heroism of Martin Luther in defending the gospel have been appalled to learn of Luther's negative comments about Jews later in life. Yet we should not judge Luther on the whole in respect to one of his great failings any more than David ceased to be a man after God's own heart because of his great sin with Bathsheba.

There is also a point of usage that is open to question, the use of "enslaved" as a verb and "enslaver" to describe slave owners. This usage is not unique to this book but in line with contemporary literature. Technically, Whitefield and Edwards were not "enslavers," those who placed people in slavery, but "slave masters" or "slave owners," neither of which is a commendable label.

However, there are numerous virtues to this book. McGever offers an excellent summary of English/Christian views of slavery at that time (49–61): (1) slavery is ordained by God; (2) slavery is the result of sin; (3) slave acquisition has limits (through war or purchase); (4) slaves must obey, and masters must be temperate; (5) slaves deserve spiritual freedom; and (6) slave conversion does not emancipate the slave. Such a summary provides readers with the context for understanding the events of that era. Likewise, although the author rightly faults Whitefield for supporting the introduction of slavery into Georgia, he also demonstrates that Georgia's initial prohibition of slavery was not on humanitarian grounds (68–69). Also commendable and helpful is the concise section on the background and development of Quaker anti-slavery sentiment (124–33), perhaps the first example of systematic Christian opposition to slavery.

Also of value is the discussion of the legacy of these men. McGever notes how, unfortunately, American Methodists backed away from Wesley's condemnation of slavery and learned to accommodate the institution. On the other hand, McGever points out how the second generation of

Edwardsean theologians (known as the New Divinity school or Hopkinsians)—including Edwards's own son—became committed abolitionists. In fact, as McGever notes, this shift emerged from Edwards's own theological principles, notably his description of virtue as "disinterested benevolence toward Being in general." Students who have puzzled over this definition will appreciate the author's explanation of the concept as "the key ethical mandate to glorify God by seeking the ultimate good of another person without consideration about how it benefits or does not benefit yourself" (154). One needs only to add seeking the ultimate good of God to see how Edwards's principle reflects Christ's teaching of the Great Commandment (Matt 22:36–40). This concept led some Edwardsean theologians to condemn slavery where their predecessors had tolerated it.

Whatever criticisms I have mentioned, I must stress that McGever has a point. Considering some surprisingly mild comments by a few contemporary evangelicals about slavery that the author cites (6–7), Christian attitudes toward slavery are far from a being simply a historical curiosity. White Christians unfortunately tend to see slavery as an issue dead and buried, not realizing its long-term impact on American history even to the present. Although few modern Christians would use the views of Whitefield and Edwards to defend slavery, the fact is that their attitudes on occasion have historically served as a precedent to those favoring slavery.[1] McGever's book highlights how Christ's command to love one's neighbor is always to guide Christians regardless of the era in which they live.

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[1] On the legacy of pro-slavery attitudes, one might point out the comment of a southern writer in the Civil War era who noted with satisfaction how George Whitefield was a slaveowner. See Kenneth P. Minkema and Harry S. Stout, "The Edwardsean Tradition and the Antislavery Debate, 1740–1865," *Journal of American History* 92, no. 1 (2005): 73.

Cooper, Tim. *When Christians Disagree: Lessons from the Fractured Relationship of John Owen and Richard Baxter*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2024. 127pp. + 10pp. (front matter) + 40pp. (back matter).

Richard Baxter and John Owen had a great deal in common. Born within a year of each other, both were reared in devout Puritan homes, both were formidable intellects, both were prolific authors, and "both men were nothing if not faithful to the very end" (26). They were, in the understated words of the title of Cooper's first chapter, "two good men" who "came to dislike each other so intensely" that "they brought out the worst in each other" (6). This is, of course, not a recent phenomenon created by social media and the ability to publish one's opinions and criticisms instantaneously (though that doesn't help).[1] And Cooper's point in recounting the nature of this relationship "is not so much that Christians disagree but how they go about their disagreements" (6). Owen and Baxter are role models in this respect; unfortunately, they are not good ones. They do not "come out of this book looking like saints" (7). Cooper is not out to rubbish them; his genuine esteem for both men is evident throughout the book. At the same time, it is not helpful to have an entirely sanitized, unrealistic view of past saints. Their triumphs can inspire us; their failures ought to caution us to remember that they, like us, "are sinners and saints all at the same time" (7).

