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## The Legitimacy of the Apocalyptic Genre in Biblical Interpretation

by Ethan S. Augustus<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to accurately understanding and applying something you are reading, properly identifying its genre is an important first step. Mistaking the assembly instructions to your new IKEA chair for motivational self-help reading, for example, could leave you sitting on the floor—though perhaps feeling better about yourself—in a pile of collapsed chair parts. Understanding what genre a text belongs to, along with its accompanying “rules,” is the first step of responsible and profitable interpretation. This is just as true for Scripture as for any text—perhaps more so. Due to the great variety of literary forms contained in the Old and New Testaments (e.g., narrative, poetry, epistolary, prophecy), the matter of genre often features significantly in hermeneutical discussions. One genre identification that often features prominently in such discussions—particularly discussions on prophetic passages—is that of apocalyptic literature.

Portions of both the Old and New Testaments are readily labeled as apocalyptic by the majority of biblical scholars, conservative and liberal alike. In many cases, scholars simply assert that a text is apocalyptic and argue from that (often unexamined) premise that the text should be interpreted symbolically. The fact that this genre stands at the center of a number of interpretive difficulties, many of which are central to one’s eschatological beliefs, shows that it warrants careful attention. What are the criteria for determining that a biblical text is apocalyptic? What is the nature of this genre in extra-biblical literature? Is the label legitimate or helpful for any portion of Scripture?

This paper stands as a critique against the widespread acceptance of the apocalyptic label in biblical interpretation.<sup>2</sup> The main contention of this paper is that, because of key differences that exist between extra-biblical apocalyptic texts and biblical texts, the latter can be more accurately understood within the confines of the prophetic genre. The label of apocalyptic for such texts is imprecise at best and directly misleading at worst. In order to examine this claim, this paper will first set the foundation for the discussion by briefly exploring how genre identification—specifically apocalyptic identification—can and does influence interpretation. Then, the mainstream definitions and proposed characteristics of apocalyptic literature will be examined. Following that, relevant portions of Scripture will be assessed to see if they are better identified as apocalyptic or prophetic.

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<sup>2</sup> This paper will not seek to present a survey of the study of apocalyptic literature. Due to limited space, it will also not provide extensive analysis of extra-biblical apocalyptic literature. Such topics, though important in their own right, will be addressed only as they contribute directly to the stated goal of discerning whether or not the apocalyptic genre identification is appropriate for select biblical passages.

### *Interpretive Implications*

In hermeneutics, properly identifying a text's genre is of first importance. As Cotterell and Turner aptly summarize, "Our identification of what we take to be the genre to which a particular text belongs raises certain expectations about how the contents of the writing are to be understood."<sup>3</sup> What are the expectations raised by the identification of the apocalyptic genre? A few examples will suffice to demonstrate interpretive tendencies.

In his commentary on Ezekiel, John Taylor prefaces chapters 40–48 (which speak extensively on the new temple) by saying, "[Apocalyptic's] features are symbolism, numerical symmetry, and futurism. . . . If the vision is interpreted on these lines, and not as prophecy in the conventional sense, readers will be spared the necessity of trying to look for some fulfilment of the words in past or future history."<sup>4</sup> Lamar Cooper, however, identifies these chapters as "prophetic-apocalyptic." While conceding some element of apocalypticism, he believes the chapters communicate "an essentially literal description of a real future kingdom."<sup>5</sup> With reference to Revelation, Leon Morris identifies the book as apocalyptic (while acknowledging differences from other such texts), observing that it "abounds in symbolism of a typically apocalyptic character."<sup>6</sup> Among other places, the implications of this assessment are clear in his treatment of Revelation 20, in which he denies the reality of a future, literal millennium in favor of a symbolic interpretation characteristic of amillennialism.<sup>7</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, Robert Thomas denies the apocalyptic identification of Revelation altogether (not even conceding "prophetic-apocalyptic"), asserting rather that it is prophecy and should therefore be understood in a characteristically literal sense, leading to premillennial pretribulationism.<sup>8</sup>

Such examples could be multiplied.<sup>9</sup> Differing views of this nature are common regarding prophetic texts in both the Old and New Testaments. Clearly, one's understanding of the identity and nature of the apocalyptic genre—and the extent to which it applies to biblical texts—is of central importance, particularly with regard to understanding biblical prophecy. The fact is that, for many interpreters, the identification of a text as belonging to the apocalyptic genre stands as sufficient warrant for interpreting its contents symbolically.<sup>10</sup> As it pertains to biblical prophecies, this

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 99.

<sup>4</sup> John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1969), 241 (emphasis added).

<sup>5</sup> Lamar Cooper, *Ezekiel*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 352–53.

<sup>6</sup> Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987), 26.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 222ff.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 23–29.

<sup>9</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, in detailing several reasons why he is "not a fundamentalist," provides a succinct picture of the nature of this distinction. In speaking of the figural relationship between Israel and the church, he concludes, "The hermeneutics of dispensationalism is insufficiently sensitive, I believe, to the literary sense of the text (in this case, to the literary genres of prophecy and apocalyptic)." A more symbolic reading, Vanhoozer concludes, more faithfully reflects the text. *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 429–30.

<sup>10</sup> This is the primary line of reasoning this paper seeks to argue against. The paper does not argue that the portions of Scripture under consideration contain no symbolic language. The primary contention here is that the grounds for

identification often means that predictions are not to be taken literally; they either refer symbolically to future events, or they do not speak of literal events at all.

With divergent conclusions reached in so many key prophetic texts, how can any kind of determination be made as to which interpretation is more legitimate? A great deal of ink has been spilled discussing which interpretation or interpretive system best accounts for all the data. In many cases, however, the issue is not that one interpretation or another is incoherent when all the textual facts are considered. If that were the case, such debates might be quite a bit shorter. The heart of the issue is more foundational and often stems, at least to some degree, from this matter of genre identification. For example, an amillennialist position may be fully coherent *if* it is true that the plethora of passages in the prophets and Revelation are to be interpreted symbolically for one reason or another. Conversely, *if* such passages are to be understood in a predominantly literal sense, premillennialism would stand as the more coherent option.<sup>11</sup>

This leads to the interpretive crux of the matter—the reason that answering this question about apocalyptic genre is so important. The magnifying glass must turn to the very presuppositional bases upon which such systems are built—specifically, in this case, *generic* presuppositions. Hirsch helpfully summarizes along these lines:

Since the quality of coherence depends upon the context inferred, there is no absolute standard of coherence by which we can adjudicate between different coherent readings. Verification by coherence implies therefore verification of the grounds on which the reading is coherent. *It is necessary to establish that the context invoked is the most probable context.* Only then, in relation to an established context, can we judge that one reading is more coherent than another.<sup>12</sup>

In our case, the “context” under consideration is the *genre* of relevant biblical texts. Specifically, because of its widespread acceptance, careful attention must be given to the apocalyptic genre—its identity, characteristics, and relevance.

### *The Identity of Apocalyptic*

What *is* the apocalyptic genre? And how can it be properly identified? This section will survey the most widely recognized scholarly work in this area, first noting proposed definitions and then exploring key characteristics of the genre.

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identifying symbolism in such passages must arise *from the passages themselves* and not merely from the apocalyptic genre-identification.

<sup>11</sup> This is often why it is a monumental (if not impossible) task to convince someone of a different system simply by “laying out all the facts.” Different interpretive systems or views (e.g., dispensationalism vs. covenant theology, premillennial vs. amillennial) may be entirely coherent in their own right. The discussion, then, must take place at a more foundational level.

<sup>12</sup> E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 238.

### Proposed Definition

The most generally accepted and referenced definition of apocalyptic came originally from the work of a group of scholars from the Society of Bible Literature in the 1970s. The definition, published by John Collins, defines apocalyptic as “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.”<sup>13</sup> While this definition has received its fair share of critique, for many it remains a helpful standard.<sup>14</sup> Hellholm, for example, says, “For a paradigmatically established definition of the genre ‘Apocalypse’ I would be willing to accept the definition . . . provided the following addition on the same level of abstraction, ‘intended for a group in crisis with the purpose of exhortation and/or consolation by means of divine authority.’”<sup>15</sup>

Aune, however, rejects both Hellholm’s addition (believing it to be insufficient for accurately describing function) and Collins’s definition. While he acknowledges the latter to be a helpful advance, he takes issue with the way it fails to address function and with the way Collins’s approach to determining the definition fails to hierarchically arrange salient literary features of apocalypses. Aune concludes that Collins’s definition “cannot deal with the virtualities or potentialities of the apocalyptic genre and shows little hermeneutical promise.”<sup>16</sup> Instead, he proposes the following definition:

In *form*, an apocalypse is an autobiographical prose narrative reporting revelatory visions experienced by the author and structured to emphasize the central revelatory message. The *content* of an apocalypse is the communication of a transcendent, often eschatological, perspective on human experience. In *function*, an apocalypse legitimates the transcendent authority of the message by mediating a new revelatory experience for the audience to encourage them to modify their cognition and behavior in conformity with transcendent perspectives.<sup>17</sup>

While other definitions could be noted,<sup>18</sup> it will suffice at this point to observe that *no consensus exists regarding the proper definition of the apocalyptic genre*. This lack of consensus does not in itself mean that the concept of the genre is invalid. It does, however, demonstrate that the identity of the apocalyptic genre is not as clear-cut a matter as many scholars and commentators seem to imply.

While no definition may be agreed on, a consideration of the proposed defining characteristics of apocalyptic—which can be drawn from these definitions—may help shed further light on its range of

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<sup>13</sup> John Collins, “Towards the Morphology of a Genre: Introduction,” *Semeia* 14 (1979): 9.

<sup>14</sup> For a helpful summary of key work in this area over the last fifty or so years, including critiques of this definition, see David Aune, “The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre,” *Semeia* 36 (1986): 67–76.

<sup>15</sup> David Hellholm, “The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre and the Apocalypse of John,” *Semeia* 36 (1986): 27. Collins, however, believes that current knowledge of the function and social setting of such ancient literature is too hypothetical to inform part of a definition. J. Collins, “Morphology,” 1–2.

<sup>16</sup> Aune, “The Apocalypse of John,” 70.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 65–66.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., see Paul Hanson, *Old Testament Apocalyptic* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 27–28.

applicability. The following table, taken with minimal adaptation from Brian Hand,<sup>19</sup> presents an effective summary of key characteristics drawn from the definitions already discussed, with the addition of another key voice.

**Table 1. Components of Apocalyptic Literature Related to Form, Content, and Function**

Component	Aune	A. Collins <sup>20</sup>	J. Collins	Hellholm
Form: Revelatory literature	•	•	•	•
Form: Narrative framework	•	•	•	•
Form: Mediation by other-worldly being		•	•	•
Form: Autobiographical	•			
Form: Central message is literary climax	•			
Form: Human recipient	•	•	•	•
Content: Transcendent Reality	•	•	•	•
Content: Eschatological salvation	•	•	•	•
Content: Supernatural world	•	•	•	•
Function: Give authority to a self-created message	•	•		
Function: Change cognition and behavior	•	•		
Function: Exhort and console a group in the middle of crisis				•
Function: Interpret present in light of future, earth in light of heaven		•		

As the table above demonstrates, even some of the leading voices in this discussion do not agree entirely on the key characteristics of apocalyptic when it comes to *defining* the genre. What is the function of the apocalyptic genre? Should function even be a component of the definition? Are characteristics such as autobiographical form or mediation of an other-worldly being intrinsic to the genre or merely characteristic of some works? Still, while the definitions referenced above do not attain complete homogeneity, there is substantial agreement among them, indicating characteristics that are believed to be central to the genre. For example, all four authors included in their definitions some form of reference to revelatory literature, narrative framework, a human recipient, eschatological salvation, and content that is both transcendent and supernatural.

It is worth observing, however, that these areas of complete agreement remain relatively superficial. The same characteristics, for example, are common to a great deal of biblical prophetic literature. In other words, nothing in these definitional characteristics seems to warrant the establishment of an

<sup>19</sup> Brian Hand, *The Worthy Champion: A Christology of the Book of Revelation Based on Elements of Its Literary Composition* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2008), 23.

<sup>20</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, "Introduction: Early Christian Apocalypticism," *Semeia* 36 (1986): 2ff.

independent genre. This illustrates an important concept related to the creation of generic definitions—the more precise they are, the more useful they are; but genres by nature are often difficult to define specifically due to the variegated nature of the works that they comprise.

### Key Characteristics

If there is no consensus regarding a precise definition of the apocalyptic genre, what are its defining characteristics? It should be noted from the outset that, as with the matter of a precise definition, there exists no consensus in the scholarly community regarding the defining characteristics of the apocalyptic genre. John Bailey observes, “In the enumeration and discussion of these various features which are alleged to characterize apocalyptic it must become apparent that no little confusion prevails.”<sup>21</sup>

Even so, while no precise consensus has emerged, it is nonetheless helpful to survey the characteristics that various scholars view as present or key to some extent in apocalyptic literature. Hellholm lists thirty-one such characteristics, organizing them according to the divisions of content, form, and function.<sup>22</sup> He is quick to provide two observations, however: (1) none of these characteristics is exclusive to apocalyptic; and (2) no apocalyptic work contains all thirty-one characteristics. These two observations should lead naturally to the conclusion that, in order to arrive at some form of generic identification, these characteristics must have some form of hierarchy. In other words, there must be *distinguishing* characteristics of apocalyptic literature—characteristics that warrant its treatment as an independent genre. In addition to standard features that receive virtually unanimous recognition (viz., narrative framework, eschatological focus, vision reports), several characteristics seem especially noteworthy along these lines.

The first is the *esoteric nature* of apocalyptic literature. Morris notes this characteristic and observes, “It cannot ever have been easy to interpret in detail, and it properly belongs within a sect or party. It is for ‘the wise,’ those initiated (not necessarily in any formal sense) into the apocalyptic group.”<sup>23</sup> This esoteric nature is directly related to the highly symbolic nature of the visions contained in the writings and also explains the frequent presence of a supernatural being to interpret what is being communicated—another key feature of the genre. John Collins notes, “The constant element is the presence of an angel who interprets the vision or serves as guide on the otherworldly journey. This figure indicates that the revelation is not intelligible without supernatural aid.”<sup>24</sup>

A second key feature of apocalyptic is *pseudonymity*—the practice of writing under the name of another; in the case of the Jewish apocalypses, authors assumed the name of an ancient and well-noted figure. John Collins concludes that pseudonymity is “universal in Jewish and Gnostic apocalypses and very common in the Christian ones.”<sup>25</sup> John Bailey notes the predominance of this feature, stating that

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<sup>21</sup> John Bailey, “Jewish Apocalyptic Literature,” *The Biblical World* 25, no. 1 (1905): 36.

<sup>22</sup> Hellholm, “The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre,” 23–24. See also J. Collins, “Morphology,” 6–8.

<sup>23</sup> Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 33.

<sup>24</sup> John Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 15.

<sup>25</sup> J. Collins, “Morphology,” 11.

apocalypses are “almost invariably pseudonymous.”<sup>26</sup> Though not all define this as a *necessary* characteristic of the genre (see below), there is large agreement among scholars that this is one of the *key* characteristics of the genre. Additionally, while there is no consensus as to why the apocalyptists chose to utilize the method,<sup>27</sup> its nearly ubiquitous presence and its rhetorical impact are recognized by the vast majority of scholars.

A third key feature of the apocalyptic genre is *ex eventu prophecy*. With this rhetorical device, past historical events are “predicted” in the form of prophecies. In his organization of Jewish apocalypses, John Collins distinguishes on a basic level those that have other-worldly journeys and those that do not; he concludes, “All apocalypses which do not have an otherworldly journey contain an *ex eventu* prophecy of history.”<sup>28</sup> Aune also lists “reviews of history presented as prophecies” as one of the striking features of the apocalyptic genre.<sup>29</sup> While this feature is not common to all apocalypses, it is nonetheless a key characteristic of many works in the genre.

The definitions and key characteristics above typify the leading scholarly discussion regarding the identity of the apocalyptic genre. But just how clear are the generic boundaries being proposed? Do the definitions and key characteristics proposed stand up to scrutiny? And if they do, can they be accurately said to apply to biblical texts?

### *The Relevance of Apocalyptic*

Attention can now be given to an evaluation of the extent to which the apocalyptic genre can be applied to the biblical text. Before examining specific biblical books or passages (as the next section will do), it will be helpful to evaluate on a more general level the definitions and key characteristics proposed above. This section will (1) examine the shared features of the apocalyptic and prophetic genres and evaluate the implications of that intersection; and (2) draw attention to key areas of distinction between the apocalyptic and prophetic genres.

### Similarities of Apocalyptic and Prophecy

Referring specifically to OT apocalyptic, Paul Hanson observes, “We are dealing with a term worthy of preservation only if it aids us in designating and understanding certain biblical writings that, while betraying connections with other types of literature, can best be studied as a discrete group.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Bailey, “Jewish Apocalyptic Literature,” 34. He goes on to deny, however, that pseudonymity is a *defining* characteristic because it was “simply a literary characteristic of the whole period; it characterizes no particular class of literature.”

<sup>27</sup> Some believe authors were making a genuine attempt to convince others that the writing came from the alleged source, thereby providing a sense of authority; others see it as a mere rhetorical device not intended to deceive. For overviews, see J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 40–41, and R. J. Bauckham, “Apocalyptic,” *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 53–54.

<sup>28</sup> John Collins, “The Jewish Apocalypses,” *Semeia* 14 (1979): 22.

<sup>29</sup> David Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 108.

<sup>30</sup> Hanson, *Old Testament Apocalyptic*, 25.

While Hanson would not agree with the premise of this paper, his observation nonetheless provides a helpful guiding principle for the present discussion. If apocalyptic is to be considered a valid biblical genre, it must be sufficiently different from other genres to warrant individual treatment. But is this the case? When closely examined, it becomes clear that the majority of the apocalyptic genre's defining characteristics are, in fact, also characteristics of the genre of biblical prophecy.

Consider, for example, the content and function of apocalyptic texts as described by the definitions above. As far as content is concerned, there is of course a plethora of purely prophetic texts that focus on transcendent reality, eschatological salvation, and realities of the supernatural world. Regarding function, prophecies as well are often designed to change cognition and behavior, exhort and console a group in the middle of crisis, and interpret the present in light of the future and earthly realities in light of transcendent realities; such functions, in fact, describe almost all—if not all—prophetic texts. Regarding form, prophetic texts are revelatory in nature, they frequently feature a narrative framework, and they also frequently employ autobiographical accounts.

Even areas that are often put forward as distinctions between prophetic and apocalyptic genres are, in fact, not so dissimilar as some would claim. One such distinction regards the kingdom of God and eschatological salvation. Some have tried to emphasize the distinction that apocalyptic texts present the kingdom of God as arising at the end of time through cataclysmic events rather than the prophetic presentation of the kingdom as arising out of history. Ladd, however, is quick to observe that “the expectation of a cataclysmic irruption into history is intrinsic to the prophetic hope of the OT.”<sup>31</sup> In many cases, when commentators or scholars observe that an OT prophetic passage is apocalyptic, this kind of eschatology is in reality what they are referring to.<sup>32</sup> While there is legitimacy to this distinction on a certain level (see next section), it is not valid to conclude that a text is apocalyptic *simply because* it contains this kind of cataclysmic eschatology, as such can be clearly found in early prophetic texts.

In reality, there is a great deal of overlap between extra-biblical apocalyptic literature and biblical prophecy. Robert Thomas comes to a similar conclusion; though he speaks with specific regard to the genre identification of Revelation, his analysis holds true for other biblical texts as well. Citing Hellholm's lists of defining characteristics, Thomas concludes, “Of the thirty-one characteristics that have been cited in attempts to define apocalyptic, all when properly understood could apply to prophecy as well, with the possible exception of pseudonymity. . . . Alleged differences between the Apocalypse and generally accepted works of prophecy often rest upon inadequate interpretations of the Apocalypse.”<sup>33</sup> As will be discussed in greater detail below, this analysis holds true for other portions of Scripture typically defined as apocalyptic.

When examined closely, it becomes clear that there is a great deal of overlap between biblical prophetic literature and extra-biblical apocalyptic literature. This should, at the very least, raise some

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<sup>31</sup> George Ladd, “Apocalyptic Literature,” *ISBE*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:151–152.

<sup>32</sup> This is why most scholars in this field tend to distinguish between apocalyptic *genre* and apocalyptic *eschatology*; a passage may contain the latter without being the former. Some also add another distinguishing element of apocalyptic *sociological ideology*. See J. Collins, “Morphology,” 3.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 25.

level of suspicion regarding the legitimacy of the apocalyptic genre in biblical literature. But it does not by itself mean that apocalyptic is illegitimate for select biblical texts. If the genre is to have a place in certain biblical texts, however, it must, despite the abundance of overlaps, feature key distinctives that (1) distinguish it from biblical prophecy and (2) can be legitimately applied to the biblical texts. Both of these factors deserve closer attention.

### Distinctions Between Apocalyptic and Prophecy

While there are a number of similarities between extra-biblical apocalyptic texts and biblical prophetic texts, there are also a number of key differences. As observed earlier in the paper, if one is to formulate anything close to a generic definition for apocalyptic, there must be some level of hierarchy as it relates to evaluating its key characteristics. Some characteristics are simply more notable than others. In light of that, the key factor in this discussion is not the number of *minor* characteristics the apocalyptic and prophetic genres may have in common, but rather several *major* differences that distinguish them. In comparison with biblical prophecy, a number of key differences separate the two genres and, due to the nature of these differences, outweigh any similarities the genres may share. These differences include the genres' primacy of ethical exhortation (or lack thereof), their view of the relationship between eschatology and history, the identity of the prophet or seer, the timing of the prophecies contained in the works, and the level of authorial control possessed by the prophet or seer.

#### *Primacy of Exhortation*

The first difference between the apocalyptic and prophetic genres relates to tone, specifically that of ethical exhortation—or lack thereof. Regarding this difference in tone, Morris says, “The typical prophet has an urgent ethical imperative the apocalyptist does not have. He has a sense that God, none less, has spoken, and men must accept God’s word with awe. This does not seem to be characteristic of apocalyptic.”<sup>34</sup> The ethical exhortation of the biblical prophets, however, is one of their defining characteristics. Rather than primarily foretelling future events (as some may perceive the role of the prophet to be), the prophets repeatedly and urgently call for God’s people to be faithful to the covenant. Regular focus is placed upon the sin of the people and their need for repentance.

This emphasis is almost entirely lacking in extra-biblical apocalyptic literature. The focus of the apocalyptists tends to be on the existing distinction between the righteous and the unrighteous and the differing fates of both. Bailey points to this focus as a possible cause of their lack of exhortation, observing that the focus on “the evil which oppressed them from without tended to deaden the sense of the evil within.” He goes on to state that, in general, apocalyptic literature demonstrates “non-recognition of any defection on the part of the chosen or elect.”<sup>35</sup> Hand further notes the distinction, saying, “Apocalypses rarely exhort their communities to do anything other than ‘hang on’ until the end. Prophecy requires its broader audience to respond to personal deficiencies by faith in the revealed

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<sup>34</sup> Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 33.

<sup>35</sup> Bailey, “Jewish Apocalyptic Literature,” 39–40.

Word.”<sup>36</sup> This difference in tone presents a marked point of contrast between biblical prophecy and extra-biblical apocalyptic literature.

### *View of Eschatology and History*

Another key difference between apocalyptic and prophetic texts relates to their views of the relationship between eschatology and history. As discussed above, both apocalyptic literature and biblical prophecy anticipate cataclysmic divine intervention at the end of the age. For apocalyptic literature, however, the heavy emphasis on this expectation results in a largely dualistic sense of world history and eschatology—the present age and the future age are viewed as entirely distinct. The salvation of God’s people and the judgment of the wicked do not arise through the normal course of world history but rather through decisive and cataclysmic divine intervention at the end of the age. On the other hand, biblical prophets, while also proclaiming the reality of such divine intervention, are also profoundly aware of God’s working in and through the course of human history. This emphasis on God’s hand at work in human history is evident, among other ways, in the way OT prophets at times speak of immediately impending events while using similar terminology to describe events anticipated at the end of the age.<sup>37</sup> They viewed God as active in the events of their times and anticipated that his activity would continue through the end of the age and manifest itself in even greater ways.

In light of this difference between apocalyptic and prophecy, Ladd observes, “The tension between history and eschatology is one of the most distinctive marks of prophetic eschatology in contrast to Jewish apocalyptic.”<sup>38</sup> The apocalyptic view of history and the time period of its authors is characteristically pessimistic. The writings convey the reality that God’s hand is largely absent from the current age (which is hopelessly evil), and only at the end of the age will God finally intervene in the course of human affairs. The prophets, however, see God’s hand at work in the course of history and call their readers to do the same. Morris observes, “[M]ore characteristically the prophets are interested in what takes place on this present earth. They are interested in the resolution of present difficulties and they concentrate on national hopes and the like.”<sup>39</sup> Though the prophets at times express despair over the current conditions of the world and the *apparent* lack of divine intervention, they typically also present a counterbalancing emphasis on God’s present work. The prophets and the apocalyptists possess characteristically differing views on the course of world history and God’s involvement within it.

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<sup>36</sup> Hand, *The Worthy Champion*, 32.

<sup>37</sup> Amos, for example, uses “Day of the LORD” terminology to prophesy exile and judgment for the people of Israel—a judgment that would follow soon after his prophecy (see Amos 5:18–20, 27). While also speaking of the Day of the Lord, however, he foretells a time of greater, worldwide judgment (8:7–10) as well as a time of future restoration for Israel (9:11–15). See Ladd, “Apocalyptic Literature,” 153 for further discussion on this point.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>39</sup> Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 42.

### *The Identity of the Prophet or Seer*

While the last few subsections have highlighted various ways in which the prophetic and apocalyptic genres are distinct, the next three distinctions are of such a nature that they strain any similarities between the generic categories virtually—if not in reality—to the point of making the genres mutually exclusive. Each of the following three distinctions relates to the *nature of the supposed revelation and the revelatory process*.

The first relates to the identity of the prophet or seer. Of particular relevance here is the prevalence of pseudonymity in apocalyptic writings. Again, pseudonymity is one of the defining characteristics of the apocalyptic genre. As referenced above, Bailey seeks to discount that this as a defining characteristic, stating that much of the literature in that time period—including large parts of the OT—was pseudonymous.<sup>40</sup> But for the conservative who upholds scriptural authorial claims, such a line of reasoning is, of course, problematic. If the Bible's authorial claims are true, then no portion of the Old or New Testaments could rightfully be claimed to be pseudonymous. The Book of Revelation, in fact, is the primary book scholars point to as an example of an apocalyptic work that is *not* pseudonymous. But if Revelation is *not* accepted as apocalyptic (see below for further discussion), then the case for pseudonymity as a defining characteristic of the genre becomes much stronger. Overall, apocalyptic works are demonstrably pseudonymous; the same cannot be said for the biblical prophets.

### *The Timing of Prophecies*

Another difference between the apocalyptic and prophetic genres related to the nature of revelation is the timing of the prophecies contained in the books. As discussed above, both Collins and Aune acknowledge that, though not present in all apocalyptic texts, *ex eventu* prophecy is a notable feature of the genre.<sup>41</sup> Biblical prophecy, on the other hand, contains legitimate prophecies of future events. It is vital that the importance of this distinction not be downplayed. When prophecy appears in extra-biblical apocalypses, it is *always* pseudo-prophecy—description of past historical events in the form of prophetic predictions. For a biblical prophetic text to be labeled as apocalyptic, then, one of two things would need to be true: (1) the book would need to lack a key defining characteristic *that typifies all extra-biblical apocalyptic prophecies*, or (2) the biblical prophecy would, in fact, have to be *ex eventu*.

As did the previous distinction, this represents an area in which those who hold a high view of Scripture must be careful not to be unduly swayed by the reasoning of those who deny inspiration and inerrancy. For many, the failure to give proper weight to this generic distinction arises from the fact that they do not believe that Scripture contains *any* legitimate prophecies; all such passages are viewed as either symbolic or as *ex eventu*.<sup>42</sup> For those who hold to the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture, then, the remaining option regarding an apocalyptic identification of such texts is that they must be labeled as apocalyptic *despite the fact that they lack a key defining characteristic that typifies all extra-*

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<sup>40</sup> Bailey, "Jewish Apocalyptic Literature," 34.

<sup>41</sup> J. Collins, "The Jewish Apocalypses," 22; Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 108.

<sup>42</sup> As discussed below, the dominant view from critical scholars is that Daniel 7–12, for example, was written centuries after it claims to have been written.

*biblical apocalyptic prophecies*. While such could be possible, the more simple explanation—and the explanation that allows defining generic categories to carry due weight—is that such biblical passages should not be labeled as apocalyptic.

This distinction arises naturally from the previous one: because apocalyptic texts were pseudonymous, the prophecies they contain necessarily feature nothing more than highly symbolic retellings of past events. Conversely, because biblical prophecies came from genuine prophets, they contain legitimate prophecies. The final distinction related to the nature of revelation carries forward a similar emphasis.

### *The Level of Authorial Control*

A final notable difference related to the nature of revelation is the level of control exerted over the message by the author (i.e., the prophet or seer). In short, biblical prophecy places a heavy emphasis on the inspired speech of God, and the prophets themselves often seem to play little to no role in determining the content and shape of the message they proclaim. The apocalyptists, however, seem to exert a much greater degree of control over the content of their writings, and they place much less emphasis on the inspired, authoritative speech of the Lord. Collins summarizes, “We seldom find direct inspired speech, which is typical of prophetic oracles, in the apocalypses.”<sup>43</sup>

The biblical prophets feature a clear emphasis on the inspired word of the Lord. For example, their writings are replete with the introductory formula, “Thus says the LORD.”<sup>44</sup> A number of passages in the prophets also feature instructions to the prophets that they are to speak what God tells them.<sup>45</sup> Second Peter 1:20–21 contains one of Scripture’s clearest statements on the matter of authorial control in revelation: “No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (ESV). While the ministry of the prophets involved more than mere repetition, their messages were always centered on the communication of God himself. The biblical prophets were responsible to proclaim the message they had been given by the Lord—not their own.

On many occasions, however, apocalyptists seem to display a great deal of control over the form and content of the messages they proclaim.<sup>46</sup> D. S. Russell observes, “The apocalyptists *give full rein to their imaginations* in extravagant and exotic language and in imagery of a fantastic and bizarre kind. To such an extent is this true that symbolism may be said to be the language of apocalyptic.”<sup>47</sup> Later, he similarly observes, “This is a highly imaginative literature in which *the inventive faculties of the*

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<sup>43</sup> J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 18.

<sup>44</sup> This construction appears over 350 times in the prophets; similarly, 221 of the OT’s 241 occurrences of the phrase, “the word of the LORD,” appear in the prophetic books. See Eugene H. Merrill, Mark F. Rooper, and Michael A. Grisanti, *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011), 362, 364.

<sup>45</sup> Consider alone the prophetic calls of Isaiah (Isa 6:8–9), Jeremiah (Jer 1:7–9), and Ezekiel (Ezek 4:1–11).

<sup>46</sup> Aune observes, “Apocalyptic literature is often distinguished from prophecy by emphasizing the interpretative role of the apocalyptist in contrast to the direct revelation characteristic of OT classical prophecy.” Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 113.

<sup>47</sup> D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 122 (emphasis added).

writers are given free scope.<sup>48</sup> The fact that the apocalyptic writers had to shape their message—and that they did so with highly symbolic language—makes perfect sense in light of the fact that their messages did not come from God (as did the prophets’), and their prophesies were illegitimate.<sup>49</sup>

Each of these distinctions underscores the profound level of separation between the biblical prophets and the extra-biblical apocalyptists. In conclusion, when apocalyptic characteristics that cannot be legitimately applied to biblical texts (e.g., pseudonymity, *ex eventu* prophecy) are taken out of consideration, the remaining characteristics can be unproblematically attributed to the prophetic genre. While similar in many ways, the two genres possess key differences that far outweigh any similarities they may possess. In the case of biblical texts, the high degree of overlap with apocalyptic simply points to the reality that there is no need to establish a separate genre for so-called apocalyptic texts.

In light of these observations, it seems best to conclude that texts contained within biblical prophetic books cannot be accurately labeled as apocalyptic—a claim that will be examined in greater detail below. But if such is truly the case, how should they be treated? What generic classification best suits them?

### *The Hermeneutical Alternative*

To return to Hanson’s metric, the generic label of apocalyptic is useful only if the texts under consideration are sufficiently unique so as to warrant specialized treatment.<sup>50</sup> But what if, as this paper has argued, that is not the case? The previous section argued (1) that the apocalyptic and biblical prophetic genres display significant overlap, which at least provides room for the possibility that the former may not be a necessary category, and (2) that even if the texts under consideration display some unique attributes, the label of apocalyptic is illegitimate due to key differences between the apocalyptic and prophetic genres. But if the label is judged to be illegitimate, how should relevant biblical passages be handled? What is the most accurate generic designation?

The great degree of similarity between the prophetic and apocalyptic genres has led many to suggest a genre identification that features some combination of the two labels. Ladd, for example, argues that “prophetic-apocalyptic” is a suitable designation that describes the teaching of the prophets and even of Jesus.<sup>51</sup> But is such a designation actually helpful? On careful analysis, it seems best to avoid such a combination for several reasons. First, as the previous section demonstrated, while there is a good deal of overlap between the genres, there are a number of striking differences. And the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 158 (emphasis added).

<sup>49</sup> Along these lines, Hand observes, “That a predominantly symbolic method applies at least to extra-canonical apocalypses is self-evident since none of the non-canonical apocalypses address literal future events. The writers of the apocalypses had no divine input and could not accurately depict the world to come.” Brian Hand, *The Climax of Biblical Prophecy: A Guide to Interpreting Revelation* (Greenville, SC: JourneyForth Academic, 2012), 152.

<sup>50</sup> Hanson, *Old Testament Apocalyptic*, 25.

<sup>51</sup> George Ladd, “Why Not Prophetic-Apocalyptic?” *JBL* 76, no. 3 (1957): 196. It should be noted that Ladd here is referring to *eschatology* more than *genre* (the primary focus of this paper); still, his observation has implications for the latter and is representative of the desire for a combined focus.

differences are of such a nature that the two genres cannot stand side by side without doing interpretive violence to one set of generic characteristics or the other.<sup>52</sup>

Second, as illustrated in the opening section, the label *apocalyptic*, even if it is combined with another qualifier, typically signals to readers that they should be anticipating highly symbolic interpretation. In light of that, it is questionable whether such a combined label is helpful. Thomas observes similarly along these lines with specific reference to Revelation, saying, “A blending of genres such as ‘prophetic-apocalyptic’ or ‘prophetic-apocalyptic-epistolary’ is not the best answer because it does not allow for the preeminence of the book’s prophetic character.”<sup>53</sup> In some cases, when authors use such combined designations, they are simply attempting to refer to unique aspects of the scriptural material that are genuinely present in the text (e.g., the unique nature of the heavenly visions). But the contention of this paper is that the apocalyptic label has enough “baggage” associated with it (viz., the automatic expectation of highly symbolic language) that its use causes more confusion than help.<sup>54</sup>

It seems preferable, then, to view the passages under consideration simply as prophetic while acknowledging that they may possess unique attributes that distinguish them from other portions of prophecy. This is not to deny, of course, that distinct “sub-genres” or forms may appear within an overarching genre. Richard Patterson observes that the prophetic books contain the “minor genres” of prayer, hymns and songs, laments, satire, vision reports, and more.<sup>55</sup> But it is doubtful whether apocalyptic should even be considered as a legitimate sub-genre based on the significant distinctions between prophesy and apocalypse. As stated above, when apocalyptic characteristics that cannot be legitimately applied to biblical texts (e.g., pseudonymity, *ex eventu* prophecy) are taken out of consideration, all of the remaining “apocalyptic” characteristics—including visions, the presence of other-worldly beings, and symbolic language—can be satisfactorily explained within the confines of the prophetic genre.

The identification and interpretation of such features, then, must be driven primarily by the immediate context and not by a genre identification (viz., apocalyptic). Avoiding the inaccurate or misleading apocalyptic label can help protect against imposing foreign hermeneutical principles such as the undue predisposition toward symbolic interpretation. As for the interpretation of visions, symbolic language, and cataclysmic eschatology—supposedly all characteristics of apocalyptic—the

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<sup>52</sup> See “Genre of Apocalypse,” *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 35–36. Hand makes this observation with regard to the generic identification of Revelation. He says, “Many scholars acknowledge that Revelation lacks a number of prominent characteristics of standard apocalypses including pseudonymity, *ex eventu* prophecy, and pessimism; but by defining apocalypse broadly, they are able to dismiss these characteristics as tangential to the genre debate. This requires the assumption that the text is apocalypse whether it meets the standard qualifications or not. *A predisposition toward the inclusion of a text that has striking dissimilarities with the other texts of the genre distorts the definition of that genre.*” *The Worthy Champion*, 24 (emphasis added).

<sup>53</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 28.

<sup>54</sup> Again, this is not to argue that the texts under consideration contain no symbolic language. Scripture is full of symbolic language, and the prophetic texts are no exception. The main contention here is that the apocalyptic label unnecessarily predisposes toward symbolic interpretation when the warrant for such an interpretation must instead be grounded in the text itself.

<sup>55</sup> Richard Patterson, “Old Testament Prophecy,” in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 304–5.

passages that contain them should be understood according to the normal conventions of biblical interpretation. And despite the unique characteristics of such elements, that means interpreting with a characteristically literal hermeneutic that properly takes poetic and symbolic language into account.<sup>56</sup>

### *Examination of Relevant Texts*

With this general hermeneutical alternative in mind, it will now be helpful to briefly examine specific passages or books that are commonly identified as apocalyptic, assessing that identification according to the features of the passages themselves. A detailed generic assessment of each passage is beyond the scope of this paper. What follows is simply an overview that serves to illustrate and apply the analysis above with reference to specific biblical texts typically labeled as apocalyptic. In light of that, attention will be given only to the features of these books or passages that are most influential regarding their alleged apocalyptic identities. In the survey that follows, greater attention will be given to Daniel and Revelation as the two portions of Scripture most commonly identified as apocalyptic. Between those two sections, more abbreviated attention will be given simultaneously to portions of Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Zechariah and then to the Olivet Discourse.

### Daniel 7–12

The latter half of the Book of Daniel is one of two portions of Scripture most readily labeled as apocalyptic by the majority of biblical scholars (the other being Revelation). Collins, for example, identifies these chapters as “the only full-blown apocalypse in the Hebrew Bible.”<sup>57</sup> Ladd further identifies Daniel 7–12 as the earliest apocalypse, standing as the source that subsequent apocalypses imitated.<sup>58</sup> But is this assessment—which enjoys such widespread support—legitimate in the end?

The case for an apocalyptic designation is not as favorable as many would assume. Baldwin, for example, observes, “Scholars are generally agreed that the book of Daniel is the example par excellence of apocalyptic in the Old Testament, and yet, on most definitions of the term, *it proves to be an exception.*”<sup>59</sup> The ready identification of the book as apocalyptic is, in fact, founded on two coordinating, faulty assumptions: its late date and its pseudonymous authorship. In his commentary on Daniel, for example, Collins points to pseudonymity and *ex eventu* prophecy as defining features of the apocalyptic genre. After noting the “essentially accurate” Hellenistic details in chapter 11 and the “notoriously confused” Babylonian and Persian elements, Collins concludes, “In view of these

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<sup>56</sup> For a brief but helpful discussion on the basis of a characteristically literal interpretation and how that applies to biblical symbolism, see Hand, *The Climax of Biblical Prophecy*, 10–21. In this section Hand defends the idea that a word or phrase should be understood in its plain, literal sense unless the context makes it clear that this is so. He also presents and defends the ideas that (1) Scripture regularly indicates and interprets symbols, and (2) the record of fulfilled biblical prophecy sets a precedent for the expectation of a literal fulfillment of prophecy.

<sup>57</sup> J. Collins, “The Jewish Apocalypses,” 30.

<sup>58</sup> Ladd, “Apocalyptic Literature,” 151.

<sup>59</sup> Joyce Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978), 52 (emphasis added).

considerations, the balance of probability is overwhelmingly in favor of a Maccabean date, at least for the revelation of chapters 7–12, which clearly have their focus in that period.”<sup>60</sup>

Both assumptions, however, are ultimately unproven and unnecessary. First, the belief that Daniel is pseudonymous makes little sense when considered in light of the standard practice of apocalyptic pseudonymity. The other Jewish apocalypses are written under the names of renowned Jewish figures of the past—Abraham, Enoch, and Ezra, for example.<sup>61</sup> Daniel, however, is unknown in the Jewish canon outside of the book that bears his name. For an apocalyptic author to assume the identity of such a figure (particularly one who resided in a foreign land) runs counter to the standard practice of the apocalyptic authors of the day. Insistence on pseudonymity in this case, however, seems to be rooted in the second unproven and unnecessary assumption—the late date of the book.

The implication derived from a natural reading of the book of Daniel itself is that it was written (or completed) around the sixth century B.C. Most scholars who readily define the book as pseudonymous, however, posit a second-century date for the book. While a detailed discussion of the dating and unity of the book is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be observed that there is no extant evidence that demands a late date of the book, and there is a great deal of evidence that favors an early date.<sup>62</sup> As Hand observes, however, one of the primary reasons for this late dating is the accuracy of the prophecies contained in these chapters; because the referents (particularly those of chapter 11) are so clear, liberal interpreters default to a late date because to do otherwise would be to open the door for the legitimacy of prophecy.<sup>63</sup>

Based on a conservative understanding of date and authorship, then, the Book of Daniel has little reason to be classified as apocalyptic. Several of the characteristics most regularly pointed to in support of the identification—pseudonymity and *ex eventu* prophecy—do not, in reality, apply to the book. Additionally, a fifth-to-sixth century date of composition puts the book well outside the influence of other apocalyptic writings, making its inclusion in the genre unrealistic and inaccurate. Along these lines, some of the other features of chapters 7–12 that are typically identified as apocalyptic (e.g., visionary experiences, a supernatural mediator) may be explained by the fact that the extra-biblical apocalypses—which followed some three to five centuries later—copied Daniel’s method and content.<sup>64</sup> To force Daniel into the apocalyptic mold, then, is somewhat of a “generic anachronism.” The book fits much more naturally within the prophetic tradition.

#### Ezekiel 40–48, Isaiah 24–27, and Zechariah 9–14

Though each of these three sections could receive extensive individual treatment with regard to their supposed apocalyptic identity (particularly Ezekiel), they will be treated together due to limited space and because the factors involved in all three sections feature a great deal of overlap. This overlap

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<sup>60</sup> John Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 26.

<sup>61</sup> Even Baruch would have been a recognizable name due to his place in Jeremiah.

<sup>62</sup> For a helpful treatment of the unity and date of the book, see Baldwin, *Daniel*, 39–52.

<sup>63</sup> Hand, *The Climax of Biblical Prophecy*, 16.

<sup>64</sup> Ladd, “Apocalyptic Literature,” 151.

begins with the fact that most scholars acknowledge that these sections should *not* be labeled as fully apocalyptic with regard to genre. Collins helpfully summarizes this perspective:

In Trito-Isaiah, and the Isaianic “apocalypse” and less clearly in Zechariah 9–14, Joel and Ezekiel 38–39, we may recognize some of the major characteristics of apocalyptic eschatology and the reflection of an early form of Jewish apocalypticism. However, all these writings must still be categorized formally as prophetic oracles, not as apocalypses, since they lack the apocalyptic manner of revelation, with an otherworldly mediator.<sup>65</sup>

While these units are rarely labeled as fully apocalyptic in the generic sense, they are nonetheless regularly given the apocalyptic label. In large part, this is due to the supposedly apocalyptic eschatology they contain. This is especially true of Isaiah 24–27 (regularly referred to as Isaiah’s “Little Apocalypse”) and Zechariah 9–14, which feature extensive discussion on the Day of the Lord and its accompanying cataclysmic events. Ezekiel 40–48 is regularly described as apocalyptic in light of what many perceive to be highly symbolic language; additionally, Ezekiel’s visionary journey and personal interaction with supernatural beings bear notable resemblances to later apocalyptic literature.<sup>66</sup>

Despite these similarities, several considerations lead away from the conclusion that these passages should be considered apocalyptic. First, the cataclysmic eschatology that is regularly categorized as apocalyptic is, as discussed above, seen regularly throughout the prophets. The distinctive mark of apocalyptic is not the *presence* of cataclysmic eschatology so much as it is the *exclusive focus* on such eschatology. The presence of such language and teaching, then, is not by itself enough to warrant a passage belonging in any way to the apocalyptic genre. To insist on such an identification is to wrongly assert that the interpretation of these early prophetic passages should be constrained by interpretive rules that govern later texts of a different genre.

Second, the distinctions noted above between prophetic and apocalyptic texts—particularly those related to the nature of revelation—should caution interpreters from identifying such passages as some early form of apocalyptic literature, as Collins does.<sup>67</sup> What is recorded in Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah is not the incipient form of a literary method imaginatively employed for religious purposes—as the apocalyptic genre would come to be. These passages constitute the inspired Word of the Lord. The form and content of these passages were not merely a stylistic choice made by the prophets; these reflect their genuine visionary experiences as they were directed by the Spirit and given the genuine Word of God. In light of that, any hermeneutical understanding necessary for the interpretation of these passages—including the proper interpretation of symbolic language—can be found squarely within the prophetic tradition and generic identification.

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<sup>65</sup> J. Collins, “The Jewish Apocalypses,” 29.

<sup>66</sup> See Cooper’s listing of four similarities between the introductory material in Ezekiel 40 and apocalyptic texts. Cooper, *Ezekiel*, 356.

<sup>67</sup> See also Hanson, *Old Testament Apocalyptic*, 35.

### The Olivet Discourse

As with the OT passages above, no one asserts that the Olivet Discourse (recorded in Matt 24–25, Mark 13, and Luke 21) is truly apocalyptic in terms of its generic identification. The discourse lacks several key characteristics of the genre, including visionary experiences and pseudonymous authorship. Many assert, however, that the discourse contains apocalyptic features that warrant special attention. R. T. France encapsulates the position well in his introduction to Matthew 24:

The whole chapter is deeply indebted to the language of the Old Testament . . . by the constant use of the language particularly of the apocalyptic parts of the Old Testament (esp. Daniel). Sometimes there is a clear allusion to a specific passage; more often the language is reminiscent of recurring apocalyptic themes. It is important in interpreting this chapter to recognize the conventional associations of such language, and not to attempt to interpret literally terms which had an accepted figurative significance in such contexts.<sup>68</sup>

Here again it becomes clear that the apocalyptic identification heavily implies symbolic interpretation. It must be acknowledged that, more than the OT passages discussed above, there may be some legitimacy to the proposal of apocalyptic influence on these teachings due simply to their date. Nonetheless, a few cursory observations point in a different direction. First, as France's statement indicates, at least some of this reasoning is based on the assumption that the OT passages and terminology being referenced are *themselves* apocalyptic. As argued above, however, this is likely not the best way to understand these OT passages. In light of that, more than mere association with certain OT texts is required for an apocalyptic identification.

Second, Jesus' teaching in the Olivet Discourse features a number of key differences from apocalyptic ideology. While the discourse no doubt contains elements featured regularly in apocalyptic (e.g., cataclysmic language), it also possesses features that would be out of place in such writings. For example, specifically referencing Mark 13, Morris notes that Jesus' discussion of both Israel and the Temple experiencing harm would have been discordant with apocalyptic belief. He goes on to acknowledge that, while it seems clear that the chapter has been influenced by apocalyptic language, the author is clearly writing from his own perspective and not merely as a representative of apocalyptic thought.<sup>69</sup> Going a step further, Charles Cousar actually sees Mark 13 as *anti-apocalyptic* in some regards. He believes that Jesus, while using apocalyptic terminology, directly combats several modes of apocalyptic thought through his distinct ethical teaching.<sup>70</sup>

Finally, Jesus' teaching in the Olivet Discourse aligns fully with the OT prophetic tradition. Again, apocalyptic literature and prophetic literature *both* feature a measure of eschatological dualism and

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<sup>68</sup> R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985), 339.

<sup>69</sup> Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 76–77.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Cousar, "Eschatology and Mark's Theologia Crucis," *Interpretation* 24, no. 3 (1970): 326. The same could be true to an extent regarding other NT portions often identified as apocalyptic. As OT authors occasionally used mythological language from surrounding religions in a polemical manner, so too NT authors may have adopted apocalyptic language not to espouse its ideology, but rather to emphasize their own distinct teaching (all while under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit).

cataclysmic language. But the latter is distinct from the former in its emphasis on God's working in and through history. Along these lines, Ladd observes, "While Jesus shares the eschatological dualism of apocalyptic, with its expectation of a cosmic catastrophe, He stands squarely in the prophetic tradition in that He also sees the hand of God in historical events."<sup>71</sup> Everything in the Olivet Discourse, including Jesus' continued use of Son of Man terminology, is firmly rooted in the teaching of the OT. In light of such differences between the Olivet Discourse and apocalyptic literature, there is good warrant to conclude that the discourse is not apocalyptic.

### Revelation

Biblical scholars tend to classify Revelation as some form of apocalyptic. While the book's epistolary form may be acknowledged, most treatments offer little qualification for apocalyptic identification and assert that a proper understanding of the rules of apocalyptic interpretation is vital for accurately interpreting Revelation.<sup>72</sup> As mentioned at the outset of the paper, this apocalyptic identification and its accompanying symbolic interpretation lead many interpreters to conclude that most of the book's prophecies refer either to past events or to spiritual realities and are thus not meant to predict literal future events.

Again, space does not permit a thorough treatment of this matter, but a survey of the book's characteristics will show that the apocalyptic label is not nearly as self-evident as many would like to believe. First, it should be apparent that the Greek label ἀποκάλυψις lends no weight to the claim that the book is apocalyptic. The term means simply "revelation" and is used throughout the NT in a non-technical sense.<sup>73</sup>

Additionally, a number of the book's characteristics show that it lacks true conformity with the principal expectations of the apocalyptic genre. First, the book's introduction—including its epistolary structure and its self-identification as ἀποκάλυψις—distinguishes it from the apocalyptic tradition.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, Revelation lacks pseudonymity and *ex eventu* prophecy, two key defining characteristics of apocalyptic literature.<sup>75</sup> Mazzaferri summarizes these and other elements in his conclusion regarding Revelation's relationship to the apocalyptic genre:

The title, apocalyptic, certainly derives from Revelation, but this is irrelevant. *Apokalypsis* is not a technical term in John's day, although he employs it prophetically. In terms of actual generic definition, Revelation cannot be equated with apocalyptic in form. It lacks essential pseudonymity, while its written form is circumstantial. Neither does it qualify in contents. Its eschatology is

<sup>71</sup> Ladd, "Apocalyptic Literature," 154.