Cooper introduces the reader to the subjects' backgrounds (chapter 1) and experiences (chapter 2). Both men entered adulthood during the English Civil War but experienced it from very different vantage points. Baxter was an army chaplain in the Midlands where most of the fighting occurred, preaching in earshot of cannon fire and ministering amid much of the death and gore of war. Owen, meanwhile, lived a safe and relatively well-connected life near London, far from nearly all of the fighting. As Cooper tersely observes, "Geography matters."

> Both Baxter and Owen supported Parliament's cause in the civil war; they were on the same side. Yet their perspectives on the war provide a study in contrasts. . . . Where Baxter perceived the civil war as a disaster for the gospel in England, Owen saw it as a triumph. Their perspectives could hardly have been more different. . . . Owen felt England to be on the brink of a glorious reformation; Baxter felt that the Reformation had been jettisoned. . . . Both looked for the hand of God in contemporary events, yet they interpreted that hand in starkly different ways. . . . Owen saw the war as a blessing from God, while Baxter viewed it as God's judgment on a sinful people. Same war, same side, but different worlds. (35, 33, 36, 37)

Cooper funnels each chapter toward a concluding series of probing, self-reflective questions to help readers personalize and process the lessons of each chapter. It is a common enough feature in books these days; but given the subject matter, it is one of the most valuable aspects of the book.

Theology may have been the topic of the conflict between Owen and Baxter, but it was "as much as anything else, a personality clash" (chapter 3, "Personality"). If we think their differences were purely theological, "we will miss the subtle but powerful impact of their experience and their personality"

[1] For a biblical-theological exploration of this same topic, see Layton Talbert, "Managing Our Differences: Biblical Norms for Navigating Our Inevitable Disagreements," *JBTW* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2024): 48–69.

(41). Personal information about Owen is hard to come by, but "one thing is clear: he possessed an ability to advance his career" and "to network, and he was not without ambition" (43). A "political player" with a "relentless determination to get his way," Owen "could be touchy when it came to slights on his authority, and he was not a man to be contradicted" (46, 47).

> Admittedly, it is difficult to square this impression of Owen with his reputation as a towering theologian. We expect such figures to be above the foibles of mere human temperament, but they never are. This is a most unflattering picture. . . . This is not the whole of the man. But it does explain something. If this is Owen's personality, what other type of personality would be likely to rub him the wrong way? Who would he find particularly grating and abrasive? The answer is someone who did not demonstrate proper deference, who lacked Owen's deft political facility, who blurted out the truth as he saw it with little regard for the feelings of others, who had his own implacable views. . . . Someone, in other words, a lot like Richard Baxter. (48)

As a boy, Baxter reportedly had no qualms about rebuking other children for their profane language. "We are told that it pleased his elders, but it could hardly have delighted his playmates" (49). Cooper explores other aspects of Baxter's life experience that certainly had an impact on his personality. As an only child, Baxter was accustomed to having "his own way, with no near rival to contradict him" and thus "lacked the opportunity a larger family presented to develop skills in negotiation or empathy" (49); Owen, on the other hand, was the second of at least six children. Baxter never went to university with its benefits of networking and community, and instead "came to his views, in the main, by reading" (50); Owen spent several years at Oxford. Baxter married late at age forty-seven; Owen married at twenty-six. Baxter never had children; Owen had eleven.

> All of this helps explain the enduring irony of Baxter's life: he genuinely desired nothing more than to cultivate peace and unity, but his style and temperament regularly caused offense and generated conflict. Both friend and foe alike observed his tendency to come across as magisterial, haughty, arrogant, impervious to correction, blind to his own weakness, incapable of self-doubt, and personally disdainful of others. (50–51)

That's not to say he was entirely unaware of such tendencies, as his correspondence bears out (51–52). But it is one thing to be aware of our weaknesses and sins, and another thing to conquer them. "When these two personalities finally came into direct contact, the result was never going to be pretty. . . . Owen was easily exasperated; Baxter was simply exasperating" (53). The upshot for us? "Vocal disagreements that seem on the surface to be merely theological may be much more substantially the product of clashing personalities. Recognizing that factor is surely an essential requirement in resolving the conflict" (54)—or at least managing it with grace and Christlikeness.