<sup>72</sup> For example, Schreiner says, "The apocalyptic genre is especially important in interpreting the book because we must see the symbolism shaping the work. Otherwise we are apt to misread what the author teaches us." Thomas Schreiner, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 46.

<sup>73</sup> See BDAG, s.v. "ἀποκαλύπτω" and "ἀποκάλυψις."

<sup>74</sup> See Table 17 in Hand, *The Worthy Champion*, 158.

<sup>75</sup> Most acknowledge that Revelation is not pseudonymous, but some who hold to a preterist or historicist view of the book do argue that it contains *ex eventu* prophecy. The latter conclusion, however, is unnecessary. See Hand, *The Climax of Biblical Prophecy*, 31–72 for a helpful overview and analysis.

Christian, with a modified temporal dualism and an optimistic view of the present. Its imminence is explicit and personal, not pseudo-prophetic, and conditional, not deterministic. . . . Despite certain superficial similarities, *Revelation completely fails to qualify as a genuine apocalypse*.<sup>76</sup>

Alan Johnson concurs with Mazzaferri's judgment, also observing that Revelation lacks the extensive focus on interpreting angels that characterizes apocalyptic. He further notes that John nowhere assumes among his readers a familiarity with extra-biblical apocalyptic. Rather, John demonstrates a consistent dependence on the OT—in a manner that is also distinct from extra-biblical apocalyptic texts.<sup>77</sup>

In addition to these distinctions, a number of Revelation's characteristics align the book closely with the prophetic tradition. At a foundational level, Revelation identifies *itself* as prophecy five times (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). This self-identification is substantiated by a number of the book's characteristics. First, Revelation features ethical appeal consistent with the prophetic tradition. This is most notable in the numerous exhortations of the second and third chapters of the book, which contain the letters to the seven churches.<sup>78</sup> Second, Revelation is steeped in OT allusions, tying it strongly to the OT prophetic tradition. Hand observes that Revelation "alludes to Old Testament prophecy more frequently than any other book of the Bible," and that "John writes self-consciously in the line of the prophets."<sup>79</sup>

In summary then, despite the fact that Revelation is considered by many to be the foremost example of biblical apocalyptic literature, there is good reason to reject the identification. The book stands much more closely aligned with the prophetic tradition.

### Conclusion

Genre identification is a vital first step in the interpretive process. Misidentifying the genre of a text, therefore, can result in interpretation and application that are warped at best and completely erroneous at worst. The preceding survey has attempted to show that the apocalyptic genre is both unnecessary and inappropriate with regard to the books of the biblical canon. The eschatology and key characteristics of relevant portions of Scripture are more accurately explained through appeal to the genre of biblical prophecy. Though such passages still contain interpretive challenges, properly identifying their generic backdrop at least opens the door for accurate interpretation and protects against misleading preconceptions, such as a predisposition toward symbolic interpretation. Despite

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<sup>76</sup> Frederick Mazzaferri, cited in Alan Johnson, "Revelation," in *EBCRev*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 13:577 (emphasis added).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 577.

<sup>78</sup> This stands in marked contrast to the apocalyptic literature. Ladd observes, "With the exception of Enoch 92–105, there is almost no ethical exhortation in the entire corpus of non-canonical apocalyptic literature." Ladd, "Why Not Prophetic-Apocalyptic?" 199.

<sup>79</sup> Hand, *The Worthy Champion*, 161. The self-consciously prophetic nature of Revelation is further evidenced by the repeated use (seven times in chapters 2–3) of *Τάδε λέγει*, or "this is what he says." As both Hand and Schreiner observe, this introductory formula appears hundreds of times in the prophetic sections of the LXX, where the most usual English translation is something along the lines of, "Thus says the Lord." *Ibid.*, 159–60; Schreiner, *Revelation*, 37.

the profusion of support the apocalyptic identification enjoys in mainstream biblical scholarship, careful analysis reveals stronger alternatives.

## Reading the Bible as Part of Which Great Tradition? A Critique of Allegorical Interpretation and a Commendation of the Reformation's Recovery of the Literal Sense

by Brian C. Collins<sup>1</sup>

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, “theological interpretation of Scripture” (TIS) became fashionable in the Christian publishing world. Ideas about what theological interpretation should be were varied, but several common emphases emerged. First, theological interpretation arose in critique of historical criticism.<sup>2</sup> Second, theological interpreters sought to bridge the divide between biblical studies and theology—a divide traced back to historical criticism.<sup>3</sup> Third, theological interpreters discovered the benefits of pre-critical interpretation.<sup>4</sup> Fourth, this look back to patristic

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 19–21, 61–75; Peter Enns, “Some Thoughts on Theological Exegesis of the Old Testament: Toward a Viable Model of Biblical Coherence and Relevance” (paper presented at the Eastern Regional ETS meeting, Souderton, PA, April 1, 2005), 5–6; Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study*, Studies in Theological Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 30–39; Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 12–14; Stephen Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 19–21.

<sup>3</sup> J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), xvii, 67. This divide is typically traced back to Gabler’s 1787 lecture at the University of Altdorf. Max Turner and Joel B. Green, “New Testament Commentary and Systematic Theology,” in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 4; A. K. M. Adam, “Biblical Theology,” in *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Gregg R. Allison lists this as one of four “common characteristics” of TIS. “Theological Interpretation of Scripture: An Introduction and Preliminary Evaluation,” *SBJT* 14, no. 2 (2010): 30; cf. Joel B. Green, “Practicing the Gospel in a Post-Critical World: The Promise of Theological Exegesis,” *JETS* 47, no. 3 (Sep 2004): 10; Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation*, 39–55; Billings, *The Word of God*, 149–94. Books on TIS often include a survey of historical interpreters that serve as models. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, 103–28, 173–98, 239–61, 307–37 (using Gregory of Nyssa, Theodoret of Cyrus, John Chrysostom, Augustine, Nicholas of Lyra, and Thomas Aquinas as examples); Stephen E. Fowl, “The Importance of a Multivoiced Literal Sense of Scripture: The Example of Thomas Aquinas,” in *Reading Scripture with the Church*, 35–50; Craig G. Bartholomew, “Calvin, Barth, and Theological Interpretation,” in *Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology*, Paternoster Theological Monographs, ed. Neil B. McDonald and Carl R. Trueman (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 163–77; Jens Zimmerman, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 78–132 (using Martin Luther, John Owen, and Philipp Spener as examples). The seminal article on this topic is David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Ex Auditu* 1 (1985): 74–82.

and medieval interpretation is part of a larger emphasis on tradition and *ressourcement*.<sup>5</sup> Fifth, the multi-sense hermeneutic of patristic and medieval interpreters was appealing to many.<sup>6</sup>

While some conservative evangelicals have been involved in the TIS project from the beginning (e.g., Kevin Vanhoozer), other conservative biblical interpreters were cautious and even somewhat critical of theological interpretation.<sup>7</sup> However, over the past decade, a recovery of the *quadriga* and allegorical interpretation have become fashionable in certain segments of evangelicalism, especially among younger evangelicals. One influential book is Peter Leithart's *Deep Exegesis*.<sup>8</sup> Leithart looks to the *quadriga* as an alternative to historical criticism. Another influential book has been Hans Boersma's *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church*.<sup>9</sup> He states his thesis clearly at the outset: "the church fathers were deeply invested in reading the Old Testament Scriptures as a sacrament, whose historical basis or surface level participates in the mystery of the New Testament reality of the Christ event."<sup>10</sup> This approach to Scripture, Boersma notes, is rooted in his adherence to Christian Platonism. In his view, "everything around us is sacramental."<sup>11</sup> A third influential book is Craig Carter's *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis*.<sup>12</sup> He identifies the problem with modern hermeneutics as lying with "Epicurean naturalism," the "historical critical approach," secularism, and progressivism.<sup>13</sup> He looks to the Great Tradition as the solution. Like Boersma, he finds Christian Platonism essential for proper interpretation of Scripture. Carter seems more oriented toward the conservative evangelical tradition than Boersma.<sup>14</sup> Mitchell Chase, author of *40 Questions about Typology and Allegory*,<sup>15</sup> stands firmly within conservative evangelicalism. He has been influenced by all of the books noted above and is representative of an increasing number of younger evangelical scholars who have embraced allegorical interpretation and the *quadriga*.

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<sup>5</sup> Billings, *The Word of God*, 10, 17–18.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Fowl, *Reading Scripture with the Church*, 90; Mark Gignilliat, "Paul, Allegory, and the Plain Sense of Scripture: Galatians 4:21–31," *JTI* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 135–46.

<sup>7</sup> Grant Osborne, "Hermeneutics and Theological Interpretation," in *Understanding the Times: New Testament Studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 62–86; D. A. Carson, "Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Yes, But . . .," in *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 187–207.

<sup>8</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Hans Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Kindle loc. 128.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Kindle loc. 288.

<sup>12</sup> Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Carter is concerned to uphold the divine inspiration of Scripture, he confesses inerrancy, and he closes the book with a friendly interaction with D. A. Carson's critique of TIS. He notes, "I share almost all of Carson's concerns," though he dissents from Carson's concerns about allegorical interpretation and Carson's appeal not to entirely reject the Enlightenment. *Ibid.*, 248–51.

<sup>15</sup> Mitchell L. Chase, *40 Questions about Typology and Allegory* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2020).

This attempt to rehabilitate patristic and medieval hermeneutics (what Iain Provan calls “Counter-Reformational Protestantism”)<sup>16</sup> could be critiqued from a number of angles. For instance, one could point out that at key points in Leithart’s book, the argument turns on equivocal meanings or the eliding of importing distinctions.<sup>17</sup> One could critique the claim that all of reality is sacramental.<sup>18</sup> Boersma’s and Carter’s conception of Christian Platonism is also open to critique,<sup>19</sup> as is their

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<sup>16</sup> Iain Provan, *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017). Provan has Hans Boersma, Craig Allert, and D. H. Williams in view. Craig Carter would almost certainly object to this characterization (and I suspect Mitchell Chase would as well) given that he sought to enlist John Calvin in support of his project. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture*, 183–86, 250. Nonetheless, the label is accurate, and this should temper some of the enthusiasm Carter and conservative evangelicals like him should have toward Boersma and his project.

<sup>17</sup> Part of what makes the argument in the second chapter of *Deep Exegesis* work is the slipperiness of *meaning* as Leithart is using the term. If E. D. Hirsch (the focus of Leithart’s critique) has drawn too stark a line between meaning and significance, Leithart keeps things fuzzy where it would be helpful to make some distinctions. Leithart brings out that texts may mean different things to the same person at different points in their life due to differing life experience. But here it is important to note that Leithart has shifted (without alerting the reader) from talking about the meaning *of* a text to the meaning *for* a reader. If the connection between the meaning *of* and the meaning *for* is broken, the reader has misunderstood the text. On the other hand, if the connection is close, the reader better understands a text after having greater life experience. Leithart also elides the distinction between the meaning of *historical events*, which is often only discerned after time has passed, and the meaning of *texts* that record and reflect upon historical events.

Leithart again elides certain key distinctions in his fourth chapter. He makes the valid point that good readers bring information with them to the text. A good reader of Matthew 1:1 will bring knowledge that “book of the genealogy” alludes to Genesis, that “Christ” is a messianic term, and that “son of David” and “son of Abraham” carry covenantal connotations. Leithart then labels this eisegesis because this information is not explicitly stated in the text. He further links his Matthew 1:1 example to the fathers who compare Moses’ outstretched arms to the cross or Rahab’s red cord to the blood of Christ. The problem is that Matthew likely intended the allusions in Matthew 1:1. It is exegesis, not eisegesis, to pick up on allusions that the *author* has *put into* his text. (For what it is worth, there may be an authorially intended link between the scarlet cord hung in Rahab’s window and the blood of the Passover lamb spread on the doorposts, in which case there may be an exegetical link to the blood of Christ; however, this is different from connecting the cord to the blood of Christ simply due to a free association with the color red.)

<sup>18</sup> Evangelicals, who rightly recognize the theological dangers of the Enlightenment are in danger of looking back to the medieval world for the solution. For instance, Charles Taylor has provided many evangelical intellectuals with language that helps make sense of our secular age. Rod Dreher has popularized some of this thinking in his book, *Living in Wonder: Finding Mystery and Meaning in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024). Many evangelicals are too attracted to the language of disenchantment and re-enchantment and have not given enough thought to the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox worldviews of the figures who are promoting it. Protestants should embrace a disenchanted world, but not a secular one. An enchanted world is a world too much influenced by paganism. A Protestant worldview recognizes the reality of the supernatural, but it does not see all of life as sacramental or as infused with magic. Alan Jacobs is insightful on this matter: “One of the great tasks of the Reformation was to break up a richly various ecology of power, in which the duly-performed rites of the Church and its consecrated objects formed weapons against various hostile forces that manifested themselves in illness and death, bad luck and bad harvests. The leading Reformers certainly believed in the inevitability of ‘spiritual warfare.’ . . . But the Reformers insisted that those forces existed only by the permissive will of the Father, and that the *only* weapon God had provided to overcome those forces is the sacrificial death of Christ on the Cross. . . . The Reformation, is, in Charles Taylor’s phrase, ‘an engine of disenchantment’; by concentrating all power in the being and acts of the Triune God it drains the world of spiritual energies.” Alan Jacobs, “Fantasy and the Buffered Self,” *The New Atlantis* (Winter 2014), <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/fantasy-and-the-buffered-self>.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel J. Treier. “‘Christian Platonism’ and Christological Interpretation: A Response to Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*,” *Reformed Faith & Practice* 5, no. 3 (Dec 2020); Paul M. Gould, “On Classical Christian Platonism: A Philosopher’s Reply to Carter.” *The London Lyceum* (August 1, 2022), <https://www.thelondonlyceum.com/on-classical-christian-platonism-a-philosophers-reply-to-carter>.

insistence that it is a necessary metaphysic for faithful interpretation.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the exegetical practices of these authors could be analyzed.<sup>21</sup>

The remainder of this paper critiques the Counter-Reformational Protestant hermeneutic by examining its appeal to the Great Tradition. Any appeal to the Great Tradition must reckon with the tradition's origins and with the gradual turn from allegorical interpretation during the medieval period as well as its rejection by the Reformers and their heirs.

### *Defining Terms*

This paper argues for interpreting Scripture according to the literal sense rather than according to the three spiritual senses of the *quadriga*. Kevin Vanhoozer observes, “Frances Young dismisses *literal* as a ‘thoroughly ambiguous’ term, of no help in enabling us to understand how biblical interpreters read in accordance to the letter.”<sup>22</sup> This is a valid critique, and I often seek to avoid the term *literal* in my own discussions of hermeneutical method.<sup>23</sup> However, given that the literal sense is one of the four senses of the *quadriga*, this terminology is unavoidable. Iain Provan provides a serviceable definition: “to read Scripture ‘literally,’ in line with Reformation perspectives on this topic, means to read it in

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<sup>20</sup> It is not sufficient to argue that the Great Tradition made use of a certain metaphysic and therefore that metaphysic is required to be a faithful Christian interpreter. It must first be demonstrated that the metaphysic in view is required by the Bible itself, at least implicitly (see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], 1:84–86 for a discussion of the Scripture as “the sole foundation (*principium unicum*) of church and theology”). In addition, the fathers were eclectic in their use of philosophy. See *ibid.*, 1:607–8; John W. Cooper, *Panentheism—the Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 44–45. If Bavinck and Cooper are correct, the fathers did not see a given philosophy (whether that of Plato, Aristotle, or anyone else) as normative for Christianity. Platonism and Neoplatonism are inconsistent with the Christian faith, just as are the modern philosophies that adherents to Christian Platonism scorn. See *ibid.*, 45. To be sure, Boersma and Carter are not claiming the fathers adopted an unmodified Platonism. But even so, it is unwise to take a particular ancient philosophy and claim it for Christianity—even in modified form. This is akin to speaking of Christian Confucianism or Christian Hegelianism. Second, and more substantively, to truly follow the fathers would mean to continue to make eclectic use of philosophical tools—including those of modern philosophy—while refusing to allow Christianity to be coopted by any one philosophical system.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Leithart has written numerous commentaries. Hans Boersma’s volume, *Sacramental Preaching: Sermons on the Hidden Presence of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016) shows his method in action. Both Carter and Chase include in their works examples of the kind of exegesis they favor.

<sup>22</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024), 115. Vanhoozer provides the following citation: Frances Young, “Literal Meaning,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 401. However, there is no article on “Literal Meaning” in this dictionary. There is an article on “Literal Sense” by Kathryn Greene-McCreight, which Vanhoozer cites two footnotes later. Evidently some of the documentation was mixed up. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

Iain Provan also documents the various ways that *literal* is used. It is used metaphorically for emphasis. It is used of literalistic interpretation (Provan provides Amelia Bedelia as an example). It is used in contrast to metaphors, in contrast to allegories within a text, and to applications of texts. It is also used of “historical reference” in texts. Provan rejects these uses. No one is arguing for Amelia-Bedelias-type exegesis. Interpreting metaphors and allegories within a text according to the “communicative intentions” of the authors is literal reading. So are applications to the present that align with the “full communicative intent of our biblical authors.” On the other hand, there are some literal interpretations that do not have historical reference (e.g., literal interpretation of parables). Provan, *Right Reading*, 86–92.

<sup>23</sup> I am sympathetic to Mark Snoberger’s proposal in “The Originalist Hermeneutic in Biblical and Constitutional Context: Comparison and Contrast” (paper presented at the Bible Faculty Summit, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, July 2022).

*accordance with its various apparent communicative intentions as a collection of texts from the past now integrated into one Great Story, doing justice to such realities as literary convention, idiom, metaphor, and typology or figuration.*<sup>24</sup>

Richard Muller provides a definition of the *quadriga*: “the fourfold pattern of medieval exegesis; a pattern which viewed the text as having a literal or historical, a tropological or moral, an allegorical or doctrinal, and an anagogical or ultimate, eschatological meaning.”<sup>25</sup> Gerald Bray provides a serviceable definition of *allegory*: “Allegory is primarily a method of reading a text by assuming that its literal sense conceals a hidden meaning, to be deciphered by using a particular hermeneutical key.”<sup>26</sup>

### *Galatians 4:24–31 and the Hermeneutics of the Apostles*

If allegorical interpretation of scripture is valid, it must be a method of interpretation found in Scripture. Galatians 4:24 is a key proof-text since Paul wrote, “Which things are an allegory [ἀλληγορέω]” (KJV). Thus, this passage would seem to provide a clear-cut case of allegorical interpretation. Neither the translations nor the commentators, however, agree on whether Paul is claiming to interpret allegorically according to the current sense of that term.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Provan, *Right Reading*, 85–86. There are some weaknesses to Provan’s definition. The wording “now integrated into one Great Story” could be read as minimizing the reality that all the biblical texts were canonical from the moment of their creation. Kevin Vanhoozer also critiques Provan for not tying the canonical aspect of his definition to divine authorial intention. *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 173. While divine authorial intent should be closely connected to human authorial intent (this is a key aspect of the doctrine of inspiration), God, who knows the end from the beginning, inescapably intends more than the human writers could intend, and progressive revelation can illuminate divine intentions beyond (but not differing from) what the human writers intended.

<sup>25</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 254.

<sup>26</sup> Gerald Bray, “Allegory,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 34. Bray also notes that *allegory* is used of allegorical compositions, but he observes, “It is doubtful whether any part of the Bible can be regarded as such.” Bray also distinguishes between allegory and typology. Al Wolters also supports this distinction: “We need to make a careful terminological distinction, following Jean Daniélou, between ‘allegory’ and typology.’ The New Testament is full of the latter, in which a person or event in the Old Testament is seen as foreshadowing or prefiguring something in the New. The key point here is that a historical reality earlier in the redemptive metanarrative of Scripture anticipates another historical reality later in that same narrative. Allegory, on the other hand, takes some feature of Scripture and makes it a symbol of some supra-historical spiritual truth in general.” “The History of Old Testament Interpretation: An Anecdotal Survey,” in *Hearing the Old Testament: Listening for God’s Address* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 24. It is precisely this distinction that Hans Boersma rejects: “Following Jean Daniélou, 20th-century scholarship often distinguished between typology and allegory by insisting that the former was grounded within history and was biblically based, while the latter was arbitrary and rooted in Philo and in the Platonic tradition. Henri de Lubac convincingly debunked any sharp distinction between the two and demonstrated the Christological basis for typological and allegorical exegesis.” “The Sacramental Reading of Nicene Theology: Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa on Proverbs 8,” *JTI* 10, no. 1 (2016): 2n3. Chase, however, properly recognizes the value of the distinction: “Of figural reading, a distinction between the terms is valuable. Patristic interpreters may not have explicitly distinguished between the interpretive practices of typology and allegory, but there is no virtue in maintaining an ambiguity where greater precision is possible.” *40 Questions*, 197; cf. Provan, *Right Reading*, 105; Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 167, with qualifications.

<sup>27</sup> The ESV clarifies that Paul is not claiming Genesis was written as an allegory; it is his interpretation that is “allegorical”: “Now this may be interpreted allegorically.” Other translations remove the word *allegory* altogether: “which things are symbolic” (NKJV); “These things are illustrations” (HCSB); “These things are being taken figuratively” (NIV 2011).

## Galatians 4:21–23, Genesis 16, and Genesis 22

Paul directs the Galatians' attention to the Abraham narratives (Gal 4:21–23), which focus on God's promises and Abraham's response to those promises with growing faith.<sup>28</sup> Genesis 16 records that Abram and Sarai believed God's promises but sought to achieve them by their own contrivances. Because Abram and Sarai sought the promise through their own efforts, Paul says, "The son of the slave was born according to the flesh" (Gal 4:23).<sup>29</sup> In the record of Isaac's birth, Moses emphasizes that Isaac was born according to God's promise (Gen 21:1–2). Abraham's personal righteousness had nothing to do with the fulfillment of promise, for he had failed once again just prior to Isaac's birth (Gen 20). His old age (noted in Gen 21:1, 5, 7) also indicates that *God* fulfilled the promise.<sup>30</sup> Based on Genesis 21 Paul says, "The son of the free woman was born through the promise" (Gal 4:23).

Paul's use of the Abraham narrative at this point in the argument of Galatians is fitting since Abraham and the Abrahamic Covenant have played a central role in Paul's argument since chapter 3. The literal sense of Genesis is clearly germane to the argument of Galatians, and it underlies the "allegory" in this section of the book. Paul's approach can be contrasted with that of Philo and Origen. F. F. Bruce ably pieces together Philo's allegorical interpretation from several places in Philo's works:

According to Philo, Abraham is the virtue-loving soul in its quest for the true God; Sarah is virtue and her son Isaac is the higher wisdom, whereas Hagar is the lower leaning of the schools and her son Ishmael is sophistry, shooting his arguments as an archer (Gn. 21:20) shoots arrows from his bow (Abr. 68; Fug. 128, 209f.; Mut. 255, etc.).<sup>31</sup>

Origen's comments on Genesis 21 follow Paul's lead, but his comments on Genesis 12 and 20 show Philo's influence:

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On the ambiguity of the term in the ancient world, see Robert Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 20.

<sup>28</sup> On the theme of faith in the Abraham narratives, see Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 72–75; Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (1948; reprint, Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1975), 83–87; Joseph P. Healey, "Faith," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:745–46. The NT confirms the thesis that faith is a major emphasis of the Abraham narrative. In both Galatians 3 and Romans 4, Paul appeals to Abraham to undergird his argument for justification by faith alone. In Hebrews 11 the portion discussing Abraham's faith runs from 11:8 to 11:19, giving Abraham the longest section in this chapter on faith. Abraham is also a key example in James 2, where the nature of faith as it relates to works is discussed. There are only two other extended discussions of Abraham in the NT. One is found in John 8, concerning the Pharisees' claim to be Abraham's children, and the other in Hebrews 7, which deals with Melchizedek.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas was correct when he said that "according to the flesh" does not refer to the sinful manner in which Ishmael was conceived. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (Albany: Magi, 1966), 136. It means that Ishmael was born of human contriving. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 299; cf. Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 299. It probably means more than simply that he was born "by the natural process of procreation," though that meaning would certainly be included. Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, WBC (Nashville: Nelson, 1990), 208.

<sup>30</sup> Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1994), 80; John D. Currid, *Genesis* (Webster, NY: Evangelical, 2003), 1:371.

<sup>31</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 215. I did track down Bruce's citations to confirm his interpretation.

According to this order of the allegory, therefore, Pharaoh, that is an impure man and a destroyer, could not at all receive Sara, that is virtue. Later Abimelech, that is, he who was living purely and philosophically, could indeed receive her, because he was seeking ‘with a pure heart,’ but ‘the time had not yet come.’ Virtue, therefore, remains with Abraham; it remains with circumcision, until the time should come that in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom ‘dwells all the fullness of deity corporeally,’ complete and perfect virtue might pass over to the Church of the Gentiles.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast to Paul’s interpretation, which connects closely with the main themes of the Abraham narratives, the allegories of Philo and Origen deal with concerns that are entirely foreign to Genesis.

Paul’s “Allegory”: Galatians 4:24–31

In Galatians 4:24–31 Paul’s figurative approach to the Abraham narratives begins. Paul had already connected the narrative of Ishmael’s birth through Hagar with seeking to achieve the promises of God through human effort (4:23). Here Paul metaphorically related Hagar and Sarah to two covenants.

**Table 1. Paul’s Figurative Interpretation of Hagar and Sarah**

Hagar	Mount Sinai in Arabia (the Mosaic Covenant) <sup>33</sup>	Present Jerusalem (Judaism as it continues to adhere to the Mosaic law) <sup>34</sup>
Sarah	(the New Covenant) <sup>35</sup>	Jerusalem above <sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 125.

<sup>33</sup> Paul may have specified that Sinai is in Arabia to signify that those under the Mosaic Covenant had not entered into the promises of God. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (1854; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 140; Schreiner, *Galatians*, 302. Ridderbos, however, prefers to understand the verse as saying that although Sinai is in Arabia, Hagar is nonetheless to be identified with the present Jerusalem. Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 3rd ed., New London Commentaries (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1961), 177–78; cf. Moo, *Galatians*, 302, 303.

<sup>34</sup> Though both Bruce (220) and Schreiner (302) favor identifying the present Jerusalem with the Judaizers, it is probably best to keep the connection to the Mosaic system. This keeps a tighter connection between the symbols that Paul is piling up. The Judaizers enter the picture because they seek to impose the Mosaic system on Christians. Moo is compelling on this point. *Galatians*, 304.

<sup>35</sup> Paul says that Hagar and Sarah represent “two covenants” (4:24), but he does not specify which covenant Sarah stood for. Interpreters divide over whether it is the Abrahamic Covenant (Bruce, Ridderbos) or the New Covenant (Longenecker, George). Bruce, *Galatians*, 218; Ridderbos, *Galatians*, 175; Longenecker, *Galatians*, 211; Timothy George, *Galatians*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 1994), 340. Schreiner favors identifying the covenant as the New Covenant but concludes that the issue is not of major importance since the New Covenant fulfills the Abrahamic Covenant. Schreiner, *Galatians*, 301. The New Covenant is the better option in this context. The Galatian churches were largely Gentile churches, and their members became the seed of Abraham and the beneficiaries of some of the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant by virtue of their union to *the* Seed of Abraham (Gal 3:27–29). This union was effected through the New Covenant gift of the Holy Spirit and the New Covenant sacrifice of Christ.

<sup>36</sup> The Jerusalem above is neither the church triumphant (Aquinas) nor the church militant (Calvin). Aquinas, *Galatians*, 143; Calvin, *Galatians*, 140. It is instead the New Jerusalem from which Christ establishes his righteous reign over all the earth. Some aspects of this reign have begun with the inauguration of the New Covenant, but the consummation of this reign (and the descent of the New Jerusalem to earth) awaits the future. For supporting references—some more convincing than others—see Longenecker, *Galatians*, 214; cf. Bruce, *Galatians*, 221.

Verse 25 justifies relating Hagar to the Mosaic Covenant and to adherence to the Mosaic law: “For she is in slavery with her children.” Earlier Paul observed that the Mosaic law imprisoned those who were under it (3:23–24; 4:5, 7). To sum things up, Ishmael was born as part of an attempt to achieve the promises of God through human effort. This corresponds to the Mosaic law, which required obedience to receive the promises (Gal 3:12; cf. Lev 18:5).<sup>37</sup> Since no one can keep the law, those who attempt to do so find themselves enslaved.

Paul demonstrates the connection between the Galatian Christians and Sarah by quoting Isaiah 54:1.<sup>38</sup> Isaiah 54 brings together the Abrahamic Covenant, the New Covenant, and Gentile salvation<sup>39</sup> while also providing many links back to the Abraham narratives.<sup>40</sup> Isaiah 54 also teaches that the extension of the Abrahamic blessing to the nations would not happen by natural means; it would be a supernatural work.<sup>41</sup> Isaiah 54 thus provides Paul with firm OT grounding for the claim that the Galatian believers, “like Isaac, are children of promise” (4:28). These Gentiles have become part of the people of God not through their own efforts but through the supernatural working of God and in accordance with his promise to Abraham (Gen 28:14).

#### Galatians 4:28–31 and Genesis 22

In verses 28–30 Paul further develops the parallel between his opponents and Ishmael. Like Ishmael, they persecuted those “born according to the Spirit” (4:29).<sup>42</sup> Genesis 21:9 recounts Ishmael “mocking” Isaac, which Paul identifies as a persecution of Isaac.<sup>43</sup> Paul saw the same dynamic at work

<sup>37</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4*, Luther’s Works (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1999), 26:437.

<sup>38</sup> The *γάρ* indicates that Paul is grounding his claim of 4:26 (“But the Jerusalem above is free, *and she is our mother*,” emphasis added), with the quotation that follows in 4:27. Longenecker, *Galatians*, 215; Schreiner, *Galatians*, 303–4; Karen H. Jobes, “Jerusalem, Our Mother: Metalepsis and Intertextuality in Galatians 4:21–31,” *WTJ* 55, no. 2 (Fall 1993), 303.

<sup>39</sup> Isaiah alludes to the Abrahamic (54:1–3), Mosaic (54:4–8), Noahic (54:9–17), and Davidic (55:3b–5) Covenants, but he does so in terms of their fulfillment in the New Covenant (compare Isa 54:10 with Ezek 34:5; 37:26; Isa 55:3 with Isa 61:8; Ezek 37:26). Barry G. Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, BST (Downers Grove, InterVarsity, 1996), 215–17.

<sup>40</sup> Paul does not appeal to this passage simply because of the word *barren*, contrary to Longenecker, *Galatians*, 215. The significance of this passage runs deeper. Isaiah 54:1 and Genesis 11:30 are parallel in Hebrew and especially in the LXX, which Paul was using in his quotation. Jobes, “Jerusalem,” 307. Isaiah 54:3 says that Zion will “spread abroad to the right and to the left” (54:3), which alludes to Genesis 28:14. J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 445. In Genesis 28:14 God not only promised Jacob numerous offspring in continuation of the Abrahamic Covenant, but he also reiterated that the blessing of Abraham’s seed would be to “all the families of the earth.”

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 445.

<sup>42</sup> The phrases “born through promise” (4:23; cf. 4:28) and “born according to the Spirit” (4:29) are parallel. The promise is clearly the promise of blessing to all nations found in the Abrahamic Covenant, but to be “born according to the Spirit” is to be a participant in the New Covenant (cf. Ezek 36:27).

<sup>43</sup> Some commentators resist the idea that Ishmael persecuted Isaac in Genesis 21:9. Bruce says that laughter is a repeated theme in Genesis 21, and thus Ishmael’s laughter need not be mocking. Second, Bruce notes that even if Ishmael’s laughter should be understood as mockery, that “is hardly tantamount to ‘persecuting.’” *Galatians*, 223. Longenecker argues that the Bible nowhere presents Ishmael persecuting Isaac and that Paul was dependent on Jewish tradition. *Galatians*, 217. In response to Bruce’s argument, the fact that צחק is a key word in Genesis 21 does not mean that its use in the chapter must be uniformly positive. Both the fact that it occurs in the Piel, which often gives the word “nasty overtones,” and the nature of Sarah’s response indicate that Ishmael’s laughter was mocking rather than friendly. Wenham, *Genesis*, 82; cf. Currid, *Genesis*, 1:375; Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredericks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids:

with the persecution of those in the New Covenant by those who insisted on adherence to the Mosaic Covenant. Given that the sin is the same, Paul concludes that the judgment will be the same: those who persecute the inheritors of the covenant promises will not receive the promised inheritance.<sup>44</sup>

### Conclusion Concerning Allegorical Interpretation and the NT

Throughout this passage Paul uses surface similarities (Hagar's bondage and the bondage of the law; Sarah's freedom and the freedom of the New Covenant; Sarah's barrenness and later fecundity and Zion's barrenness and later fecundity) to illustrate aspects of his present situation. When probed, these surface similarities have deeply rooted, substantive connections. These roots in the literal sense of the OT set Paul's "allegory" apart from the allegories of the patristic and medieval eras.

Augustine extended Paul's allegory to apply also to Abraham's children by Keturah. Those sons, according to Augustine, represented "heresies and schisms."<sup>45</sup> An examination of Genesis 25 reveals that Augustine's allegory lacks roots in the biblical text. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine every possible allegorical interpretation.<sup>46</sup> However, Galatians 4 is the most promising passage for finding allegorical interpretation in the NT. Since it differs significantly from the allegorical

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Zondervan, 2001), 294. In response to Bruce's second point, Calvin better understood the seriousness of Ishmael's mocking: "And there is no doubt that his manifest impiety against God, betrayed itself under this ridicule. He had reached an age at which he could not, by any means, be ignorant of the promised favour, on account of which his father Abraham was transported with so great joy: and yet—profoundly confident in himself—he insults, in the person of his brother, both God and his word, as well as the faith of Abraham." John Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (1847; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 543. Furthermore, Jesus himself was willing to call verbal abuse persecution (Matt 5:11), and Peter, in his first epistle, developed verbal abuse as a subtheme under the dominant suffering motif (e.g., 1 Pet 4:4). Since Paul is referring to Genesis 21, Longenecker's theory of dependence on Jewish tradition is superfluous as well as unduly speculative. On the latter point see Ridderbos, *Galatians*, 181n12.

<sup>44</sup> Paul gives this warning based on the words of Sarah: "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman" (Gal 4:30). This has traditionally been read to say that the Galatians should exclude unconverted Jews from their midst. Ambrosiaster, *Galatians–Philemon*, ACT, trans. and ed. Gerald L. Bray (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009), 26; Aquinas, *Galatians*, 148; Ernest de Witt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921), 262, 267–68. More recently it has been read to say that they should exclude the Judaizers. Longenecker, *Galatians*, 217; George, *Galatians*, 347. There are numerous passages that do teach that false teachers must be expelled from the church (e.g., Gal 1:8–9; 2 Cor 6:14–7:1; 2 John 10–11), but in the flow of Paul's argument this quotation seems to be a warning that fits with Paul's opening admonition: "Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?" Submission to the law results in being cast out from the family of promise. Schreiner, *Galatians*, 306; Bruce, *Galatians*, 225.

<sup>45</sup> "Now if someone has gained confidence from the Apostle's very clear demonstration that these two sons are to be understood allegorically and also wishes to see in Keturah's sons some figure of things to come—for these events involving such persons were not recorded of the Holy Spirit for nothing—he will perhaps find that they signify heresies and schisms. They are indeed sons of a free woman, as are the sons of the Church, yet they were born according to the flesh, not spiritually through the promise. But if so, they are also found not to belong to the inheritance, that is the heavenly Jerusalem, which Scripture calls barren because for a long time she did not bear sons on earth." Eric Plummer, *Augustine's Commentary on Galatians: Introduction, Text, Translation, Notes*, Oxford Early Christian Studies, ed. Gillian Clark and Andrew Louth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 195; cf. Aquinas, *Galatians*, 136.

<sup>46</sup> See Appendix 2 for a survey of proposed allegories in the NT. See Provan, *Right Reading*, 107–150 for a survey of texts that are often thought to provide evidence for allegorical interpretation within Scripture. Provan concludes that "Jesus and his apostles read Scripture (i.e., the OT) predominately, perhaps even entirely, literally." Provan, *Right Reading*, 107.

interpretation practiced by patristic and medieval interpreters, it is unlikely that allegorical interpretation is an apostolic method of interpretation.<sup>47</sup> This conclusion is advanced by Al Wolters: “Another striking difference, especially with the interpretation of Scripture that we find in Hellenized Jews like Philo, is the avoidance of allegory in the New Testament.”<sup>48</sup>

### *The Origins of the Allegorical Interpretation of Scripture*

The NT is not the origin of the allegorical interpretation of Scripture. The allegorical interpretation that influenced the fathers began in Greece in the sixth century BC.<sup>49</sup> The development of allegorical interpretation, and the reasons for its adoption in the church, must be evaluated before allegorical interpretation can be reappropriated by the church.

### Hellenistic Origins of Allegorical Interpretation

In the sixth century BC, some interpreters wished to harness Homer’s narratives to promote philosophical reflection. They also wished to defend Homer from accusations that his narratives were not pious.<sup>50</sup> The Jewish scholar, Philo of Alexandria (20 BC–AD 40) applied this allegorical method to Scripture. His motivation also included an apologetic element. Opposition to Judaism in Hellenistic culture led him to align Scripture with Hellenistic thought through allegorical interpretation.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Several commentators conclude from the uniqueness of this interpretation that Paul must be countering a similar interpretation devised by the Judaizers. Bruce, *Galatians*, 218; Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 219; George, *Galatians*, 334. Silva provides the best evaluation: “We have no evidence to confirm this theory, and the text itself gives no clear indication to support it, but the possibility should be left open. In any case, the very fact that Paul nowhere else uses this approach (1 Cor. 10:4 provides only a partial analogy, while 9:9 does not deal with an OT narrative) should be a warning against drawing major conclusions on the basis of Paul’s use of the Sarah/Hagar analogy.” Moisés Silva, “Galatians,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 808.

<sup>48</sup> Wolters, “The History of Old Testament Interpretation,” 24.

<sup>49</sup> Whitman writes, “Allegorical interpretation begins in earnest in the sixth century BC, with the philosophic interpretation of Homer.” Jon Whitman, *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 20; cf. Anthony Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 72. If this is a universally true statement, allegorical interpretation emerged just as the final books of the Bible were being written: Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Chronicles. If allegorical interpretation had not been developed when most of the OT was written, then its authors clearly did not intend for their works to be read allegorically. Any defense of allegorical readings of the OT would have to defend it according to divine intention alone. Nonetheless, some see Jotham’s fable of the trees and the bramble (Judg 9:8–15), Ezekiel’s story of the adopted bride turned prostitute (Ezek 16), and his parable of the two eagles and the vine (Ezek 17) as compositional allegories (rather than allegorical interpretations of non-allegorical texts. On the need to distinguish “allegorical interpretation” from “compositional allegory,” see Whitman, *Allegory*, 3–4; cf. Mikołaj Domaradzki, “The Beginnings of Greek Allegoresis,” *Classical World* 10, no. 3 (Spring 2017): 300–3. Domaradzki uses the term *allegoresis* to refer to allegorical interpretation and *allegory* to refer to “compositional allegory.” The allegory under consideration in this period is allegorical interpretation. Struck notes that “ancient allegorism is a phenomenon of reading, not writing.” Peter T. Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 3n1.

<sup>50</sup> Whitman, *Allegory*, 20, 38.

<sup>51</sup> Provan, *Right Reading*, 141–42; Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 68–70.

A number of problems exist with this Hellenistic approach to interpretation. Whitman observes that while Homer's writings invite allegory, a close reading of his works cannot sustain them.<sup>52</sup> In other words, Homer did not write allegories, and attempts to read his writings as allegories do not withstand scrutiny. This means that the fathers adopted a reading strategy that *misread* texts.

Additional problems emerged when the allegorical approach was applied to Scripture. Iain Provan observes that Philo was not "constrained by the canonical shape of the literature [that is, Scripture] as a whole read in a broadly literal way. He allegorizes it almost *in toto*, in line with Greek philosophical and ethical norms. It is these norms, whether borrowed from Plato, or the Stoics, or whoever, that drive the entire enterprise." This leads Provan to conclude, "It is fundamentally the Greeks whom Philo is reading in his 'reading' of the Bible. It is not really Scripture at all, which represents merely an obstacle that must be overcome."<sup>53</sup>

Clearly, any interpretative method that substitutes a foreign worldview for that of Scripture itself and which is prone to misread the scriptural text must be rejected.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, this critique must be tempered. The allegorical method as deployed by the fathers differed from Philo's allegorical approach in a significant way. Patristic allegory was more likely to align with the canonical shape of Scripture read literally. It was more aimed at finding Christ in the OT and in alleviating difficult interpretive questions than conforming the OT to Greek philosophy.<sup>55</sup> Does this put the patristic allegorizers in the clear? Not necessarily. It is necessary to evaluate Origen's rationale for allegorical interpretation before reaching a final verdict.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Whitman, *Allegory*, 14–20. For instance, in one section Athena might appear to be a symbol of wisdom. But in a later narrative Athena deceives a man, leading him to his death—a role inconsistent with the symbol of wisdom. As he probes this example, Whitman observes, "The fact, of course, is that Athena is too literal a goddess too often to be consistently 'something else,' the something else of allegory." *Allegory*, 16.

<sup>53</sup> Provan, *Right Reading*, 143–44.

<sup>54</sup> Chase recognizes the difficulties this historical origin of allegory raises. "We don't want interpreters treating Scripture in ways that are motivated by avoiding embarrassment from the text, as those who allegorized Greek myths were embarrassed by the surface sense of the poetry and the activities of the gods. The dilution of Scripture for the sake of cultural acceptability is a road to disaster and endless reinterpretations. We also know from the history of biblical interpretation that allegorical readings have reached conclusions that seem exegetically indefensible. . . . There is a danger that allegorical interpretation may misunderstand the passage or offer conclusions that distract from the point of the passage. An interpreter might rely on his own subjective imagination in order to impute creative yet unwarranted conclusions that cannot be exegetically and canonically defended." But Chase also insists that neglecting allegorical interpretation is itself dangerous. "But there is also a danger about these dangers, and that would be stiff-arming the strategy of allegorical reading in every case. We must acknowledge the prominence of allegorical interpretation throughout church history. Allegorizing was not some aberration." *40 Questions*, 196. This argument from pervasive use is misguided. If Scripture does not authorize allegorical interpretation, if the origins of this method are foreign to Scripture, if the rationales offered justifying its use by Christians are faulty, and if the method caused enough problems that it began to fall out of use, then pervasive use at an early period of church history is not enough to justify its present adoption. See also Provan, *Right Reading*, 105.

<sup>55</sup> Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 147.

<sup>56</sup> In addition, resorting to allegory is not a way of finding Christ in the OT; it is an admission of failure to find him in the letter. I would argue that Christ is to be found in the letter.

### Origen on Allegorical Interpretation

Origen was one of the most significant exegetes of the early church, and his approach to interpretation was influential in the Middle Ages.<sup>57</sup> Book IV of *On First Principles* contains Origen's own statement of his exegetical approach.<sup>58</sup> Origen argued for spiritual interpretations of Scripture for four main reasons. First, spiritual interpretation was necessary because the Jews argued on the basis of literal interpretation that Jesus could not be the Messiah.<sup>59</sup> Second, heretics used literal interpretation to argue that the god of the OT was evil.<sup>60</sup> Third, Origen found spiritual interpretation necessary to make sense of a large swath of the OT.<sup>61</sup> Finally, Origen believed that certain parts of Scripture could not bear a literal interpretation.<sup>62</sup> Origen therefore concluded, "For our contention with regard to the

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<sup>57</sup> "Origen is still acclaimed as the founder of biblical criticism in the church, the most influential Christian interpreter of Scripture and the founder of systematic theology." Charles Kannengisser, "Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church," in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007), 5.

<sup>58</sup> Any work with Origen's corpus is complicated by the fact that Justinian ordered Origen's works destroyed due to grave concerns about his orthodoxy. Origen's writings in the original Greek are fragmentary, and some doubt exists regarding the reliability of the Latin translations. Henri de Lubac, "Introduction to the Torchbook Edition," in Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), vii. Fortunately for this study, the relevant portion of *On First Principles* was preserved in the *Philocalia* of Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus. The translator of the edition utilized here presented translations of both the Greek and the Latin in parallel columns (xlvi).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.2.1 (pp. 269–70).

<sup>60</sup> These are the examples cited by Origen: "A fire has been kindled in mine anger' [Deut 32:22; Jer 15:14]; and 'I am a jealous God, visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation' [Exod 20:5]; and 'It repenteth me that I have anointed Saul to be king' [1 Sam 15:11]; and 'I, God, make peace and create evil'; [Isa 45:7]; and elsewhere, 'There is no evil in a city, which the Lord did not do' [Amos 3:6]; and further, 'Evils came down from the Lord upon the gates of Jerusalem' [Mic 1:12]; and 'An evil spirit from the Lord troubled Saul' [1 Sam 18:10]; and ten thousand other passages like these." *Ibid.* (pp. 270–71); Scripture references added from footnotes.

<sup>61</sup> What benefit does the reader have, wondered Origen, to know that Lot slept with his daughters, that Abraham and Jacob were polygamists, that the tabernacle had certain kinds of furniture, that one person begat another, and that various battles were fought, unless there were a meaning beyond the literal? *Ibid.*, 4.2.2 (pp. 272–73). This point also has an apologetic aspect to it as well. The Gnostics denied the value of the OT. Origen's method of interpretation provided him a way to find value in these texts.

<sup>62</sup> He argued, "What man of intelligence will believe that the first and the second and third day, and the evening and the morning existed without the sun and stars?" *Ibid.*, 4.3.1 (p. 288). Of the garden, the trees in the garden, the walking of God in the garden, and Adam's hiding of himself after his sin, Origen said, "I do not think anyone will doubt that these are figurative expressions which indicate certain mysteries through a semblance of history and not through actual events." *Ibid.*, 4.3.1 (p. 288). He observed that Cain could not go out from the face of God, for God does not have a face. Likewise, Satan did not take Jesus to a high mountain, for no mountain is high enough to give a person a view of all the nations. *Ibid.* (p. 289). He also claimed that certain commands of Scripture were "irrational" and thus not to be taken literally. The command to destroy the uncircumcised Israelites was irrational. "If the law relating to these children were really meant to be carried out according to the letter, the proper course would be to order the death of their fathers or those by whom they were being brought up." *Ibid.*, 4.3.2 (p. 290). The command to one struck on the right cheek to allow the other to be struck made little sense because "every striker, unless he suffers from some unnatural defect, strikes the left cheek with his right hand." *Ibid.*, 4.3.3 (p. 292). The command to gouge out the right eye if it causes lust was also irrational: "How can the blame be attributed to the right eye, when there are two eyes that see? And what man, even supposing he accuses himself of 'looking on a woman to lust after her' and attributes the blame to his right eye alone, would act rationally if he were to cast this eye away?" *Ibid.* (p. 293).

whole of divine scripture is, that it all has a spiritual meaning, but not all a bodily meaning; for the bodily meaning is often proved to be an impossibility.”<sup>63</sup>

### *Evaluation of Origen*

Contemporary proponents of allegorical interpretation and the *quadriga* repeatedly appeal to the Great Tradition to justify a return to these interpretative methods. The arguments of the earliest proponents of these methods are, however, flawed.

Origen’s first two reasons for adopting an allegorical approach to Scripture are reminiscent of the Greek reasons for allegorizing Homer. Homer was allegorized because the gods in his narratives behaved badly. The apologetic recourse to allegory is a concession that there are problems, moral or otherwise, with the letter. If Jesus cannot be demonstrated to be the Messiah from the letter, and if God as he is revealed in the OT cannot be demonstrated to be righteous from the letter, then Christianity is not true. The fact that both have been demonstrated from the letter obviates the need to resort to allegorical interpretation.

Origen’s objections to interpreting the Creation week according to the letter are like the objections of today’s theistic evolutionists. Conservative interpreters, however, have insisted that the sun was truly not created until the fourth day, that Adam truly was placed in a garden, and that he hid himself after his sin. The description of God walking in the garden refers to God’s condescension, but it is not to be allegorized.

Some of Origen’s other objections fail to recognize that figures of speech are included within the literal sense. This explains Cain going out from the face of God as well as the command to gouge out the lusting right eye. Clearly, something supernatural was taking place when Satan showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, but this does not mean that the high mountain is allegorical.

Some of Origen’s interpretations are simply wrong. The statement in Genesis 17:14 is not that uncircumcised male Israelites were to be killed. Rather, they were excluded from the covenant people.<sup>64</sup> Origen is perceptive when he notes that normally the left cheek is struck with the right hand; however, Christ was probably referring to a backhanded slap.<sup>65</sup> In sum, Origen, who stands at the fountainhead

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<sup>63</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.3.5 (p. 297). This means that occasionally “the records taken in a literal sense are not true.” Ibid., 4.3.4 (p. 294). Nonetheless, Origen was careful to guard against the conclusion that none of the historical events recorded in the Bible happened or that none of the commands were to be obeyed literally. He noted, for instance, that Abraham was actually buried in a cave in Hebron and that the command to honor one’s parents should be obeyed literally. Ibid. (pp. 294–96).

<sup>64</sup> It seems best to understand this text as teaching that males not circumcised by their parents were excluded from the Abrahamic Covenant and thus considered Gentiles. The passage is about who enters into the covenant. It is not calling for the death of the infant. Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:458–59; John Gill, *An Exposition of the Old Testament* (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1810), 1:124; David Brown, A. R. Fausset, and Robert Jamieson, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments* (London: William Collins, Sons, and Company, n.d.), 1:153; Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 2005), 205; Duane A. Garrett, “Meredith Kline on Suzerainty, Circumcision, and Baptism,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 263.

<sup>65</sup> John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (1886; reprint, Valley Forge, PA: Judson, n.d.), 118; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 291; R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 220; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand

of Christian allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures adopted this approach for theologically problematic and textually unjustified reasons.

### *Allegorical Interpretation in the Middle Ages and Reformation*

Those who advocate a return to the *quadriga* or to allegorical interpretation also need to reckon with the reasons that the literal sense began to displace allegorical interpretation in the Middle Ages. They must also consider why the Reformers and their heirs insisted on a single literal sense.