Chapter 4 moves finally into the theological issues that sparked their relational conflagration. "Theology does truly matter. But, as we have seen, so does biography. It is impossible to separate how we think from what we have experienced" (57). Their different emphases can be explained "in large part because each was driven by a different set of concerns" (58). Despite those differences, Cooper

spells out "just how much they had in common" and the fact that "we can see both men as Calvinists" who "shared an enormous amount of common ground" but "stood back-to-back, looking in opposite directions and subject to opposite fears" that "made it extremely difficult for each man to see in the other the many points they held in common" (69).[2]

If Cooper's depiction is accurate (and he quotes amply from both men), the tone of Baxter's initial critiques of Owen were "relatively measured" even if somewhat off-pitch (76). Owen, nonetheless, "was deeply offended, and the language he used throughout his short reply made that very clear" (77). Baxter refrained from responding for five years and, when he did, his answers to Owen were "both brief and respectful" (79) but still expressed concern over the potential impact of some of Owen's views. Owen's reply was devastating: "a remarkably personal, bitter, and scathing rebuke" (81). Baxter, in return, only escalated matters, doubling down on his criticisms and making them, if anything, more pointed and insistent. "He complained that he had been personally attacked, 'voluminously slandered,' and roundly criticized as 'hypocritically proud.' Instead of understanding, he had received from Owen 'ingenious malice'" (81). All of this was conducted not in personal letters but public print. The heightened stakes of a reading audience "made any sort of reconciliation that much harder. Pride and ego came into play, rather than humility, kindness, and generosity. The damage had been done. By 1650 the written word had estranged two men who had not yet even met" (83).

The plot only thickened when the two men finally did meet (chapter 6, "Collision"). In 1654 Parliament called "a subcommittee of around a dozen minister-theologians to prepare a list of the fundamentals for the approval of Parliament and the Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell" (95). Owen, a Congregationalist and leading theologian with Parliamentary connections, was an obvious choice. Archbishop James Ussher from Ireland was nominated but declined. His replacement was Richard Baxter, who had a penchant for insisting on the exclusive use of expressly scriptural language in the formation of any confession. Seeing his opinions would not prevail, he decided that the only remaining strategy was "to hinder them from doing harm and thrusting in their own opinions or crude conceits, among our fundamentals" (98). "The whole affair achieved nothing but to confirm Baxter and Owen in their worst views of each other and to permanently darken their relationship" (99–100). Cooper notes, "The great irony is that the project in which Baxter and Owen were involved in 1654 was designed to achieve unity and mend division, but the outcome was the opposite, at least for them" (100).

The final nail in the coffin of their relationship sealed it so tight that the breach was to extend even beyond the grave. But my space is running out, so I must leave that for readers to explore on their own (see chapter 7, "Memory"). Cooper concludes with the observation that "even the most conscientious Christians disagree. It is their very conscientiousness that can trigger their disagreement. They take truth seriously. It matters. It matters enough to take a stand, even against a fellow believer" (119–20). But when that becomes necessary, for it is inevitable, what can we learn from Owen and Baxter so as

[2] Cooper goes into adequate detail about the theological issues on which they divided. I decided to avoid addressing those issues in this review; the larger scope and purpose of the book points to the observation that in the broad scheme of things, the specific points of disagreement are comparatively irrelevant. Our theological differences with one another are constantly shifting, and the goal is not so much to decide which side to take as to learn to manage our differences well.

not to repeat their errors? Cooper develops five suggestions (120–25). (1) Look for a mediator. (2) Never lose sight of common ground. (3) Take seriously the Scriptures "that summon us to unity and concord." (4) Cultivate humility. (5) Consider the invisible factors behind our disagreements. These are followed by a series of searching questions to ask ourselves in order to manage our disagreements more scripturally (125–26).

To be honest, I had a hard time putting down my highlighter. The brief chapters are packed with intriguing historical background, astonishing statements from both Owen and Baxter, and Cooper's own insightful observations along the way.