#### Thomas and the Middle Ages

In seeking to establish that Reformation exegesis was “not entirely discontinuous” with medieval exegesis, Richard Muller notes that already with Hugh of St. Victor and Thomas Aquinas the emphasis in the *quadriga* had shifted toward the literal sense. With Nicholas of Lyra, the shift continued, with Lyra proposing a “double literal sense” that included within the literal sense not only the “sign” but “the thing signified.” Muller notes that Lefèvre d’Etaples took this a step further by including the thing signified in a single literal sense.<sup>66</sup>

Nicholas Healy attributes the shift back toward the literal sense to four factors. First, heretical groups were able to exploit allegorical interpretation to further their theological agendas.<sup>67</sup> Though the teaching that the literal sense grounds the other senses reaches back to Augustine, insisting on this point became a key means to stymie these heretical groups.<sup>68</sup> Second, greater appreciation of Aristotle gave interpreters a greater appreciation for the material world. Thus, the letter had inherent value; it did not need to point beyond this world to have value.<sup>69</sup> Smalley notes, “The Aristotelian would perceive the ‘spirit’ of Scripture as something not hidden behind or added on to but expressed by the text.”<sup>70</sup> Third, a greater interest in the “history of salvation” led interpreters to value the literal sense more. Instead of theological and devotional meaning being found in a spiritual sense read onto the

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Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 197; D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *EBCRev*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 189; Wayne Grudem, *Christian Ethics* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 551–52.

<sup>66</sup> In making sense of shifting elements from other parts of the *quadriga* into the literal sense, it is important to note with Muller that the *quadriga* is not simply about allegorical interpretation. Thus, the abandonment of allegory by the Reformers was not abandonment of all the concerns contained within the *quadriga*. Many of the non-allegorical elements were brought into the literal sense—a process underway for hundreds of years before the Reformation. Richard A. Muller, “Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: The View from the Middle Ages,” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: Essays Presented to David C. Steinmetz in Honor of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 10–12.

<sup>67</sup> Nicholas M. Healy, “Introduction,” in *Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to His Biblical Commentaries*, ed. Thomas G. Weinandy, Daniel A. Keating, and John P. Yocum (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 8. For instance, Joachim of Fiore developed elaborate allegorical interpretations of various texts to support his distinctive eschatology, including claims of a coming age of the Holy Spirit in which “the letter will be altogether cast aside and spiritual men will have perfect spiritual understanding of Scripture.” Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 288.

<sup>68</sup> Healy, “Introduction,” 8.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Smalley, *Middle Ages*, 293.

history, the events of salvation history, and especially of the life of Christ, were read literally as examples to be imitated.<sup>71</sup> Fourth, the dialectical method of the schools began to supplant older methods of spiritual interpretation. These methods were oriented around raising questions about the text and using logic to provide the answers.<sup>72</sup>

Allegory and the fourfold sense were not rejected in this period. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, continued to utilize the fourfold sense.<sup>73</sup> But Thomas differed from the Alexandrian fathers (and Augustine) by placing metaphors within the literal sense.<sup>74</sup> Thomas also emphasized that the literal sense must ground the other senses.<sup>75</sup> The fathers turned to allegory to find theological truth among historical texts. Thomas used his prodigious philosophical skills to read Scripture according to its literal sense in a philosophically and theologically rich way.

### Calvin

With the Reformers came a rejection of allegorical interpretation.<sup>76</sup> Calvin said of the commentator, “It is almost his only work to lay open the mind of the writer whom he undertakes to explain.”<sup>77</sup> Seeking authorial intention was not a novel idea, for fathers such as Augustine affirmed that interpreters should seek authorial intent. Augustine, however, was willing to accept that the Spirit illumined interpretations at variance from authorial intention as long as they conformed to the rule of

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<sup>71</sup> Healy, “Introduction,” 8; Smalley, *Middle Ages*, 284–85.

<sup>72</sup> Healy, “Introduction,” 8.

<sup>73</sup> Though his commentary on Isaiah was designated as *ad litteram*, Thomas included brief marginal notes that pointed toward spiritual interpretations of key phrases. Joseph Wawrykow, “Aquinas on Isaiah,” in *Aquinas on Scripture*, 50–53. His commentary on John was largely on the literal sense, but Thomas did provide allegorical interpretations, such as one on the piercing of Christ’s side, alongside his literal interpretation. Matthew Levering, “Reading John with St. Thomas Aquinas,” in *Aquinas on Scripture*, 118–19. Even when limiting himself to the literal sense, Thomas could express appreciation for the spiritual sense. In the prologue to his commentary on Job, Thomas said, “We intend briefly as far as we are able, having trust in divine help, to expound according to the literal sense that book which is entitled Blessed Job. Blessed Pope Gregory has already disclosed to us its mysteries so subtly and clearly that there seems no need to add anything further to them.” Thomas Aquinas, *The Literal Exposition on Job: A Scriptural Commentary Concerning Providence* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), 69.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Job*, 76; John Yocum, “Aquinas’ Literal Exposition on Job,” in *Aquinas on Scripture*, 26; cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.1.10.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. “No sense except the literal has the power of confirming anything.” Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, VII.6 a.14:3, cited in K. Froehlich, “Thomas Aquinas,” in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, 983. Thomas did this in explicit dependence on Augustine, so this alone is not evidence that Thomas was moving to a greater appreciation of the letter. However, in practice the letter was gaining ground.

<sup>76</sup> This is not an uncontested claim. John L. Thompson, for instance, finds allegorical interpretation in Zwingli and Peter Martyr Vermigli. Calvin, in his reading, is the outlier. John L. Thompson, “Allegorical Argumentation in Vermigli’s OT Exegesis,” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*, 270–71. Eric Lundeen says much the same. *The Reformation of the Literal: Prophecy and the Senses of Scripture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: T&T Clark, 2025), 214. However, this is not entirely borne out in the preceding text, in which Oecolampadius seemed unique among the Reformers in admitting a spiritual sense.

<sup>77</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (1849; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), xxiii.

faith.<sup>78</sup> Calvin, on the other hand, often rejected interpretations consistent with the rule of faith because he did not think they were what the author intended.<sup>79</sup>

Earlier interpreters used allegorical interpretation, often based on word association, to infuse seemingly non-theological texts (such as historical narratives) with theological significance. Calvin demonstrated the theological significance of texts by showing their place in the book's argument and thereby connecting them to the major themes of the book.<sup>80</sup> More commonly, however, Calvin sought to show the relevance of a text through the use of analogy.<sup>81</sup> Calvin completely rejected the division of senses into literal and spiritual.<sup>82</sup> He even identified the hermeneutical turn to allegory as Satanic.<sup>83</sup> Calvin argued that Paul's use of "allegory" in Galatians 4 did not justify patristic or medieval allegories. Paul, according to Calvin, simply made a figurative application of the historical meaning of the text.<sup>84</sup>

John L. Thompson, observing that the ancients did not distinguish between allegory and typology, concludes that Calvin was open to certain kinds of allegorical interpretation. And yet, being a careful

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<sup>78</sup> "But when from the same words of scripture not just one, but two or more meanings may be extracted, even if you cannot tell which of them the writer intended, there is no risk if they can all be shown from other places of the holy scripture to correspond with the truth. However, those who are engaged in searching the divine utterances must make every effort to arrive at the intention of the author through whom the Holy Spirit produced that portion of scripture." Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1996), 3.27.28 (p. 185–86).

<sup>79</sup> In his comments on Genesis 1:1, Calvin denied that the plural *Elohim* pointed to the Trinity. He likewise did not believe that the double mention of LORD in Genesis 19:24 pointed toward the Trinity. He rejected the Christological interpretation of "desire of all nations" (KJV) in Haggai 2:7. He hesitated to affirm that Micah taught the eternity of the Messiah in Micah 5:2, and he absolutely rejected that this passage taught the two-fold nature of the Son. Calvin denied that the "crimsoned garments" of Isaiah 63:1 referred to the blood of Christ shed on the cross. David L. Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 5–6. For primary sources, see Calvin's commentaries on the references noted.

<sup>80</sup> "Like all Calvin's commentaries, he intends this final biblical exposition [on Joshua] as a guide for readers to find their way through the Scriptures, ensuring that the reader can easily discern the theme and goal of the book, and easily identify the main teachings and practical applications throughout the course of the narrative." Raymond A. Blacketer, "Calvin as Commentator on the Mosaic Harmony and Joshua," in *Calvin and the Bible*, ed. Donald K. McKim (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 46.

<sup>81</sup> T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 72–73; Wilhelmus H. Th. Moehn, "Calvin as Commentator on the Acts of the Apostles," in *Calvin and the Bible*, 202. These authors cite in support of Calvin's comments on Genesis 3:15, Exodus 6:7, Daniel 8:24–25 and his Acts commentary *passim*.

<sup>82</sup> Parker, *Old Testament Commentaries*, 70; T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 102; David C. Steinmetz, "John Calvin as an Interpreter of the Bible," in *Calvin and the Bible*, 283.

<sup>83</sup> "We must, however, entirely reject the allegories of Origen, and of others like him, which Satan, with the deepest subtlety, has endeavored to introduce into the Church, for the purpose of rendering the doctrine of Scripture ambiguous and destitute of all certainty and firmness." Calvin, *Genesis*, 1:114, noted by Puckett, *Exegesis*, 107, and Randall C. Zachman, "Calvin as Commentator on Genesis," in *Calvin and the Bible*, 15. "With such approbation the licentious system gradually attained such a height, that he who handled Scripture for his own amusement not only was suffered to pass unpunished, but even obtained the highest applause. For many centuries no man was considered to be ingenious, who had not the skill and daring necessary for changing into a variety of curious shapes the sacred word of God. This was undoubtedly a contrivance of Satan to undermine the authority of Scripture, and to take away from the reading of it the true advantage." Calvin, *Galatians*, 135.

<sup>84</sup> In other words, Paul realized the typological nature of Abraham's family. Calvin explicitly compared it to circumcision, sacrifices, and the priesthood. Calvin, *Galatians*, 135–36; cf. Puckett, *Exegesis*, 108–9.

historian, Thompson also notes that Calvin “always strains to find a direct tie to the literal or historical sense, even if he has to read the historical narrative and the ‘mind of the writer’ somewhat generously.” Thompson acknowledges that Calvin “will happily embrace plausible analogies, types, metaphors, and so on . . . as long as he sees a warrant in the context of the narrative.”<sup>85</sup> Thompson is correct that the ancients did not distinguish between allegory, typology, analogy, and metaphor. But Calvin did, and the distinction emerged for good reason.

Thompson notes that Calvin was willing to find allegories in circumcision, the sacrificial system, the priesthood, and the tabernacle.<sup>86</sup> Parker notes that Calvin called Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in Daniel 4 an allegory.<sup>87</sup> Additionally, Calvin spiritualized kingdom promises given to Israel and applied them to the church. Puckett concludes from this spiritualizing that the difference between Calvin and his opponents was simply “one of degree.”<sup>88</sup> There is a difference, however, between allegorical interpretation and interpreting an allegory (even if the ancients did not make this distinction). Calvin was doing the latter in these instances (on a broad definition of allegory), not the former.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> John L. Thompson, “Calvin as a Biblical Interpreter,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 68.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>87</sup> Parker, *Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries*, 70.

<sup>88</sup> Puckett, *Exegesis*, 113. Lundeen makes a perceptive observation regarding those who find in Calvin non-literal interpretation despite his protestations against such: “It seems to me that there are at least three perspectives from which we can describe historical interpreters of the Bible, and contemporary scholarship on John Calvin here offers a brief and useful example of the importance of clarity in this regard. First, we can describe Calvin using his own categories; second, using our own contemporary categories; or third, using the categories of his contemporaries. None of these are necessarily illegitimate endeavors, but the lines between these perspectives, while logically and conceptually distinct, are often blurred or ignored altogether.” Lundeen acknowledges scholars who “have claimed that Calvin, despite his explicit statements to the contrary, continued to subtly utilize allegorical and nonliteral modes of interpretation,” and he notes, “It seems to me that scholars in this second group often implicitly write from the second perspective, utilizing an understanding of ‘literal’ that does not align with Calvin’s own but instead works from a narrower definition of the term.” He does not object to this, but he thinks that they should make this fact clear. *Reformation of the Literal*, 215. I find Calvin’s understanding of the literal sense superior to that of these later historians.

<sup>89</sup> With regard to the spiritualization of kingdom promises made to Israel, Calvin explained in his Amos commentary how he discerned when the prophet spoke allegorically: “If any one objects and says, that the Prophet does not speak here allegorically; the answer is ready at hand, even this,—that it is a manner of speaking everywhere found in Scripture, that a happy state is painted as it were before our eyes by setting before us the conveniences of the present life and earthly blessings: this may especially be observed in the Prophets, for they accommodated their style, as we have already stated, to the capacities of a rude and weak people.” John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets* (1846; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 413; cf. Puckett, *Exegesis*, 112; Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 2:470–72. Muller’s point is that Calvin’s understanding of the literal sense has more continuity with medieval interpreters than historical-critical scholarship allows. As a result, in Muller’s reading Calvin allowed for “allegories imbedded in the text as its literal sense.” He rejected “the *importation* of invented allegories.” *Ibid.*, 2:472. In other words, author-intended allegories are recognized; allegorical *interpretation* is rejected.

## Post-Reformation Reformation Theologians

Speaking of Calvin's hermeneutic, Craig Carter says, "He shows no interest whatsoever in arguing for a single-meaning theory as the Enlightenment does."<sup>90</sup> Far from being an Enlightenment dogma, however, a single sense is the confessional Reformed position: "The true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one)" (*Westminster Confession of Faith* I.9; *London Baptist Confession*, I.9).<sup>91</sup> Likewise, in his *Disputations on Holy Scripture* (1588) the Anglican theologian William Whitaker argued for the single sense. His conclusion is as follows:

The sense of scripture, therefore, is but one,—the literal; for it is folly to feign many senses, merely because many things follow from the words of scripture rightly understood. Those things may, indeed, be called corollaries or consequences, flowing from the right understanding of the words, but new and different senses they are by no means.<sup>92</sup>

Whitaker must be read carefully. He clarified that he does not deny that within Scripture there is "allegory, anagoge, and tropology." However, he took these either to be part of the letter itself or applications drawn from the letter. As to Paul's "allegory" in Galatians 4, he understood Paul to be interpreting the OT typologically.<sup>93</sup>

The defense of the single sense of Scripture continued among prominent Reformed theologians in the Post-Reformation era. In his comments on Galatians 4:24 William Perkins critiqued the *quadriga*.<sup>94</sup> John Owen likewise insisted on a single sense. He saw the literal sense as full of meaning, and he saw the multi-sense approach as draining the text of meaning.<sup>95</sup> Owen acknowledged that the NT did not always draw out the primary point of OT texts in their context. Nonetheless, Owen maintained that the NT was always drawing either on "some peculiar specialty that is either *truly*

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<sup>90</sup> Carter, *Interpreting*, 186. In an online post, Carter says, "To say that the meaning is 'one' in a premodern setting is not to refer to the conscious intention of the human author and the text's initial readers (that is, what tends to be called the 'historical meaning' in modernity). Rather, the meaning would more naturally be understood as the Divine Author's intention in inspiring the text. No *sensus plenior* should ever contradict or be unrelated to the plain sense, that is, the meaning intended by the human author." Craig A. Carter, "The Single Meaning of Scripture and the 2LCF: How to Read a Premodern Confession," *The Great Tradition* (Substack), accessed June 23, 2025, <https://craigacarter.substack.com/p/the-single-meaning-of-scripture-and>.

<sup>91</sup> Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 148. Letham is cautious about this conclusion, noting that the minutes are sparse at this point. Nonetheless, the minutes do note that they debated the literal sense at this place. Craig Carter is correct that the Reformers would have understood God to be the primary author of the text, but this does not mean that they were willing to accept the *quadriga*.

<sup>92</sup> William Whitaker, *Disputations on Holy Scripture*, trans. William Fitzgerald (1849; reprint, Soli Deo Gloria, 2005), 408.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 405–8.

<sup>94</sup> After explaining the *quadriga*, he commented, "To make many senses of Scripture is to overturn all sense and to make nothing certain. As for the three spiritual senses (so called), they are not senses, but applications or uses of Scripture." William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2015), 2:301.

<sup>95</sup> "Some think that it belongs unto the fulness of the Scripture that each place in it should have various senses,—some say three, some four. But this, indeed, is to empty it of all fulness; for if it have not everywhere one proper determinate sense, it hath none at all." John Owen, *The Works of John Owen* (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1854), 21:167.

*included* in the words or *duly deduced* by just consequence from them.”<sup>96</sup> Turretin rejected the fourfold sense as Roman Catholic.<sup>97</sup> He believed that once a multi-sense approach was adopted, an external authority, such as the Roman Church, was needed to judge which senses were legitimate. He distinguished between compositional allegory and allegorical interpretation, allowing for the former but disallowing the latter. He also argued that figurative language and typology are found in the literal sense. He surveyed passages and arguments used to justify the fourfold approach, rejecting each in turn.<sup>98</sup> Petrus van Mastricht was also direct in his rejection of the *quadriga*: “The orthodox allow only one sense, and that the literal, namely, that which the writer himself intends by his words.”<sup>99</sup> He traced the multisense approach back to Origen, and he rejected it because it undermines the perspicuity of Scripture and requires a churchly magisterium to adjudicate right readings of Scripture.<sup>100</sup>

Post-Reformation Lutheran theology also insisted on a single literal sense. Robert Preus observes, “The Lutheran insistence on determining the *sensus literalis* of Scripture is clearly opposed to the theory of Origen, which filtered down to the Schoolmen, that every Scripture passage admitted of a *multiplex intelligentia* and a fourfold sense must be sought.”<sup>101</sup> Preus also explains the motivation for the Lutheran insistence on the single sense: “A multiplicity of meanings ascribed to a single Bible text turns Scripture into a waxen nose and makes a chaos of all Biblical exegesis. Furthermore, if a given text can possess many meanings, what then becomes of the clarity, the inerrancy, or even the authority of Scripture?”<sup>102</sup> The Lutherans utterly rejected “allegory as understood by Philo and the medieval scholastics,” and they understood Paul’s allegory in Galatians 4 to be an example of typology.<sup>103</sup>

The argument is not that Reformed or Lutheran interpreters universally avoid allegorical interpretations. Some did allegorize.<sup>104</sup> The argument is that weighty authorities in the Post-

<sup>96</sup> Owen, *Works*, 21:167; see also John W. Tweeddale, *John Owen and Hebrews: The Foundation of Biblical Interpretation*, T&T Clark Studies in English Theology (London: T&T Clark, 2020), Kindle loc. 2605.

<sup>97</sup> “Whether the Scriptures have a fourfold sense: literal, allegorical, anagogical and tropological. We deny against the papists.” Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 1:149.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:149.

<sup>99</sup> Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2018), 1:169. Note that van Mastricht’s definition of the literal sense is at odds with Carter’s claim regarding how the pre-moderns thought of the literal sense.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:168–69.

<sup>101</sup> Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1970), 1:324.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:326.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:327–29.

<sup>104</sup> “Edwards sought out the spiritual meaning of Scripture and thus recognized multivalent readings that arose from the literal sense. He held that ‘Scripture often includes various distinct things in its sense’ because the Holy Spirit who inspired it is ‘infinite in understanding,’ ‘has everything in full and perfect view at once,’ and ‘knows how to adapt his words to many things’ (WJE 20:80).” David P. Barshinger, “Hermeneutics,” *The Jonathan Edwards Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 289; cf. Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 175–80. Douglas Sweeney, however, cautions against overplaying Edwards’s spiritual exegesis. Douglas A. Sweeney, *Edwards the Exegete* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 48, 102. On the one hand, it is notable that Edwards still used *sense* in the singular. On the other hand, the argument from God’s “infinite understanding” was used to defend the multisense approach, and Turretin engaged and rejected it. *Institutes*, 1:151.

Reformation period strongly opposed the *quadriga*. Any appeal, especially by Protestants, to the Great Tradition in order to justify recovery of allegorical interpretation or the *quadriga* must reckon with these weighty voices that opposed it.<sup>105</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The move toward pre-critical interpretation and away from the barrenness of historical critical interpretation is understandable. There is an attractiveness for young conservative scholars to embrace the Great Tradition. This claim to stand against modernism with the Great Tradition has a significant problem, however. Examination of the Great Tradition reveals fierce debates. The Reformers and their Post-Reformation heirs stood opposed to the *quadriga* and allegorical interpretation. The medieval period saw a turn away from allegory and toward the literal sense. And the origins of allegorical interpretation of Scripture came from paganism. Allegorical interpretation is foreign to the Bible itself. All of this is papered over by broad appeals to the Great Tradition.

The Reformation also provides a pre-critical approach to interpretation that stands as an alternative to historical criticism. It retains the best of the *quadriga* (concerns to find Christ in the OT, to discern the ethical import of a text, and to discern what eschatological hope the text contains) without its weaknesses. Instead of reading these things into texts, the Reformers and their heirs read them out of the literal sense.<sup>106</sup>

Which Great Tradition should exegetes follow? The Great Tradition of the apostles as recovered by the Reformers and their heirs.

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<sup>105</sup> Chase does acknowledge that Luther, Calvin, Perkins, and Turretin opposed allegorical interpretation. But he downplays their opposition, concluding, “Christian interpretation during the early modern era was in continuity with convictions of previous interpreters within the Great Tradition.” *40 Questions*, 227; cf. pp. 222–25.

<sup>106</sup> This is not to say that earlier interpreters were not also at times really reading doctrinal, ethical, and eschatological meaning out of texts. It is to say that their approach legitimized reading these things into texts when it ought not have done so. Nor is this paper an argument against reading and learning from patristic and medieval interpreters of Scripture. When I survey commentaries on a given passage, I typically begin my survey with patristic commentaries and work my way into the present. I find valuable insights in the fathers. Nevertheless, fifteen years’ worth of engagement with the fathers in this way has confirmed for me that the Reformers and their heirs are generally better interpreters of Scripture than the fathers.

*Appendix 1:*  
*Craig Carter's Alleged Spiritual Sense in Calvin*

Craig Carter argues that Calvin did not reject the spiritual sense. He appeals to Calvin's commentary on Exodus 3:5:

Calvin was not averse to finding a deeper spiritual meaning in addition to the literal or plain sense. Although he had sharp criticisms of certain allegorical interpretations, his mind was subordinated to the text of Scripture, and he fearlessly described what he found there, whether it fit with his theory or not. For example, consider his comments on the command to Moses to put off his shoes because he stood on holy ground during his encounter with the LORD at the burning bush (Exod. 3:5). Calvin writes, "If any prefer the deeper meaning (*anagoge*) that God cannot be heard until we have put off our earthly thoughts, I object not to it; only let the natural sense stand first, that Moses was commanded to put off his shoes, as a preparation to listen with greater reverence to God."<sup>107</sup>

Calvin's commentary on Exodus 3:5 is not, however, a strong basis for defending an allegorical approach in Calvin. First, the action being interpreted is inherently symbolic. The difference between an allegorical and a literal interpretation of a symbolic action will not be as great as the difference between an allegorical and literal interpretation of a historical narrative. Second, directly before the portion that Carter quoted, Calvin referred to those "who delight in allegory," and he dismissed "the whole of their subtle triflings." Instead, he proposed that the point of the command for Moses to remove his sandals was that Moses' "mind might be disposed to reverential feelings," just as kneeling to pray can fit the mind to pray. Third, Calvin did not endorse the proposed "deeper meaning"; he simply said that he would not object to it if the natural sense stood first. Note, however, how close this deeper meaning comes to what Calvin called the "natural sense." To "put off our earthly thoughts" is quite close to having the "mind . . . disposed to reverential feelings."<sup>108</sup>

An examination of various allegorical interpretations of Exodus 3:5 further undermines Carter's attempt to link Calvin to allegorical interpretation. Theodoret of Cyrus recounts the allegorical approach behind the deeper meaning Calvin refrained from objecting to: "Some commentators have

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<sup>107</sup> Carter, *Interpreting Scripture*, 183, citing John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony* (1852; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1:64. Carter would have been better advised to argue from Calvin's commentary on Genesis 27:27, "The allegory of Ambrose on this passage is not displeasing to me. Jacob, the younger brother, is blessed under the person of the elder; the garments which were borrowed from his brother breathes an odour grateful and pleasant to his father. In the same manner we are blessed, as Ambrose teaches, when, in the name of Christ, we enter the presence of our Heavenly Father: we receive from him the robe of righteousness, which, by its odour, procures his favour; in short, we are thus blessed when we are put in his place." John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (1847; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 2:91. This, however, seems to be the exception that proves the rule. In any event, for this allegory to work, Esau would have to represent Christ, and his hairy hunting garments the righteousness of Christ. Thus, the allegorical interpretation that Calvin, contrary to usual practice, accepted is an allegorical interpretation that does not survive close engagement with the text of Genesis.

<sup>108</sup> Calvin, *Four Last Books of Moses*, 63–64.

claimed [Moses] was to cast aside earthly cares linked to this mortal life, since the leather of sandals is dead.”<sup>109</sup> Calvin would likely have called the rationale for this interpretation “subtle trifling” even though he declined to object to the conclusion. Notably, Calvin deigned to mention various other allegorical interpretations. Ephraim the Syrian proposed that the removal of his sandals signified that Moses was to “go trample the Egyptians.” Ambrose taught that it signified that we must “free the feet of our soul from the bonds of the body and clear our steps from all connections with this world”; and having “put aside the garments of the flesh,” the godly man may “walk with his spirit and the footstep of his mind naked.” Ambrose also taught that it meant we must “remove every bond of iniquity.” And he further taught that it signifies the feet that are “beautiful for preaching the gospel.” Augustine made the connection between leather sandals and “dead works”; the instruction signified the need to “give up dead works.” Gregory of Nyssa said that Moses “freed the lower part of his soul from the dead garment made of skin.”<sup>110</sup> Carter recognizes that Calvin would not accept these kinds of allegorical interpretation; but Calvin’s concession to a modest “deeper meaning” in Exodus 3:5 is a thin reed upon which to develop an argument that Calvin aligned with the patristic and medieval use of a spiritual sense.

Carter likewise attempts to read Calvin’s acknowledgement of typology in Paul’s “allegory” of Hagar and Sarah as “an example of Calvin standing squarely in the trajectory of Great Tradition exegesis insofar as he views any legitimate spiritual sense as an extension of the literal sense”<sup>111</sup>—and all this despite his clear denunciation of allegory at this very place in his commentary.<sup>112</sup> Carter then turns to Calvin’s six references to allegory in the *Institutes*. He notes that “all six are refutations of doctrinal error.” He concludes from this that Calvin “himself shows a willingness to interpret the Scripture allegorically when the text warrants.” For Carter, Calvin’s opposition to allegory is only opposition to using “allegory in the *wrong way*.”<sup>113</sup> This is quite the conclusion to draw when no examples of Calvin interpreting the text allegorically are provided.

In fairness to Carter, he does not seem drawn to the extremes of patristic exegesis. Nonetheless, his project would be stronger if he grounded his advocacy of premodern exegesis more in the Reformation, including in their critiques of patristic and medieval exegesis.

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<sup>109</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus, *The Questions on the Octateuch* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 229.

<sup>110</sup> Joseph T. Lienhard and Ronnie J. Rombs, eds. *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, ACCS (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 13–14.

<sup>111</sup> Carter, 184.

<sup>112</sup> Calvin, *Four Last Books of Moses*, 63.

<sup>113</sup> Carter, 185.

*Appendix 2:*

*Apostolic Allegorical Interpretation According to Mitchell Chase Analyzed and Evaluated*

Do the NT authors engage in allegorical interpretation of the OT? I argued above that in the most promising passage in which to find allegorical interpretation, Galatians 4:24–31, the apostle Paul was interpreting the OT according to the literal sense. This appendix briefly surveys the allegories that Mitchell Chase has identified in the NT in order to provide an evaluation of a wider set of passages.<sup>114</sup>

**Table 2. Proposed NT Allegories**

Proposed Allegory	Evaluation
<p>The gifts of gold are appropriate for a king (1 Kgs 10:2; Ps 72:10–11, 15). Gold, frankincense, and myrrh are all connected to Tabernacle worship (Exod 25–30). Therefore, “the gifts should provoke interpreters to consider their own heart’s response to the Christ. The reader of the Bible should fall before him and worship” (279).</p>	<p>That gold, frankincense, and myrrh were gifts for a king is not an allegory. It is part of the letter of Matthew (Matt 2:2). The connection of these gifts to the Tabernacle is worth probing, but it is not necessary to connect Matthew 2 to worship, for worship is part of the letter as well (Matt 2:2, 8, 11). The personal application is just that; it is not an allegory.</p>
<p>Chase places “Out of Egypt I called my son” in the category of typology (61–62). However, it is worth including in this list because this text appears to many to be an example of non-literal interpretation.</p>	<p>In its original context Hosea was referring to the historical exodus, at which time God identified Israel as his son (Exod 4:22–23). Nonetheless, Hosea was himself sensitive to earlier historical events serving as types or analogies of later events.<sup>115</sup> It is also significant that Hosea in this chapter sees the historical exodus as a model of the eschatological exodus in which Israel will be returned to the land. In addition, Hosea connects this return with the coming Davidic Messiah.<sup>116</sup> In addition, there is explicit OT exegetical warrant for drawing the parallel between Israel’s exodus and the Messiah’s coming (note the parallels between Israel and the Messiah in Numbers 23–24).<sup>117</sup> Matthew was not reading Hosea 11:1 allegorically or out of context; he was reading it with greater sensitivity</p>

<sup>114</sup> The proposed allegories are from Chase, *40 Questions about Typology and Allegory*. Within the chart, page numbers from this book will be provided in parentheses.

<sup>115</sup> Plummer documents a number of these. Robert L. Plummer, “Righteousness and Peace Kiss: The Reconciliation of Authorial Intent and Biblical Typology,” *SBJT* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 58.

<sup>116</sup> “Hosea’s citation in Hosea 11:1b is only the beginning of a section that moves from the original exodus (Hos. 11:1b) to the metaphorical return to Egypt (Hos. 11:5) and finally to the new exodus out of Egypt (Hos. 11:11). And for the composer of the Twelve, this new deliverance would not take place apart from the eschatological king of Hosea 3:5. The prophet’s interest in a recapitulation of Egyptian bondage (Hos. 8:13; 9:3) and the hope of a new exodus (Hos. 2:16–17) has been well developed by the time the reader reaches this juncture, and the remainder of the Twelve will sustain this interest (e.g., Mic. 7:15; Zech. 10:10).” Michael B. Shepherd, *A Commentary on the Book of the Twelve: The Minor Prophets*, KEL (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2018), 93–95.

<sup>117</sup> John H. Sailhamer, “Hosea 11:1 and Matthew 2:15,” *WTJ* 63, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 85–96; Seth D. Postell, “Numbers 24:5–9, 15–19: The Distant Star,” in *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy*, ed. Michael Rydelnik and Edwin Blum (Chicago: Moody, 2019), 285–305.

Proposed Allegory	Evaluation
<p>Locusts in the OT represent judgment (Exod 10:1–20; Deut 28:42; Joel 1:4–7). Honey represents blessing (Exod 3:8; Ps 19:10). “So when John the Baptist is eating locusts and honey, the meaning is about the message he’s proclaiming in the region around the Jordan River” (280).</p>	<p>to its immediate and canonical context than many other interpreters.</p> <p>It may be that the ascetic nature of John’s diet is the main point. If the diet had symbolic associations, then locusts may have called to mind judgment. However, in this context, the honey would as well signify judgment (Isa 7:21–25).<sup>118</sup> If this is the case, Matthew is not allegorizing OT texts. He is highlighting an aspect of John’s diet which (intentionally on John’s part?) drew on signs of judgment within the literal sense.</p>
<p>The disciples’ act of laying down their nets to follow Jesus “means that we follow Jesus with all that we are, denying whatever else would vie for centrality. The nets are our lives. We may not be fishermen, but Jesus wants us to lay down our nets and take up our cross” (280).</p>	<p>This is not an example of the NT allegorizing. It is Chase’s attempt at an allegorical interpretation. However, such an interpretation is not necessary. The nets do not need to stand as an allegory for lives to make the analogy between the disciples leaving all behind to follow Jesus and the wholehearted devotion that all Christians should give Christ.</p>
<p>In commenting on Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well, Chase observes, “First they’re talking about physical water. And then Jesus starts talking about spiritual water. The spiritual meaning in the passage is vital to understanding Jesus’ words to the woman” (281).</p>	<p>A literal reading of the text recognizes that Jesus is using water as a symbol. This is not a “spiritual meaning” laid overtop the literal sense of the passage.</p>
<p>Chase allegorizes the account of Jesus calming the storm by equating Jesus’ presence in the boat with his presence in the Christian’s life. The storm represents “overwhelming circumstances and internal doubts.” The story teaches that Christians should “cry out to Christ, who is with us always and is an ever-present help in our trouble” (281).</p>	<p>This is not an example of the NT allegorizing. It is Chase’s attempt at an allegorical interpretation. He does not provide a justification for identifying the boat with the Christian life and the storm with difficulties.</p>
<p>“By making the lame to walk, Jesus is affirming the value of the physical, created world and reversing tangible effects of the curse (see Isa. 35:6). The physical miracles are displays of Christ’s power, but they are also signs pointing to the spiritual condition of us all. The physical inability of the lame man points to the spiritual inability of the same man and of every sinner as well. Only Jesus can raise us out of the deadness of our transgressions. We’re so paralyzed that we have to be brought to Jesus through the gospel words of others who carry us to the Great Physician” (281–82).</p>	<p>This is not an example of the NT allegorizing. It is Chase’s attempt at an allegorical interpretation. It starts off with legitimate application and then moves to allegorize the text in a way that he does not justify from the text.</p>
<p>Chase interprets Jesus’ claim to be the bread of life as follows: “Jesus was giving himself. He was the bread, and he would be broken and dispensed through faith to Jews and Gentiles who would receive him” (282).</p>	<p>Here it is important to note that the bread-of-life imagery is part of the literal sense of John. It is not allegorizing to recognize the figure of speech that Jesus used. Chase does not claim that Jesus allegorized the OT text on the provision of manna, but it worth noting that while Jesus drew an analogy between God’s provision of manna and</p>

<sup>118</sup> Charles L. Quarles, *Matthew*, EBTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2022), 138.

Proposed Allegory	Evaluation
	God’s provision of himself as the bread of life, Jesus was not allegorizing the manna narratives.
Of the healing of Bartimeus, Chase observes, “His physical sight revealed his spiritual sight” (282–83).	In John 9, the symbolism of blindness and sight was intended by John and is part of the letter of that passage (John 9:39). The same dynamic may be at work in the healing of Bartimeus (Mark 10:46–52), though it is not brought out as clearly in that text. In any case, this would have been a symbolism inherent in the miracle, and something explained by Jesus to his disciples (cf. John 10). It is not an allegorical interpretation, much less an example of apostolic allegorization.
The parable of the sower (283).	Interpretation of the symbolism of parables is not allegorical interpretation of parables.
Jesus, the Good Shepherd (283–84).	Interpretation of the symbolism of parables is not allegorical interpretation of parables.
	Notably, Chase does not include the parable of the Good Samaritan or interact with the famous allegorical interpretations of that parable.
Jesus’ cursing of the fig tree (284).	Interpreting a symbolic action is not allegorical interpretation. The symbolic action is part of the letter.
Jesus’ washing of the disciples’ feet (284).	Interpreting a symbolic action is not allegorical interpretation. The symbolic action is part of the letter.
The symbolism of the bread and the cup in the Last Supper (284–85).	Interpreting a symbolic action is not allegorical interpretation. The symbolic action is part of the letter.
“Peter had taken the lame man by the hand and raised him up (Acts 3:7), and the hand of Peter was the hand of Christ. Our restoration comes when Christ’s hand grasps us and pulls us from the darkness of sin and sets us upright for a life of worship. How much greater than silver or gold is everlasting life!” (285).	This is not an example of the NT allegorizing. It is Chase’s attempt at an allegorical interpretation. In this case, he does not justify the connection he makes between lameness and “the darkness of sin.” This allegorical interpretation also draws the reader’s attention away from the contribution of this passage in its context.
Peter’s vision of the sheet with animals (285–86).	Interpreting a symbolic vision is not allegorical interpretation. The symbolic vision is part of the letter.
Of Paul’s use of Deuteronomy 25:4 in 1 Corinthians 9:9, Chase says, “The deeper and truer significance of a worker benefiting from labor is not the oxen who treads but the preacher who proclaims. Paul says the words about the oxen were ‘written for our sake’” (287-88).	Paul was not allegorizing the command regarding oxen. He is saying, in an argument from the lesser to the greater, that there is an extended application to humans. The OT context points toward this application beyond oxen to humans. In its context, the command regarding oxen stands alone as a command regarding care of animals among commands to provide for the needy. The command regarding the oxen was in context an illustration of the kind of care that people should have for one another. <sup>119</sup> This means that Paul interpreted

<sup>119</sup> F. Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1893), 2:11; Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, “1 Corinthians,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 719; Eugene Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 1994), 325; Edward J. Woods, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011), 255; Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 590.

Proposed Allegory	Evaluation
<p>Chase sees allegorization in Paul’s claim that the Israelites were baptized into Moses as they crossed the Red Sea and ate the miraculous manna and water. He does not lean into the claim that the Rock from which the water came was Christ (288).</p>	<p>Deuteronomy 25:4 with more care to its original context than those who claim he allegorized at this point.</p> <p>Though Chase is modest, others see this as evidence that Paul allegorized the OT. In response, the claim that the Israelites were baptized into Moses in the Red Sea crossing is a claim that just as Christian baptism marks the union of the believer with Christ, the covenant head, so Israel was being brought into the Mosaic Covenant under the covenant headship of Moses.<sup>120</sup> Additionally, the identification of Christ as the spiritual Rock has deep OT roots. God is addressed with the appellation “Rock” by Moses (Deut 32:4, 15, 18, 30–31). Psalm 78 also brings together <i>Rock</i> as a title for God, the provision of water from the rock in the wilderness, and the presence of God among his people.<sup>121</sup> To say that the Israelites drank from the spiritual Rock that was Christ is not to allegorize the rocks in the desert that Moses struck. It is to recognize that God was the source of this provision for Israel and that Christ is God.</p>
<p>“The most famous New Testament example of allegorical interpretation is Galatians 4:24–31, where Paul reflects on the family of Abraham and says that ‘this may be interpreted allegorically’ (Gal. 4:24)” (288).</p>	<p>This is addressed above in the body of the article.</p>
<p>The author of Hebrews draws a connection between the bodies of the animals burned outside the camp on the Day of Atonement, the suffering of Christ outside the camp, and Christian suffering, which he styles as Christians going outside the camp with Christ to “bear the reproach he endured” (Heb 13:11–13). Chase takes the extension of the “outside the camp” symbolism as an allegory (289).</p>	<p>The procedures of the Day of Atonement were inherently symbolic. They were types fulfilled by Christ’s death. The extension of this imagery to Christian suffering is an analogy built on the theological reality of the Christian’s identification with Christ. The author of Hebrews is not allegorizing the Leviticus 18 or the crucifixion accounts in this allegory.</p>
<p>Chase understands Peter to allegorize Isaiah’s word to Israel of comfort and the return of the Lord by identifying that word as the gospel (289–90).</p>	<p>It is not clear why Chase sees Peter as allegorizing Isaiah. Isaiah clearly is declaring the gospel in Isaiah 40. There are, to be sure, Israel specific aspects to his prophecy in that chapter, but the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles is not done by allegorizing the message.</p>
<p>Chase sees an allegory in the vision of Revelation 12. He interprets the child as Christ, the dragon as Satan, and the woman as the remnant of believers in Israel and as Mary.</p>	<p>Interpreting a symbolic vision is not allegorical interpretation. The symbolic vision is part of the letter. Ironically, Chase may be too inclined to interpret the woman in the vision too literally as Mary. Robert Thomas notes of the Marian interpretation: “This effort faces the insurmountable obstacles of this being a symbolic woman,</p>

<sup>120</sup> See Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 724; David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 450–51.

<sup>121</sup> E. Earle Ellis, *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament* (1981; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 69; G. K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 99.

Proposed Allegory	Evaluation
	not a real one, and of the impossibility of this being a single individual in light of ‘the rest of her offspring’ in 12:17.” <sup>122</sup>

The notable thing about this list is how it confirms that the NT authors did not allegorize the OT. Apostolic interpretation is not allegorical interpretation. Allegorical interpretation is thus a scripturally unwarranted way to read Scripture.

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<sup>122</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–12: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 119.

## William E. Biederwolf: Perfecting the Theory and Practice of Urban Evangelism

by Mark Sidwell<sup>1</sup>

*Christians sometimes think of “worldview” in terms of how Christianity applies to cultural issues in such areas as economics or the fine arts. But a true biblical worldview must be centered on understanding what the Scripture both teaches and emphasizes. For example, however one views the Christian’s cultural mandate that many Christians espouse, it is more important for a Christian to fulfil the gospel mandate stressed in the NT. Part of this gospel mandate is evangelism. This article is the fourth in a series on noted evangelists in American history—their work, methodology, and philosophy—a series that is intended to deepen understanding of the successes and failures, strengths and weaknesses, of historic American evangelism.<sup>2</sup>*

The shadows of D. L. Moody and Billy Sunday obscure lesser figures of the golden age of urban evangelism. Moody and Sunday indeed were evangelism’s most prominent leaders during this period. Yet before World War I, there were roughly 650 full-time professional evangelists in the United States, with perhaps twice again as many part-timers.<sup>3</sup> Among these was William Edward Biederwolf (1867–1939), a contemporary of Sunday. Biederwolf learned the trade from two noted evangelists of the era, J. Wilbur Chapman and B. Fay Mills. Biederwolf served as a promoter of evangelism for both the Federal Council of Churches and the Interdenominational Association of Evangelists. He parlayed his evangelistic work into other ministries, notably leadership of the Winona Lake Bible Conference. William McLoughlin ranks Biederwolf as one of the “second five” evangelists of the period after Billy Sunday.<sup>4</sup> Biederwolf’s modestly successful career as an evangelist and particularly his writing about evangelism provides a distinct, even unique, vantage point for viewing the history of American evangelism.

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<sup>2</sup> The earlier installments are Mark Sidwell, “George Whitfield and the Rise of American Evangelism,” *JBTW* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2023): 53–75; idem, “Between Whitefield and Finney: The Evangelism of Asahel Nettleton,” *JBTW* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2024): 33–47; idem, “J. Wilbur Chapman and American Evangelism,” *JBTW* 5, no. 1 (Fall 2024): 36–57.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Stelzle, “The Evangelist in Present-Day America,” *Current History* 35 (November 1931): 225. Stelzle (1869–1941) gives no source for his estimated number of evangelists twenty years before he published the article, but in 1911, Stelzle had served as head of the Bureau of Social Service, Presbyterian Church in the USA, and would have had professional interest in such figures. This article discusses more of Stelzle’s career below.

<sup>4</sup> William McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 262. The other four were Gipsy Smith, Charles Scoville, Milford Lyon, and Henry Stough.

### *Life and Career*

Biederwolf was born on September 29, 1867, in Monticello, Indiana, the seventh child of German immigrants. Brought up in Monticello's Presbyterian church, Biederwolf was converted as a teenager and made a public profession of his faith at the age of eighteen. Biederwolf originally entered Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana, but he transferred to Princeton College and received his bachelor's degree there in 1892. He also earned his MA from Princeton in 1894 and graduated from Princeton Seminary in 1895. Biederwolf made an excellent record as a student and won a fellowship in Greek that allowed him to study at the University of Berlin (1896–97).<sup>5</sup>

During the summers of his years at Princeton, Biederwolf worked in rescue missions in New York City and Scranton, Pennsylvania. After graduation, but before his study trip to Europe, he served with the B. Fay Mills evangelistic team. In 1897 Biederwolf took the pastorate of the Broadway Presbyterian Church in Logansport, Indiana,<sup>6</sup> serving there until 1900, except for a year's service as a chaplain during the Spanish-American War.<sup>7</sup>

Upon resigning his pulpit, Biederwolf became a full-time evangelist. During the early years he alternated between holding independent meetings and serving on the staffs of other men. In the middle of the first decade of the century, Biederwolf served with J. Wilbur Chapman during campaigns sponsored by the Special Committee on Evangelism of the Presbyterian Church in the USA. During the 1910s, the climactic decade of urban evangelism, Biederwolf rose in fame, popularity, and success.

During the latter part of his career, Biederwolf was closely associated with the Winona Lake Bible Conference in Indiana where he had appeared on the program at least as early as 1902.<sup>8</sup> In 1922, after the death of Sol Dickey, Winona's founder, Biederwolf became director. The following year, the board made him president of the fledgling Winona Lake School of Theology, which under his direction

<sup>5</sup> There is one biography of Biederwolf, Ray E. Garrett, *William Edward Biederwolf: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1948). This book is useful but lacks footnotes or a bibliography. Also of value are the papers of Biederwolf, housed in the Archives of Wheaton College, Illinois (Collection 195). The papers include newspaper clippings and sermons as well as handwritten notes and a copy of his thesis from Princeton on the self-testimony of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels and John. Apparently the only scholarly examination of Biederwolf's career is James Paul Cogdill Jr., "A Major Stream of American Mass Evangelism: The Ministries of R. A. Torrey, J. W. Chapman and W. E. Biederwolf" (PhD dissertation. Southern Baptist Seminary, 1990). See also the brief sketch in William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: Ronald, 1959), 393–96.

<sup>6</sup> Biederwolf may have been speaking of this congregation years later when he wrote, "When I began my ministry it was with a church that was known to be somewhat fashionable—in fact, so fashionable that for a goodly number of years they had dispensed altogether with the Sunday night service for the lack of any one to attend it." William E. Biederwolf, *Evangelism: Its Justification, Its Operation and Its Value* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1921), 99.

<sup>7</sup> See W. E. Biederwolf, *History of the One Hundred and Sixty-first Regiment, Indiana Volunteer Infantry* (Logansport, IN: Wilson, Humphries and Co., 1899), available at <http://www.archive.org/details/historyofonehund01bied>; a sketch of Biederwolf himself is found on 225–28. According to a publicist for the Biederwolf team, Biederwolf "wrote its [the regiment's] history simply because, so far as I can find out, the more or less arduous duties of chaplain of an American Regiment in a foreign land were not enough to keep him busy." Edward Marshall, "Biederwolf: The Evangelist and the Man," *The Awakening of the Church*, December 1905, 4, folder: "Biederwolf, William," #00963165, the Fundamentalism File, J. S. Mack Library, Bob Jones University.

<sup>8</sup> One of Biederwolf's earliest books, *The Man God Tried to Kill* (Chicago: Glad Tidings, n.d.), consists of sermons he delivered at men's prayer services at Winona.

evolved into a degree-granting seminary despite its summers-only schedule.<sup>9</sup> Winona Lake became a base of operations for Biederwolf for the rest of his life.

Because Winona Lake occupied only his summers, Biederwolf could commit to other ministries during the remainder of the year. He continued to conduct evangelistic meetings, making his first overseas tour (to the Far East and Australia) in 1923–24. In Asia Biederwolf became interested in the plight of lepers, and his fund-raising efforts on their behalf resulted in the establishment of the Biederwolf Home for Lepers in Korea.<sup>10</sup> In 1909 he founded the Family Altar League, an organization dedicated to encouraging family prayer and devotion, with which he remained associated throughout his career. From 1929 to 1939 Biederwolf served as pastor of the Royal Poinciana Chapel in Palm Beach, Florida. The chapel had been built for winter visitors and was open only during the winter season. Biederwolf preached there about a dozen Sundays a year.

Biederwolf remained active into old age. At age seventy, he wrote to J. Palmer Muntz, his successor at Winona Lake, “Yes my dear boy, I am working too hard. I never could stand it if God had not given me an iron constitution. I am up every night to 12:30 and 1 P.M. [*sic*] and as tho I did not have enough to do I have gone ‘nutty’ on Florida shrubbery and am writing a book.”<sup>11</sup> Biederwolf published numerous books, most of them collections of his sermons. Other books were more ambitious, such as his works on evangelism (discussed below). Probably Biederwolf’s most notable publication was *The Millennium Bible* (sometimes reissued under other titles such as *The Second Coming Bible* and *The Second Coming Bible Commentary*), a one-volume commentary on the prophetic passages of Scripture that reflected his interest in Bible prophecy.<sup>12</sup>

### *Evangelism and Fundamentalism*

Biederwolf represented the close association of American evangelism with fundamentalism, a Protestant movement in the early twentieth century that attempted to defend major tenets of Christian

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<sup>9</sup> On Winona Lake, see Mark Sidwell, “The History of the Winona Lake Bible Conference” (PhD dissertation, Bob Jones University, 1988); Vincent H. Gaddis and Jasper A. Huffman, *The Story of Winona Lake: A Memory and a Vision* (Butler, IN: Higley Huffman, 1960); Terry White and Steve Grill, *Winona at 100 Third Wave Rising: The Remarkable History of Winona Lake, Indiana* (Winona Lake: BMH, 2013); and Michael S. Hamilton and Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, “Keeping the ‘Fun’ in Fundamentalism: The Winona Lake Bible Conferences, 1895–1968,” in *Re-Forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present*, ed. Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 300–317. On the Winona Lake School of Theology, see Mark Sidwell, “Fundamentalist Intellectualism: The Winona Lake School of Theology,” *Biblical Viewpoint* 34, no. 2 (November 2000): 113–22.

<sup>10</sup> See his own account, William Edward Biederwolf, “Lepers as I Saw Them,” *Winona Echoes* 1922 (N.p.: Winona, 1922), 23–33; see also Garrett, 47–55.

<sup>11</sup> William E. Biederwolf to J. Palmer Muntz, February 15, 1938, Grace College, Winona Lake.

<sup>12</sup> William E. Biederwolf, *The Millennium Bible* (Chicago: W. P. Blessing, 1924). McLoughlin claims that “Biederwolf considered the premillennial theory of the Second Coming part of the Christian fundamentals” (McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 396). The evidence, however, does not support this claim. According to his biographer, Biederwolf was uncertain of his millennial position until the mid-1910s, when he converted to premillennialism. Garrett, 75. Afterwards he seems to have remained charitable in his views. Custer observes that in *The Millennium Bible* Biederwolf “quoted a great array of biblical authorities without slanting his work toward premillennialism, amillennialism, or postmillennialism.” Stewart Custer, *Tools for Preaching and Teaching the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1998), 197.

orthodoxy (essential, or “fundamental,” doctrines) against the onslaught of liberal biblical criticism.<sup>13</sup> The name *fundamentalist* likely derived from *The Fundamentals*, a series of pamphlets published in the 1910s and distributed without charge to pastors and laity across the country. *The Fundamentals* printed essays by noted authors (not all of whom eventually identified with the fundamentalist movement) who defended key doctrines, such as the deity and virgin birth of Christ and the inspiration of the Bible.