> We tend to think of ourselves as autonomous individuals firmly in control of our own decision-making, finding our way in the world through the choices we make, both large and small. While this is true to a significant extent, it is not an entirely safe assumption. It overlooks the ways in which we have been profoundly shaped by forces that lie outside our control. We do not choose the family into which we are born, our DNA, our prenatal environment, the quality of nurture we receive in our early years, or the shaping forces in our social, political, and cultural context as we grow into maturity. All that life experience molds how we see the world and how we perceive both ourselves and others. When two people come into conflict, they bring with them a contrasting set of perspectives informed by their respective pasts. Their personal history is very much alive. It operates in ways that they themselves may not recognize, let alone the person with whom they have clashed. Thus, two people can be set up for conflict and misunderstanding before they even meet. (29)

In his Introduction, Cooper invites his readers "to apply the lessons of this story" to how we manage the modern issues that often divide us, confessing, "I have no easy answers" (6). To be sure, there are simple answers; but that is not at all the same thing. Cooper's lists of reflective questions at the end of each chapter, along with the book's manageable brevity, make this an excellent venue for group discussion.

Cooper forewarns his readers on the front end: "Spoiler Alert: there is no happy ending" (4). Ah, but there is. Baxter and Owen have been enjoying it for 300 years, where the spirits of just men are made perfect and the saints enjoy eternal rest.

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Morgan, Christopher W., and Thomas R. Schreiner. *Salvation*. Theology for the People of God Series. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2024. 453pp. + 14pp. (front matter) + 55pp. (back matter).

This volume is part of a growing series (Theology for the People of God) that pairs a biblical scholar and a theologian to address major doctrines. Volumes available to date also include *The Holy Spirit* (see my review in *JBTW* 3, no. 1), *A Handbook of Theology*, *Humanity*, *Special Revelation and Scripture*, and *The Work of Christ*. Though not without its occasional quirks,[1] *Salvation* makes a valuable and often insightful contribution to the field of soteriology.

Following an introduction that frames soteriology in the larger metanarrative context of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration, Morgan and Schreiner develop their topic straightforwardly with a simple succession of chapters on ten major soteriological doctrines: union with Christ, election, calling, regeneration, conversion, justification, adoption, sanctification, preservation and perseverance, eternal life and glorification. The goal of the series to integrate biblical and systematic theology is reflected in the division of each of these chapters into two (sometimes three) sections. The book's consistent organization makes it easy to follow. "Exegetical Foundations" explores the biblical-theological data for the doctrine under consideration. "Systematic Formulations" then organizes the salient features of that data into overarching systematic theological conclusions. Select doctrines (election, justification, sanctification) also include an intervening section on "Historical Reconnaissance," which examines and weighs major divergent views from a historical theological standpoint. These ten specific doctrinal foci are followed by three final overarching chapters that coordinate all the soteriological doctrines considered under three wide-angle rubrics.

Interestingly, the authors begin with the soteriological doctrine of union with Christ, "the means by which God grants all the other blessings of salvation to believers" (17). Though it is a NT doctrine, the OT sets the stage for the concept: humanity's identity with Adam, the Jews' identity with Abraham, Israel's identity with Moses, the connection between the Son of Man and the holy ones of the Most High (Dan 7). Despite Paul's distinctive emphasis on this truth in the NT, "it isn't clear that the theme is the center of Paul's thought or the most important truth for understanding his theology" (24). The authors identify John and Paul as the NT's two primary proponents of this doctrine, though in the eight pages of NT corroboration that follow, they discuss only one passage of John's (17:20–26) and five passages from Paul.