In 1920 Baptist newspaper editor Curtis Lee Laws urged that those “who mean to do battle royal for the fundamentals” be called “fundamentalists.”<sup>14</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s there ensued just such a “battle royal,” the fundamentalist-modernist controversy (liberals often being referred to as “modernists”). Fundamentalists sought to purge modernism from the major American denominations and to cleanse denominational agencies (seminaries, mission boards, publishing houses) from modernist influence. Although most evangelists sympathized with fundamentalism, some feared that theological controversy might hamper evangelism. Some modernists had supported evangelistic campaigns, either because they thought the campaigns might lead to social and moral improvement or, more pragmatically, because their own churches might benefit from an influx of converts. Still evangelists felt greater kinship with those who stood for the orthodox doctrines that they preached. Evangelists stressed that only Christ could save the lost and asserted that such a Savior must be God himself, who made atonement for humanity’s sins by his death, and who physically rose from the dead in triumph over sin.

Few evangelists embodied the evangelists’ embrace of fundamentalism more than Biederwolf. He had been a student at Princeton Seminary during its rigorously orthodox days, and, as a Presbyterian, Biederwolf belonged to a denomination that experienced one of the bitterest fights during the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. As the director of a Bible conference, Biederwolf led an institution that served both as a birthplace for fundamentalism and as a vehicle for the movement’s propagation. In short, the life of Biederwolf represented the intertwining of several strands from which fundamentalism derived.

Theologically, Biederwolf was a militant fundamentalist. After he took over as director of the Winona Lake Bible Conference, the 1924 program for the conference proclaimed,

We trust that the personnel of the Conference Committee is sufficient guarantee that Winona is to be kept true to the Fundamentals of the Faith, once, and for all, delivered to the saints. We want no uncertain note in this respect to sound from the Winona platform. Christ’s Virgin Birth and consequent Deity, His vicarious Sacrifice, His bodily Resurrection, Ascension and Return—

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<sup>13</sup> On the history of fundamentalism see George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870–1925*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); David O. Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism Since 1850* (Greenville, SC: Unusual Publications, 1986); and Ernest Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (1970; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978). For a thorough, cumulative study of recent scholarship on the movement, see Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Christian Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> See Beale, 195.

these are the truths which Winona holds essential and dear, and we welcome no voice in this program that does not subscribe to and champion them.”<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, Biederwolf illustrates the flexibility inherent in defining a fundamentalist. Although he became a premillennialist, he did not emphasize that eschatological position as necessary to defending the faith. He worked for a time to promote evangelism through the Federal Council of Christian Churches, an organization (and its successor the National Council of Christian Churches) that fundamentalists viewed as representing the theological compromise they opposed. In the battle for the Presbyterian Church in the USA, he clearly stood on the conservative side while maintaining ties to the denomination in hopes of making it a vehicle for religious renewal. He invited to the Winona Lake conference moderators of the PCUSA, Charles Erdman in 1925 and Lewis Mudge in 1931. He hosted conservative spokesman J. Gresham Machen at the conference as well as for a summer session in the School of Theology.<sup>16</sup> Yet he also invited the point man for the moderate faction in the Presbyterian Church, Robert Speer, multiple times. In 1937 Biederwolf begged off an appearance at Bob Jones College, excusing himself from the visit because the date clashed with the Presbyterian General Assembly in Columbus, Ohio, telling Bob Jones Sr., “I must be there.”<sup>17</sup> In 1935, the very year the Presbyterian Church defrocked Machen, Biederwolf challenged an audience with the dangers and opportunities of the present era, saying near the conclusion, “The hour is at hand. If any Church is to lead the way, why not this one—the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.? Surely there are forces enough and leadership enough to marshal and direct them in such a way as will, under God, cause us to see the mighty tides of revival grace for which we have so long prayed and yet waited for in vain.”<sup>18</sup>

When Biederwolf led in the reorganization of Winona Lake in the 1930s, which involved creating a new board, he made it clear that he wanted an avowedly fundamentalist corporation. Recalling the reorganization some twenty years afterward, Alva McClain of Grace Schools remembered Biederwolf saying, “We are determined to bring nobody on this Winona Board who is not a fundamentalist.” McClain asked, “What if they die?” Biederwolf replied, “When one dies, we’re going to find another fundamentalist to take his place.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Winona Lake Bible Conference: The Thirtieth Annual, August Twenty-two to Thirty-one, 1924*, 2, Grace College.

<sup>16</sup> See Mark Sidwell, “Was J. Gresham Machen a Fundamentalist?,” *Biblical Viewpoint* 31, no. 2 (1997): 71–80.

<sup>17</sup> William Biederwolf to Bob Jones Sr., n.d. (c. 1937), folder: “Biederwolf, William” #00957639, the Fundamentalism File, J. S. Mack Library, Bob Jones University.

<sup>18</sup> William Biederwolf, “For Such a Time as This,” *Winona Echoes 1935* (N.p.: Winona Lake Institutions, 1935), 12–13.

<sup>19</sup> Alva McClain, transcript of an address delivered on J. Palmer Muntz Day in Winona Lake, August 17, 1958, 2–3. Grace College. Biederwolf wrote to Bob Jones Sr., “I am going to tie Winona so tight to the Fundamentals the Modernists won’t even have a look in.” William Biederwolf to Bob Jones Sr., n.d. (c. 1937), folder: “Biederwolf, William” #00957639, the Fundamentalism File, J. S. Mack Library, Bob Jones University.

*The Apprenticeship of an Evangelist*

“In my own younger days,” Biederwolf once recalled, “I sought opportunity to sit at the feet of every successful evangelist in the United States.”<sup>20</sup> Biederwolf worked with B. Fay Mills just as the evangelist was beginning his shift from evangelism to the social gospel and away from Protestant orthodoxy. Biederwolf served as an assistant in Mills’s 1895 campaign in Columbus, Ohio, during which Mills tried to fuse evangelism with his new social emphasis.<sup>21</sup> Although Biederwolf appears to have learned from Mills the value of organization and efficiency, he did not follow Mills’s departure from orthodoxy. Biederwolf later said that “social service means serving society, and if a man is not saved for that he is not saved at all,”<sup>22</sup> but his evangelistic focus remained the conversion of individuals with reform of society being only a by-product.<sup>23</sup>

Biederwolf underwent a longer apprenticeship with J. Wilbur Chapman, participating as an associate in the simultaneous campaigns that Chapman made famous.<sup>24</sup> Associate evangelists in these campaigns often advertised their work as focused outreach to a specific group. For instance, Charles Schaeffer specialized in children’s work, and labor advocate Charles Stelzle directed his meetings toward blue-collar workers. Biederwolf set his sights on teens and young adults by stressing his athleticism. He followed the example of evangelism’s rising star, former baseball player Billy Sunday, by advertising his athletic achievements with Princeton’s football team. When Biederwolf was still working with Mills, advertisements described the young evangelist as “a good specimen of muscular Christianity,”<sup>25</sup> a phrase that reflected a theme of urban evangelism. Fearing that American Christianity had become “feminized” with the church becoming more a province of women (as shown by women’s higher rates of church attendance), churchmen sought “manly” attractions to challenge men with the claims of Christianity. Former athletes such as Sunday, with his energetic, almost swaggering, presence on the platform, fit the bill for “muscular Christianity.”<sup>26</sup> Biederwolf well fit the

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<sup>20</sup> Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, 91.

<sup>21</sup> A description of Mills’s 1895 Columbus campaign, in which Biederwolf was an assistant, along with the texts of many of the sermons delivered, is found in Henry Stauffer, ed., *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio, Under the Labors of Rev. B. Fay Mills* (Columbus: W. L. Lemon, 1895). The volume contains an address by Biederwolf, “The Power of the Holy Spirit,” 139–42. Mills’s new emphasis on adding the improvement of society to the salvation of the individual is seen in that same volume in “The New Era in Evangelism,” 146–47, and in the preface by Washington Gladden (a pastor in Columbus and a leading proponent of the social gospel), “The New Evangelism,” 5–6.

<sup>22</sup> Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, 72.

<sup>23</sup> In her study of Mills’s career, Constance Murray includes a description of Biederwolf’s work with Mills in the New Haven campaign of 1896. She notes how newspapers heaped praise on Biederwolf in a manner almost to eclipse Mills, describing Biederwolf’s affecting impact on audiences. Constance P. Murray, “From Individual Salvation to Social Salvation: Why Evangelist B. Fay Mills Changed His Revival Message” (MA thesis, James Madison University, 2011), 105–7.

<sup>24</sup> See Sidwell, “J. Wilbur Chapman,” 49–51,

<sup>25</sup> Stauffer, 13.

<sup>26</sup> For an overview of the concept of “muscular Christianity,” particularly as advocated by American evangelists during the golden age of urban evangelism, see Josh McMullen, *Under the Big Top: Big Tent Revivalism and American Culture, 1885-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 58–88; see also the lengthy footnote McMullen has on page 202 for a list of pertinent literature.

mold. Colleague Charles Stelzle recalled how the Chapman evangelistic team relaxed by gathering in a hotel room where they “told stories, engaged in gymnastic stunts, or general tomfoolery.” Stelzle noted that “Biederwolf was always the leader at these nightly festivities. He was a natural athlete and often he tossed me close to the ceiling, sometimes to my own alarm.”<sup>27</sup>

Later in his career a chastened Biederwolf seems to have regretted this approach. Biederwolf chided the evangelist who chose to “go to the photograph gallery and put himself into all sorts of ridiculous attitudes that would do justice to a prize pugilist or a circus contortionist, and then use these camera productions in advertising himself and [his] work.” He added ruefully, “The writer frankly confesses that to some degree he has been foolishly guilty with his brethren.” Having “long ago put away the things of a fool,” Biederwolf said that he could never look at such pictures “without feeling that an operation above the eyes would have brought enough relief to have prevented the thing from ever taking place.”<sup>28</sup>

Nonetheless, in his later career Biederwolf continued to focus on ways to reach men. As with other evangelists of the era, he held special meetings for men only. There he often delivered the sermon “The White Life” (“white” as in “pure”) to condemn male vices and call men to their responsibilities as husbands and fathers.<sup>29</sup> Although he followed the pattern of preachers such as Billy Sunday, his tone was more temperate. In Sunday’s “men only” sermons the evangelist became so graphic describing such topics as venereal disease that men often fainted.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, a publicist for Biederwolf wrote that issues in his message were “so chastely handled that it might have been delivered to a mixed audience, except that its counsel was to men alone.”<sup>31</sup>

### *Methodology and Practice*

Biederwolf located his own work as an evangelist within the overall context of Christian evangelism. He identified five forms of evangelism: “Personal, or Individual” in which Christians

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Stelzle, *A Son of the Bowery* (New York: George H. Doran, 1926), 218. Stelzle later became disenchanted with the method of evangelistic campaigns. See Stelzle, “The Evangelist in Present-Day America,” 224–28. Even then, however, he singled out Biederwolf as an exception who sought to lift the level of evangelistic work (225).

<sup>28</sup> Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, 48. Biederwolf does not appear to have maintained his athletic fitness. In 1905 a publicist for the Biederwolf team wrote, “Born with amazing strength and agility of body and splendidly constituted, he has, through sheer forgetfulness of self, strained that constitution well nigh to the breaking point. There is no good, strong, healthful color in his cheeks. His fingers, because of the sheer asceticism of his life, sometimes shake as do a toper’s. His shoulders, when he is at rest, are stooped. . . . When you see Dr. Biederwolf stand up in the pulpit to tell you about religion, you will be convinced by his gaunt, slightly stooped figure, by his rugged, lined and pasty-colored face, that he is, not figuratively but literally, pouring his strength into the work of evangelism.” Edward Marshall, “Biederwolf: The Evangelist and the Man,” *The Awakening of the Church*, December 1905, 3–4, folder: “Biederwolf, William,” #00963165, the Fundamentalism File, J. S. Mack Library, Bob Jones University.

<sup>29</sup> For a description of one of Biederwolf’s men’s meeting and the substance of the “The White Life” sermon, see Edward Marshall, “Armory Scene of Remarkable Demonstration,” *The Awakening of the Church*, April 1907, 10, 20, folder: “Biederwolf, William,” #00963165, the Fundamentalism File, J. S. Mack Library, Bob Jones University.

<sup>30</sup> Homer Rodeheaver, *Twenty Years with Billy Sunday* (Nashville: Cokesbury, 1936), 32.

<sup>31</sup> “Notable Meeting for Men,” *The Awakening of the Church*, December 1906, 8, folder: “Biederwolf, William,” #00963165, the Fundamentalism File, J. S. Mack Library, Bob Jones University.

witnessed to others as they were able; “Parental, or Domestic” in which parents won their children to Christ; “Parish, or Visitation,” an organized effort by teams of two Christians to reach their community; “Pastoral” conducted by the minister personally, which Biederwolf called “the most important” of all forms; and “Professional, or Vocational,” as Biederwolf himself practiced.<sup>32</sup>

William Biederwolf’s evangelistic itinerary was unremarkable compared with those of other moderately successful evangelists of his era. He held numerous meetings in small towns and mid-sized cities, with a few campaigns in larger cities, thus making Biederwolf more representative of urban evangelists than the bigger names such as Moody or Sunday. Few (if any) other evangelists experienced what Billy Sunday did, with over 1.5 million people attending his New York City campaign. But many could have readily related to the work of Biederwolf in Goshen, Indiana, or Piqua, Ohio.

Biederwolf’s earliest recorded meetings were in towns such as Flemingsburg, Kentucky (1901), and Elkhart, Indiana (1902).<sup>33</sup> After working with Chapman, Biederwolf held meetings in larger cities, such as in Boston at the Tremont Temple (1911) and in Los Angeles (1919). Yet even after he had become more famous, Biederwolf alternated larger with smaller places. Only rarely did he conduct campaigns in large metropolitan areas.

Nor was Biederwolf an innovator. Generally he adopted—and adapted—the methods of others. A good example is his campaign in Rush County, Indiana, a predominantly rural region in mid-eastern Indiana, where he preached in the fall of 1912. Following Chapman he referred to this effort as a “simultaneous campaign” with meetings conducted by others in streets, schools, and workplaces in addition to the central meetings at the tabernacle led by Biederwolf.<sup>34</sup> In Rush County he also included a program of one-on-one personal evangelism called the “Individual Campaign.” After Biederwolf completed his meetings, local churches participated in a focused follow-up effort.<sup>35</sup>

One of Biederwolf’s most ambitious efforts was the “Kansas Forward Movement” (1908–1909), which as Cogdill notes was an attempt to apply Chapman’s simultaneous revival method on a statewide basis.<sup>36</sup> In this case, Biederwolf served not as a solo evangelist but as the director of an intensive effort involving seventy-five campaigns in different Kansas towns, an attempt to blanket the area in a manner otherwise impossible in the era before radio or television.

<sup>32</sup> W. E. Biederwolf, “Evangelism,” *Bob Jones Magazine*, June 1929, 4.

<sup>33</sup> One may find descriptions of various campaigns, not in chronological order, in Garrett, 25–46.

<sup>34</sup> “Pay Your Debts and Get Right,” *Rushville Republican*, September 24, 1912, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Garrett, 38. Such a follow-up effort resembled the “Simultaneous Campaign of Personal Evangelism” Biederwolf had used earlier in his career. Following a campaign, the Biederwolf team recommended that the churches united for the work continue to cooperate for a period afterwards by—among other things—holding meetings to recruit a “Personal Workers’ League” to pray and conduct personal work, selecting a General Secretary for the League to coordinate efforts, and holding midweek meetings both in individual churches and jointly with other congregations for prayer and organization, as well as conducting cottage prayer meetings. “After the Revival What?” *The Awakening of the Church*, February 1907, 2, folder “Biederwolf, William,” #00963165, the Fundamentalism File, J. S. Mack Library, Bob Jones University.

<sup>36</sup> See Cogdill, 270–73, and Garrett, 38. Biederwolf’s 1912 campaign in Rushville, Indiana, was likewise slated to be the first phase of an “entire state campaign,” but this united Indiana campaign does not seem to have materialized. “Pay Your Debts and Get Right,” 1.

Biederwolf's compensation was generous but not extravagant. During his 1916 campaign in Allentown, Pennsylvania, Biederwolf responded to attacks on the profits of evangelists by saying, "My income for last year . . . was fifteen thousand dollars. I gave nine thousand dollars to The Family Altar League and four thousand dollars to Winona College. I carry heavy insurance for Mrs. Biederwolf's protection in case of my death. I own my own home and outside of those things I have little use for money."<sup>37</sup> Biederwolf's associates bear out his claim. For instance, Stelzle said, "He was generous beyond belief in his dealings with his associates."<sup>38</sup> When his Rushville, Indiana, campaign threatened to falter because his committee was short of funds to pay for the tabernacle, Biederwolf authorized them to finish the structure with his own money.<sup>39</sup>

The most public of an evangelist's skills was his speaking ability and pulpit style. McLoughlin cites Biederwolf, along with J. Wilbur Chapman, as an evangelist who marked a transition in American evangelism "from the pious soul-winning of D. L. Moody to the barn-storming, 100 per cent Americanism of Billy Sunday."<sup>40</sup> On at least one occasion, Biederwolf tore down the "red flag of the saloon" during a service and trampled it before raising the American flag in its place.<sup>41</sup> After he denounced tobacco in his Akron campaign, men abandoning the habit littered the platform with plugs of chewing tobacco, pipes, cigars, and cigarettes.<sup>42</sup> He also couched his appeals in masculine terms: "A man who refuses to sign a remonstrance [against alcohol] or to lend his influence against the iniquity damning the community, for fear of losing the sale of a few pounds of sugar or yards of calico is as small a piece of manhood as ever walked in breeches."<sup>43</sup> Even Biederwolf's admirers suggested that the evangelist borrowed from Billy Sunday. Ray Garrett, Biederwolf's student and biographer, says Biederwolf preached in the style of Sunday,<sup>44</sup> offering the following excerpt to illustrate:

I'd rather be a dog with gratitude enough to wag his tail, a foul-featured orang-ou-tang of the jungle, a leather-hided rhinoceros, my jaws dripping red with the blood of slaughtered prey, a dodo, an ichthyosaurus, a hippopotamus, or any sort of a cloven-hoofed, web-footed, sharp-clawed creature of God's earth, than to be a man with a soul so contemptibly mean as to sit down at the

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<sup>37</sup> Garrett, 29–30.

<sup>38</sup> Stelzle, *A Son of the Bowery*, 217. On complaints about the remuneration of evangelists, Biederwolf bluntly observed, "In plain Anglo-Saxon, if the evangelist is getting too much money, it is because somebody is guilty of giving it to him." William E. Biederwolf, *The Evangelistic Situation* (Chicago: Glad Tidings, [1917]), 70.

<sup>39</sup> "Makes Night Trip to Monticello," *Rushville Republican*, September 17, 1912, 7.

<sup>40</sup> McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 364.

<sup>41</sup> "5000 People Hear Biederwolf in Two Sermons Sunday," *Rushville Republican*, October 8, 1912, 1.

<sup>42</sup> "Trains Guns at the Hypocrites," *Rushville Republican*, September 27, 1912, 1.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Garrett, 40.

table three times a day and gulp down the good that God has provided and never once lift my heart in thanksgiving to God who gives it all.<sup>45</sup>

A reporter observed, “Persons who love good acting need go no further than the Biederwolf tabernacle, for nobody ever saw better acting than was witnessed on that stage on Saturday night,” although he hastened to add that, unlike the theater, there was no sense of “sham” with Biederwolf.<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, Biederwolf maintained a certain dignity in the pulpit. His words were not flowery, but they were carefully chosen. Bob Jones Jr., who heard Biederwolf preach during the evangelist’s later years, wrote that he “was one of the two or three evangelists whose pulpit style incorporated most of the elements of great preaching. His scholarship was broad; his use of the English language was concise, accurate, and powerful; his sympathies were deep; his heart was warm; and his doctrinal position was not given to extremes of interpretation.”<sup>47</sup> Although he could play to an audience, Biederwolf also tried to elevate the level of preaching, using for instance sermon illustrations from classic sources such as art and mythology.<sup>48</sup>

A question worth considering is how Biederwolf reconciled his evangelistic theology with his background at Princeton Theological Seminary. Princeton was a bastion of Old School Presbyterianism, maintaining a solidly traditional, confessional position often suspicious of American urban evangelism. The Old School looked askance at the flavor of Arminianism in the theology and methods of most American evangelists. Billy Sunday was also nominally a Presbyterian, although he said on one occasion, “I don’t know any more about theology than a jack-rabbit knows about ping-pong, but I’m on my way to glory.”<sup>49</sup> J. Wilbur Chapman, another Presbyterian evangelist, even had a seminary education. However, he had attended Lane Seminary in Cincinnati, which leaned more toward the New School Presbyterian faction, which was more accepting of interdenominational evangelism. Biederwolf seems not to have expressed himself regarding any tensions between Princeton’s stance and his own evangelistic career, except for a comment cited below that he thought Princeton could have better cultivated an atmosphere to prepare evangelists.

### *Philosophy of Evangelism*

Critics often charge American evangelicalism in general, and fundamentalism in particular, with being anti-intellectual.<sup>50</sup> Certainly Biederwolf possessed the intellectual and literary skills necessary to

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Garrett, 44; Cogdill makes the same observation about similarities between Biederwolf and Sunday (239–40). McLoughlin thinks that some of Biederwolf’s sermons were “so similar to Sunday’s that plagiarism or permissible borrowing must have taken place.” McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name*, 263.

<sup>46</sup> “Biederwolf Scars Audience with Sabbath Desecration,” *Rushville Republican*, October 1, 1912, 1.

<sup>47</sup> Bob Jones, *Cornbread and Caviar* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1985), 99.

<sup>48</sup> See William E. Biederwolf, *Illustrations from Mythology* (Fort Wayne: Glad Tidings, 1927); and *Illustrations from Art* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1930). For an example, see William Biederwolf: “Niobe and the Wrath of Latona,” *Bob Jones Magazine*, October 1930, 12.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in William T. Ellis, *Billy Sunday: The Man and His Message* (Chicago: John C. Winston, 1936), 147.

<sup>50</sup> See Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), particularly chapters 4 and 5.

deflect this charge.<sup>51</sup> His fellowship to study in Europe is one example. Acquaintances noted likewise his use of the Greek NT in the pulpit, which he translated as he went along.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, his intellectual abilities enabled him to write cogently about evangelism, his writings making a significant contribution to its history. As early as 1904 he lined out for the audience of the Winona Lake Bible Conference the basics of his philosophy of evangelism,<sup>53</sup> and he later refined and expanded on these basic ideas.

Biederwolf wrote two major works on evangelism. *The Evangelistic Situation* (1917) was the result of research he did as General Secretary of the Commission on Evangelism of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America. McLoughlin describes this commission as an attempt “to put some check upon the irresponsible antics of . . . foolish or unscrupulous revivalists” and says that the burden of the committee’s work fell on Biederwolf.<sup>54</sup> Although it was a personal work and not an official statement of the FCCC position, Biederwolf’s book was a helpful—and sometimes pointed—look at urban evangelism in the 1910s.

Biederwolf’s other major book on evangelism was *Evangelism: Its Justification, Its Operation and Its Value* (1921), which borrowed heavily from research he did for the FCCC. More comprehensive in its treatment of evangelistic campaigns than the earlier book, it was also more positive, though not uncritical, in its outlook. Biederwolf originally delivered its contents as lectures to, among other schools, Princeton Theological Seminary, Xenia Theological Seminary, and Moody Bible Institute.

Perhaps Biederwolf viewed these lectures as remedying a deficiency in Christian education. He once said, “Our schools for ministerial training have lent in the past no encouragement to the work of evangelism and have therefore given absolutely no training to their students such as would fit them for this most essential administration of the Christian ministry.” Of his own days at Princeton, he added, “I passed through one of the best of these schools and can bear witness today that what little reference was made to this matter was by way of disparagement rather than otherwise.”<sup>55</sup> Therefore, Biederwolf’s philosophy of evangelism seems to have been more on practical experience and observation than on classroom theory.

### Revival and Evangelism

In his writings Biederwolf said that an evangelist should be an orthodox Christian. He asserted in no uncertain terms that someone who did not believe in the Word of God should not be in a pulpit.<sup>56</sup> Conversely, evangelism was necessary to orthodoxy: “The church that is not evangelistic ceases to be

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<sup>51</sup> McLoughlin describes “the educated but evangelistic clergymen which descended from Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield,” among whom he lists B. Fay Mills, Torrey, Chapman, and Biederwolf. *Modern Revivalism*, 365.

<sup>52</sup> Stelzle, *A Son of the Bowery*, 217.

<sup>53</sup> William Edward Biederwolf, “The Office of an Evangelist,” *Winona Echoes 1904* (Chicago: Winona, 1904), 131–49.

<sup>54</sup> McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, 449–50.

<sup>55</sup> Biederwolf, “The Office of an Evangelist,” 133.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

evangelical.”<sup>57</sup> Part of his theological definition involved the terms *evangelism* and *revival*. Biederwolf viewed “evangelism” as being for the unconverted and “revivalism” for people who were converted but spiritually cold.<sup>58</sup> In his writings, however, Biederwolf treated the terms almost interchangeably.