The chapter on election (chapter 2) includes a historical overview that contains these two statements on the atonement: "Universal atonement means that Jesus died to make the salvation of everyone possible. . . . Limited or definite or particular atonement means that, although universal benefits flow from the cross, Jesus dies to save the elect, not each and every person" (70). Intentional or not, it's worth noting that these two positions as stated actually do not conflict or contradict each other logically or theologically. It should also be pointed out that the unqualified inclusion of "limited

[1] The authors occasionally go out of their way to showcase international and lesser-known writers—which is a good thing, except that these citations often highlight unremarkable observations. Examples include notations from the *ESV Global Study Bible* (6, 259, 413), *Africa Bible Commentary* (87, 126, 219, 312), PhD dissertations (7), and a reference to an "unpublished master's thesis" (130).

atonement" (with all of its modern implications) as one of the canons of Dort (70) is an all-too-common mischaracterization of that point, since the original position on the atonement as stated at Dort accommodates a universal provision for the sins of all.[2] Things get even more interesting, however, in the "Systematic Formulations" segment. Surprisingly, the authors cite Ephesians 1:4 and 2 Timothy 1:9 (among many others) as teaching *not* individual election, but the *corporate* election of the church (77). Surprise turns to perplexity, however, when they explain that corporate election is only historical, not eternal or definitive: "God chooses via historical election the visible New Testament church as a corporate people, but not every individual in the church experiences salvation" (79). Though that initially sounds confusing, it might only mean that people can find their way into a local church who were not actually part of God's corporate election of the true church. Poorly worded, perhaps, but so far so good—until the next page: "Historical election puts one in the community of faith but does not guarantee that one has been eternally elected for salvation" (80). Combining those statements, Ephesians 1:4 and 2 Timothy 1:9 do not teach an individual, eternal, definitive election, but a historical and corporate election that does not necessarily signify personal salvation. The muddle is further compounded when Ephesians 1:4 and 2 Timothy 1:9 are also later cited to teach pretemporal, eternal, individual election (83). The arguments for individual vs. corporate election from exegetical details are also inconsistent. Acts "speaks of election only twice, once of corporate election (18:9–10) and once of individual election (13:48)" (78)—but the reason for the difference is unclear. One might think 18:9–10 is corporate because "people" is plural; yet they argue on the same page that Romans 9:18 refers to individual election because the pronouns ("on whom" and "whom") are singular, but that John 5:21 also refers to individual election because the pronoun ("whom") is *plural*. Despite much helpful data and discussion regarding election, the chapter bogs down under the weight of some inscrutable inconsistencies.

The authors correctly ground regeneration (chapter 4) in OT passages such as Deuteronomy 10 and 30, Jeremiah 4 and 32, and Ezekiel 36 and 37. (Other passages that would have bolstered their position include Jeremiah 24:7 and Ezekiel 11:19; 18:31). Unsurprisingly, they insist that "*logically* regeneration precedes faith, even though *temporally* faith and regeneration occur at the same instant" (116). Later in the chapter, the authors juxtapose three possible views: "Is faith the cause of regeneration (the Arminian view), or is regeneration the cause of faith (the Calvinist view)? Or are they simply distinct pictures of salvation that are complementary and do not necessarily fit into a certain order of salvation?"—i.e., an *ordo salutis* (124–25). Curiously, they argue for *both* the second view, which assumes an *ordo salutis,* and the third view, which rejects an *ordo salutis* (125). This apparent inconsistency surfaces later in the book as well (see below).

The discussion of justification (chapter 6) is one of the longest, being one of the more complex and historically debated doctrines—not only between Protestantism and Romanism but, more recently, within Protestantism itself. Against the New Perspective, the authors argue at length exegetically and theologically for "righteousness" as conformity to a norm rather than covenant

[2] See Lee Gatiss, "The Synod of Dort and Definite Atonement," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective,* ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 162–63. Cf. Raymond A. Blacketer, "Blaming Beza," in the same volume, 141.

faithfulness, for God's righteousness as including judging righteousness rather than exclusively saving righteousness, and for salvific righteousness as forensic (declaring sinners righteous) rather than transformative (making sinners righteous). To be sure, salvation is transformative; the issue, however, is whether the biblical words "justification" or "righteousness" *mean* to "be transformed, made righteous." Morgan and Schreiner correctly say no. The forensic/declarative view of justification raises its own problem, however. How can a righteous God declare sinners righteous without compromising his conformity to his own standard of righteousness (175)? The solution lies in the combined concepts of propitiation and imputation (176–78; 194–201). The authors round out their exegetical defense of justification with a lengthy defense of the harmony between Paul and James (178–83).

Adoption (chapter 7) has been traditionally explained in terms of ancient cultural practice (whether Roman or Jewish) and widely defined as the legal placement of a believer as God's son and heir. The authors bypass that cultural discussion and take a holistic approach, utilizing the term *adoption* in a broad theological sense ("invited to be members of God's family," 210) and corroborating the doctrine with a generic range of passages, including those that depict God as the believer's Father, believers as God's children, and Jesus as their brother, as well as regeneration passages such as John 1:12 (210; cf. 114, 121) and all five NT *huiothesia* passages. In the authors' view, adoption is a distinct but alternative parallel soteriological image to regeneration: "Scripture also describes people becoming God's children in another way: regeneration" (214). Regeneration is necessary because people are spiritually dead; adoption is necessary because people are spiritually enslaved. Thus, they define adoption this way: "God frees slaves to sin and welcomes them into his own family as sons and daughters" (214). At the same time, our adoption "is an already-but-not-yet reality. Believers are now adopted, but the fullness of their adoption will be consummated . . . when believers are granted new bodies at the resurrection" (213). This is an overall improvement over cultural theories, but a more exegetically exhaustive and theologically thorough explanation is that adoption refers to God's act of reversing our alienation and restoring our ontological sonship (as originally created in God's image) via a two-event process: regeneration (impartation of eternal spiritual life) and resurrection (impartation of eternal physical life).[3]

Morgan and Schreiner rightly differentiate between three categories of sanctification: *definitive* (aka "positional"; believers are declared holy at salvation), *progressive* (the process of becoming more like Christ throughout life), and *final* (aka "eschatological"; our complete transformation to Christlikeness in glorification). After exploring the exegetical evidence for each of these kinds of sanctification, the authors furnish a historical survey (237–49) of five major evangelical views of sanctification within the context of Christian living—Lutheran, Wesleyan, Keswick, Pentecostal, and Reformed—followed by an evaluation of each view (249–52). The Lutheran position tends toward a static view that essentially denies progressive sanctification. The next three of these views share a common flaw, a "two-stage" soteriology that involves "justification followed by a second blessing, whether entire sanctification (Wesleyanism), a deeper life encounter (Keswick), or Holy Spirit baptism

[3] See Andrew Minnick's three-part series, "Bringing Many Sons to Glory: The Theological Intersection of Sonship and Resurrection in Redemption and Christology," *JBTW* 1, no 2; 2, no. 1; 2, no. 2.

(Pentecostalism)" (251)—all of which the authors argue are not consistent with biblical teaching. Instead, they defend a Reformed view of sanctification but one with an interesting twist. Citing both Anthony Hoekema and John Frame, the authors advocate a Reformed view that "rejects the traditional Reformed understanding of the *ordo salutis*" and instead views all the "aspects of the application of salvation" as "unified under the heading of 'union with Christ'" (251). This explains the topic and placement of the first chapter ("Union with Christ") but seems inconsistent with their earlier defense of at least a partial *ordo salutis* in arguing for the logical priority of regeneration to faith (116, 124–25). Later the authors clarify, "We agree with both [John] Murray and [Anthony] Hoekema that the various doctrines that constitute the application of salvation should be distinguished, and so we have devoted separate chapters to them. However, we side with Hoekema concerning the priority of union with Christ and the inadvisability of formulating a strict logical order for the doctrines" (345). Again, the only exception appears to be the logical priority of regeneration to faith.

Their treatment of glorification (chapter 10) includes a distinctive emphasis that is as exegetically obvious as it is routinely overlooked—the concept of *present, progressive glorification*. "We must not allow Paul's overwhelming emphasis on future glory to obscure" the fact that "2 Cor 3:18 teaches that 'already' the Spirit works in believers so that they increase progressively in glory until the return of Christ" (336–37). Like sanctification—and linked to it—our glorification is past (John 17:22), present (2 Cor 3:18), and future (Rom 5:2).

In chapter 11 ("Salvation and Theological Themes"), the authors (re)view the ten soteriological doctrines covered in the book through a variety of theological lenses (e.g., Trinity, divine sovereignty and human responsibility, kingdom of God, covenant). Together with chapters 12 ("Salvation and the Christian Life") and 13 ("Salvation and the Glory of God"), this triad admirably concludes the book with a theological, a practical, and a doxological emphasis.

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