Revival was, to Biederwolf, woven into the warp and woof of the church’s life and history as part of “the Natural Law of Progress.”<sup>59</sup> “The history of God’s people after all is little more than the story of revival,” he said.<sup>60</sup> He argued, “All progress is in fact through a revival. Nowhere is advance ever made through a monotonous and unbroken continuity. Everywhere we find the ebb and flow of the tide.”<sup>61</sup> He, in fact, widened this application: Ebb and flow is a law of life, of civilization, of nature. “What is springtime but a revival in nature?”<sup>62</sup> He viewed revivals as a part of the natural rhythm of the life of the church, like periods of waking and sleeping.<sup>63</sup>

Biederwolf tended to define a “revival” as an evangelistic effort. Like most urban evangelists, he abandoned the idea of the Great Awakening that a revival was an unpredictable, inscrutable work of God. Biederwolf showed some affinity for Charles Finney’s idea that human instrumentality is key to creating a revival. A publicist for Biederwolf’s campaign in Salina, Kansas, wrote of “what is expected to be the greatest revival in the history of Salina. . . . Whether or not it will be a revival of religion of the Lord Jesus Christ, Dr. Biederwolf says, depends entirely upon the Christian people of this community.”<sup>64</sup>

Biederwolf did not strongly emphasize theology. He paid more attention to practical issues. In his stress on the need for organization, Biederwolf insisted that one must maximize the place of the Holy Spirit. “To work without Him and to work through Him—or rather to have Him work through us—is all the difference between trying to run a big machine by hand and attaching it to the dynamics of a powerful electric motor. The results of a revival effort that is wholly man-made cannot prove otherwise than pitifully disappointing.”<sup>65</sup> Yet he also wrote that “the human equation dare not be eliminated,”<sup>66</sup> adding, “If we work as though the revival were entirely our own and pray as if it were entirely God’s there will be no doubt as to what God will do.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, 85.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 19. Interestingly, this concept lay at the heart of a famous work by Jonathan Edwards, *The History of the Work of Redemption*, vol. 9 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). Later adherents of the New England Theology picked up on this emphasis and may have influenced other American Protestants such as Biederwolf.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 39–40.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>63</sup> Despite his stress on conversion and evangelism, Biederwolf appears to believe it is possible for a child to be reared so that he or she would not experience a noticeable conversion (Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, 52–53, 92).

<sup>64</sup> “Inaugural Meeting of Great Revival,” *The Awakening of the Church*, February 1907, 2, folder: “Biederwolf, William,” the Fundamentalism File, J. S. Mack Library, Bob Jones University.

<sup>65</sup> Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, 120.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

Biederwolf's system of evangelism clearly emphasized human means. He claimed that an evangelist "carries with him oftentimes a personal magnetism which all pastors do not possess." Biederwolf said, "All this talk about the crowds that will pack your church and the multitudes of people that will be converted if only you are a man filled with the Holy Spirit is utter nonsense with which healthy minds ought to be done."<sup>68</sup> He believed evangelists had "peculiar ability for leading men to a definite decision for Jesus Christ. We call it magnetism. That may not be the best name for it but it is a union of certain physical and psychical powers by which some men move others." He admitted, "It is true that much of [this magnetism] is God-given and native," but he also insisted "that it can be to a certain extent acquired."<sup>69</sup>

### Vocational Evangelism and Union Meetings

Although he thought that revival had been part of the church's spiritual life throughout history, Biederwolf admitted that the modern citywide campaigns of professional evangelists were a newer development: "The revival in the sense of a protracted meeting or an evangelistic campaign is of comparatively recent origin."<sup>70</sup> While all Christians supported evangelism per se, he noted controversy over the "Vocational or so-called Professional Evangelism, especially as it operates in union revival services where all or the majority of the churches of a given community unite in a general evangelistic campaign."<sup>71</sup> Biederwolf himself had no doubts about the office, and he called for the specific office of evangelist on the basis that "scientific specialization should . . . exist in religious work as in every field of endeavor."<sup>72</sup>

Biederwolf offered five reasons to justify union campaigns: God had blessed the method historically, it was adapted to the evangelistic and revival needs of the present era, it had observable numerical results, it provided a united Christian testimony of Christ, and it made an "impression" on the community.<sup>73</sup> Daniel Nelson, in evaluating the campaigns of B. Fay Mills, makes a similar observation to Biederwolf's fourth and fifth points: "Statistical analysis is one way to assess a revival, but it should be noted that it is not necessarily the only way or the most valid way. The main value of a Mills revival was not in the number of accessions to church membership but in the remarkable focus it brought to bear on the cause of evangelical Christianity in a particular community and by the way in which it afforded an opportunity for an entire community to unite on a festival occasion to publicly share common values."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Biederwolf, "The Office of an Evangelist," 135.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>70</sup> Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, 19.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 110–15.

<sup>74</sup> Daniel W. Nelson, "B. Fay Mills: Revivalist, Social Reformer and Advocate of Free Religion" (PhD dissertation, Syracuse University, 1964), 113.

### Warnings About Evangelism

Although a staunch advocate of professional evangelism, Biederwolf was not blind to its problems. He criticized evangelists whose sermons “are little else than a string of stories—just tellers of anecdotes.”<sup>75</sup> He also noted those who puffed up statistics by asking for decisions for temperance or patriotism and then counted them as Christian professions of faith.<sup>76</sup> Later he wrote that

in this day . . . we now talk of “hitting the trail.” In some way the idea has prevailed with many that walking the aisle and taking the evangelist’s hand is all that is needed and as a consequence many of our evangelistic campaigns have degenerated very largely into a general proposition of hand-shaking and card-signing or name-getting. But this is a sorry spectacle for a time like that when an eternal destiny is hanging in the balance.<sup>77</sup>

Running throughout Biederwolf’s philosophy of evangelism was his advocacy for some kind of regulation of the evangelistic ministry. In 1904 he complained to an audience at Winona Lake that the church had never tried to supervise evangelists<sup>78</sup> and argued that it “ought to have a larger share in providing these [evangelists’] credentials.”<sup>79</sup> As Biederwolf hinted, one possible source of regulation was denominational oversight. Chapman’s campaigns conducted through the Presbyterian Church’s special committee may have influenced Biederwolf’s thinking. But most citywide campaigns were union meetings of varied denominations, limiting any regulation that a single denomination could exercise. Another possibility was the Interdenominational Association of Evangelists, headquartered at Winona Lake, a professional organization that tried to provide guidelines for the conduct of an evangelistic ministry. Biederwolf supported the IAE and served as an officer, but its voluntary nature and lack of disciplinary power hindered its ability to regulate vocational evangelism.

Probably the most serious effort to regulate evangelistic work was the Commission on Evangelism of the Federal Council of Churches, to which Biederwolf served as secretary and chief researcher. His report on that research resulted in his most detailed proposals for what could be done. Biederwolf said that as long as churches held union evangelistic campaigns, “*there will be a demand, and a crying one, for some sort of ecclesiastical sanction or direction over this particular, this important and delicate phase of Christian activity.*”<sup>80</sup>

Furthermore, Biederwolf’s ideas were not simply theoretical. He provided a form for credentials committees to use in investigating the background of potential evangelists and for establishing an

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<sup>75</sup> Biederwolf, *Evangelism*, 214. Biederwolf, however, by no means disdained the importance of illustration. He recalled that he at first eschewed illustration when he began preaching but found that he put audiences to sleep and discovered that using illustration required more skill than he realized. *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 206–7.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>78</sup> Biederwolf, “The Office of an Evangelist,” 132–33.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>80</sup> Biederwolf, *The Evangelistic Situation*, 32 (emphasis original).

ethical framework for matters such as reporting statistics.<sup>81</sup> Biederwolf outlined a basic code of evangelists' ethics,<sup>82</sup> including an insistence on belief in the fundamentals of the faith as an essential.<sup>83</sup> According to R. K. Johnson, biographer of Bob Jones Sr., when Jones and Biederwolf were serving as president and vice president, respectively, of the IAE they proposed and saw passed unanimously a resolution that no member of the association would knowingly hold campaigns under the sponsorship of liberal churches and clergy.<sup>84</sup>

Motivating Biederwolf's concern for oversight was, then, not so much a desire for control as a deep concern that evangelists maintain a high level of personal and financial integrity and that they adhere strictly to Protestant orthodoxy. Oversight was not intended to burden evangelistic work but to preserve and improve it.

### *Conclusion*

Shortly after the 1938 Winona Bible Conference, Biederwolf fell ill and spent much of the next few months in the hospital. On September 3, 1939, he died at his home in Monticello. Although not one of the giants in the field of evangelism, William Edward Biederwolf was nonetheless significant, typifying the interests and activities of evangelists during the golden age of urban evangelism. Furthermore, his writings provide both an explanation and a defense of his vocation. Biederwolf's career enriches our understanding of the golden era of America's citywide evangelistic campaigns, and it deepens our knowledge of the nature of evangelism in general. Perhaps his most notable achievement was in further refining evangelistic efforts. With his research and writing providing both theory and critique, he sought to elevate the standards for evangelistic work. By his own example of language and sermon content, he established a model for others to consider and emulate. In short, William Biederwolf not only followed but also set a pattern for American evangelists.

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<sup>81</sup> Biederwolf, *The Evangelistic Situation*, 37–39.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 45–46.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 46–47.

<sup>84</sup> R. K. Johnson, *Builder of Bridges: A Biography of Dr. Bob Jones Sr.* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1982), 106. Unfortunately, Johnson does not give the date of this event, simply describing it as “before World War I.”

## A Royal Fellowship of Death: The Proper Application of Contingency and an Apologetic for Prophetic Precision

by Layton Talbert<sup>1</sup>

Like any other literary genre, prophecy functions according to certain rules. Unlike any other, however, we did not invent the genre nor make the rules that govern it. God originated the prophetic genre, so his use of prophecy sets the patterns and establishes the rules. In developing and codifying a prophetic hermeneutic, then, it is necessary to observe those patterns and understand those rules in order to avoid coming to erroneous conclusions about prophecy and, more importantly, about God.

The Books of Kings are thickly populated with prophets and, as such, function as a primer to the issue of prophecy.<sup>2</sup> The narrative includes eleven named prophets, six unnamed prophets, and several groups of prophets (1 Kgs 18:4; 22:6; 2 Kgs 4:38). The ministries of Elijah and Elisha dominate nearly one-third of Kings and span the entire structural center of the books (1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 8). In addition, even though most of them are not mentioned by name in Kings, every writing prophet in the OT (except for the last three)—from Isaiah to Zephaniah—ministered at some point during the timeframe recorded in the books of Kings. The monarchy was the golden age of OT prophecy. It is actually the prophets who “rule” in Kings, not the monarchs. The king’s word may or may not come to pass, but the words of a true prophet were inviolable because they were the words of God (Isa 44:24–26a).

As such, the Books of Kings condition God’s people for what to expect when it comes to prophecy and fulfillment. The chart in the appendix reveals that the correlation between prophecy and fulfillment is consistently both literal and precise, even though the time lapses range from a few hours to a few centuries.<sup>3</sup> That pattern is duplicated repeatedly in the prophecy of the OT and is essential for validating the trustworthiness of God’s words. This paper attempts to define the properties and

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<sup>2</sup> The same is not true of Chronicles, which covers the same historical period of the monarchy. References to *prophets*, *prophecy*, and *prophesying* occur eighty-nine times in Kings, but only forty times in Chronicles. The Books of Kings mention Elijah and Elisha 124 times (by name); Chronicles mentions only Elijah, and him only twice. Kings emphasizes the role played by prophets in the history of the monarchy in a way Chronicles does not.

<sup>3</sup> Contra Chisholm’s assertion: “Analysis of prophetic fulfillment in Kings shows that a prophecy could be understood as fulfilled, even if some details were not realized exactly.” The only example he cites is 1 Kings 21:19 and 22:38 (which will be explored in detail as one of two major case studies in the final section of this article). For further corroboration, however, he footnotes “[D. Brent] Sandy’s insightful and enlightening study of fulfilled prophecy in Samuel-Kings, in *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, 136–51.” Robert B. Chisholm Jr., “When Prophecy Appears to Fail, Check Your Hermeneutic,” *JETS* 53, no. 3 (September 2010), 575. For more on Sandy’s methodology, see note 34 below.

boundaries of just one important principle in the outworking of prophecy, with a view to identifying and distinguishing correct and incorrect applications of that principle in interpreting prophecy.

### *Concept of Contingency*

Contingency refers to conditionality; whether a prophecy comes to pass depends on whether certain conditions are met. The contingency factor speaks to the issue of prophetic certainty. Not all prophecies are necessarily unconditional, ironclad assertions of what will be.

The *locus classicus* for the principle of contingency is found in Jeremiah. God sent the prophet on a field trip to watch a potter at work (18:1–4). The lesson in this live parable was not merely the potter’s power to make what he wanted, but his right to *remake* as he saw fit.<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah’s attention “concentrates on the moment when the human potter was seen to alter his design.”<sup>5</sup> That is the image on which God pins his point (Jer 18:7–10):

At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it.<sup>6</sup>

God explains that at least some of his prophecies may not materialize because they are contingent, conditioned on a human response. In any given prophecy, that conditionality may be explicit or implicit.

### Explicit Contingency

Some prophecies have built-in, *explicit* conditions, usually signaled by an “if . . . then” construction. The most obvious example on the covenantal level is the Mosaic Covenant (Exod 19:5–6; cf. 19:8, 24:3).<sup>7</sup> Another example is God’s prophetic promises to Solomon, in a personalized conditional application of the unconditional Davidic Covenant (1 Kgs 9:4–10, emphasis added):

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<sup>4</sup> For an extended discussion of Jeremiah 18 as a divine illustration of how God “fashions” the hearts of all people simultaneously (Ps 33:15), hardening some (like Pharaoh) and not others, see Layton Talbert, “An Inquiry into the Hardness, and Hardening, of Pharaoh’s Heart” in *JBTW* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2024), 72–76.

<sup>5</sup> Derek Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987), 76. Jeremiah fastens on one incident, when what the potter was working on “was marred in the hand of the potter, so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make” (Jer 18:4).

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise noted, Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, © Copyright The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, 1995. Used by permission.

<sup>7</sup> The conditional language “if you will . . . then you shall be” introducing the covenant is only expanded in the subsequent giving of the law, which ties both blessing and judgment to Israel’s conformity (cf. Lev 26; Deut 28). The New Covenant turns that Old Covenant language on its head in 1 Peter 2:9–10 with the formula, “But you are . . . that you should.” The Old Covenant conditions Israel’s treasured status and holy identity on their obedience; the New Covenant declares believers’ treasured status and holy identity in Christ as the basis for their obedience and glorification of God.

As for you, *if you* will walk before Me as your father David walked, in integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you *and* will keep My statutes and My ordinances, *then I* will establish the throne of your kingdom over Israel forever, just as I promised to your father David, saying, “You shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel.” *But if you* or your sons indeed turn away from following Me, and do not keep My commandments and My statutes which I have set before you, and go and serve other gods and worship them, *then I* will cut off Israel from the land which I have given them, and the house which I have consecrated for My name, I will cast out of My sight. So Israel will become a proverb and a byword among all peoples. And this house will become a heap of ruins; everyone who passes by will be astonished and hiss and say, “*Why has the LORD* done thus to this land and to this house?” And they will say, “*Because they* forsook the LORD their God, who brought their fathers out of the land of Egypt, and adopted other gods and worshiped them and served them, therefore the LORD has brought all this adversity on them.”

Because in his old age Solomon forsook the Lord (as did many of his sons, 9:6), the Temple would be destroyed (9:7), Israel would be deported from the land (9:6), and Solomon would forfeit the extension of the Davidic Covenant through his line (9:5)—which seems to be the reason Jesus’ physical lineage comes through Nathan (Luke 3:31; cf. 1 Chr 3:5), not Solomon.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, God’s promise of eternal blessing and favor on the newly dedicated Solomonic Temple initially sounds unequivocal (2 Chr 7:16) but is expressly contingent (7:19–20).

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God urged Zedekiah to surrender to the king of Babylon, assuring him that *if* he did (there is the operative word of condition) he and his family would live and Jerusalem would not be burned (Jer 38:17). On the other hand, *if* he would not surrender, the doom of both king and city was settled (v. 18). Jeremiah begged Zedekiah to heed God’s prophetic pronouncement (v. 20) and further detailed what would happen if he did not (vv. 21–23). The most stunning statement comes at the end: “*if you* refuse to surrender . . . this city will be burned with fire” (vv. 21, 23). On the human level, King Zedekiah was directly and personally culpable for the death of his family and the burning of Jerusalem, because of his refusal to trust and obey God’s astonishingly gracious promise to him even in the context of divine judgment on Jerusalem and Judah. Jeremiah 39 describes the fulfillment of the negative conditions due to Zedekiah’s disobedience. In view of 38:17–18, what is described in 39:6–8 need not have happened.

Perhaps hovering somewhere between explicit and implicit contingency are prophecies divinely post-scripted with the word *perhaps* (Jer 26:2–3; 36:2–3; cf. Ezek 12:3; Zeph 2:1–3).<sup>9</sup> The very fact of prophetic contingency implies a degree of “openness” in connection with human response to the promises and warnings of God.<sup>10</sup> God certainly knows the outcome, but that does not negate the genuineness of the proffered conditions nor the freedom of human response. Identifying explicit

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Robert H. Stein, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Nashville: B & H, 1992), 142.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Chisholm, 567–68.

<sup>10</sup> I use the word *openness* cautiously because of its association with Open Theism, the theological and practical defects of which are numerous and serious.

conditionality involves no great mystery; the mystery of conditionality attaches to the dynamics between divine determination and human responsibility.<sup>11</sup>

### Implicit Contingency

Some prophecies have built-in, *implicit* conditions. The verbal parallels between Jeremiah 18:7–8 and Jonah 3 suggest the experience of Nineveh as the *exemplum classicum* of the principle of contingency spelled out in Jeremiah 18.

**Table 1. Contingency Parallels Between Jeremiah 18 and Jonah 3**

Jeremiah 18:7–8	Jonah 3:8–10
<p><sup>7</sup> At one moment I might speak [דָּבַר] concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy [אָבַד] it; <sup>8</sup> if that nation against which I have spoken [דָּבַר] turns [שׁוּב] from its evil [רָעָה], I will relent [נָחַם] concerning the calamity [רָעָה] I planned to bring [עָשָׂה] on it.</p>	<p><sup>8</sup> “. . . and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn [שׁוּב] from his wicked [רָעָה] way and from the violence which is in his hands. <sup>9</sup> “Who knows, God may turn [שׁוּב] and relent [נָחַם] and withdraw [שׁוּב] His burning anger so that we will not perish [אָבַד].” <sup>10</sup> When God saw their deeds, that they turned [שׁוּב] from their wicked [רָעָה] way, then God relented [נָחַם] concerning the calamity [רָעָה] which He had declared [דָּבַר] He would bring [עָשָׂה] upon them. And He did not do [עָשָׂה] it.</p>

Jonah’s prophecy of Nineveh’s destruction within forty days never materialized because they repented—even though God never expressly promised that if they repented then he would relent. The pronouncement is unqualified: “Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (Jonah 3:4). It sounds final, definite, hopeless. On the other hand, if God intended to destroy them, why give them forty days? For that matter, why *warn* them at all? The Ninevites apparently thought of this, too. They humbled themselves and repented and changed their ways, in hopes that God might relent (3:5–9). And he did, for that very reason (3:10).

Astonishingly, what immediately follows in the context of the contingency model laid out in Jeremiah 18—in the first direct application of that contingency paradigm—is Judah’s jaded disregard for the grace of conditionality. God commissioned Jeremiah to warn the people of coming judgment, implying that if they would repent, then he would relent (18:11). But they replied, “That is hopeless! So we will walk according to our own plans, and we will every one obey the dictates of his evil heart” (v. 12, NKJV). The principle of implied conditionality, or contingency, is illustrated elsewhere in Jeremiah as well (26:2–3, 12–13, 18–19; 42:10).<sup>12</sup> A conditional prophecy—whether explicitly or

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the intersection between these two concepts, see Layton Talbert, *Not by Chance: Learning to Trust a Sovereign God* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2001), Appendix E, “Salvation: Divine Determination or Human Responsibility?”

<sup>12</sup> Each of these passages holds out the possibility of God’s relenting of his pronounced judgment on the condition of his people’s repentance.

implicitly—may, however, transmute into an unconditional prophecy (see the section below entitled “The Intercession of Others on behalf of Those to Be Judged”).

### *Rationale for Contingency*

Why does God do this? One reason for conditionality—particularly in prophecies of judgment—is that God wants people to change more than he wants to judge them. Much prophecy is not purely predictive, but hortatory.<sup>13</sup> God often uses prophetic statements as a shot across the bow—not a mere threat of what *could* happen, but the warning of what *will* happen if the objects of the prophecy do not change. In these cases, prophecy is intended to elicit a response of repentance, a change in behavior and posture toward God. Listen to one of God’s more graphic prophecies (Isa 13:9–18):

Behold, the day of the LORD is coming,  
 Cruel, with fury and burning anger,  
 To make the land a desolation;  
 And He will exterminate its sinners from it. . . .  
 Anyone who is found will be thrust through,  
 And anyone who is captured will fall by the sword.  
 Their little ones also will be dashed to pieces  
 Before their eyes;  
 Their houses will be plundered  
 And their wives ravished.  
 Behold, I am going to stir up the Medes against them,  
 Who will not value silver or take pleasure in gold.  
 And their bows will mow down the young men,  
 They will not even have compassion on the fruit of the womb,  
 Nor will their eye pity children.

We understand the potentially persuasive power of threat, particularly when it does not merely confront the will but also engages the imagination and emotion with vivid imagery. A striking parallel to Isaiah 13 appears in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, when the English king suspends his assault on the French city of Harfleur and calls on them to surrender (*Henry V*, 3:3:1–43):

If not, why, in a moment look to see  
 The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand  
 Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;  
 Your fathers taken by the silver beards,

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<sup>13</sup> Chisholm, 562–63. He writes that often, if not usually, predictive prophecy “announces God’s intentions conditionally and is intended to activate a positive response to the expository-hortatory discourse it typically accompanies. In this case, the prophecy’s predictive element is designed to prevent (in the case of a judgment announcement) or facilitate (in the case of a salvation announcement) its fulfillment.”

And their most reverend heads dash'd to the walls,  
 Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,  
 Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused  
 Do break the clouds, as did the wives of Jewry  
 At Herod's bloody-hunting slaughtermen.  
 What say you? will you yield, and this avoid,  
 Or, guilty in defence, be thus destroy'd?

It works. The city surrenders. The decimation is canceled. Henry V sends the Duke of Exeter to take charge of the city with these words: “Use mercy to them all.”

One more illustration of the power and goal of threat hits closer to home. On July 26, 1945, the Potsdam Declaration called on Japan to concede “unconditional surrender . . . without delay . . . or risk prompt and utter destruction.” Interpreting it as a sign of American weakness—an empty threat calculated to intimidate Japan into surrendering in order to avoid a costly invasion—the Japanese government ignored the message. For ten days Japan’s only reply was silence. On August 6, 1945, the world’s first atomic weapon was unleashed on Hiroshima. A second appeal from President Truman followed: “It was to spare the Japanese people from utter destruction that the ultimatum of July 26 was issued at Potsdam. Their leaders promptly rejected that ultimatum. If they do not now accept our terms they may expect a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth.” Once again, the only reply was silence. Three days later, a second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. In less than twenty-four hours Japan surrendered.<sup>14</sup>

Devastating as human weaponry has become, it is a drop in a bucket compared to divine destruction. In the atomic bomb, it was said, humans had discovered and harnessed “the power of the universe”; but God *created* the power of the universe. The Bible maintains a tension between the profound patience of a God who graciously builds conditions into his warnings, and the terrifyingly righteous wrath of God when his grace and warnings are met with silence or, worse, defiance. He is both Warrior and Savior, but he is also God and King.

### *Criteria for Contingency*

A biblical-theological analysis reveals that the prophetic component of contingency operates within narrowly defined parameters. The key passage that explains this principle (Jer 18) also lays down the major criteria for prophetic contingency. Other Scriptures supply one additional criterion.

#### Criterion for the Loss of Pronounced or Intended Blessing

In the case of intended blessing (Jer 18:9–10), there appears to be only one condition on which God would reverse his positive pronouncements: doing “what is evil in my sight and not listening to

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<sup>14</sup> David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 442–59. Cf. A. J. Baime, *The Accidental President: Harry Truman and the Four Months That Changed the World* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 330–346.

me” (HCSB). The Lord had pledged the privilege of priesthood to the descendants of Levi and Aaron in perpetuity (Exod 29:9; Num 25:13). God reminded Eli of this (1 Sam 2:27–28). But Eli honored his wicked sons above God (1 Sam 2:29). “Therefore the LORD God of Israel declares, ‘I did indeed say that your house and the house of your father should walk before Me forever’; but now the LORD declares, ‘Far be it from Me—for those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me will be lightly esteemed’” (v. 30). The juxtaposition between “I did indeed say . . . but now the LORD declares” is jarring. But it illustrates the factor of conditionality. God did not renege on the Levitical covenant itself, but he did cut Eli’s line out of it.<sup>15</sup>

Saul’s loss of the chance for a perpetual dynasty (1 Sam 13:13–14) comes as even more of a shock, perhaps to him as much as to us. God never mentioned that this potential blessing was waiting in the wings. The fact that nothing is known of this intended honor (until its loss was announced) suggests the possibility of forfeiting unknown blessings intended by God.

### Criteria for Averting Pronounced Judgment

In the case of pronounced judgment, one of two conditions may prompt God to avert his negative intentions: (1) the genuine repentance of those to be judged, or (2) the intercession of others on behalf of those to be judged. The first is directly mentioned in the potter passage (Jer 18:7–8) and has already been illustrated in the preaching of Jeremiah and Jonah (see also Joel 2:12–14). Sometimes, however, God is even willing to mitigate judgment by degrees, depending on how people respond to his prophetic warnings.

#### *The Repentance of Those to Be Judged*

In a remarkable example of implicit conditionality, God announced that he would cut off all of Ahab’s posterity (1 Kgs 21:21). Though the pronouncement did not elicit repentance, Ahab does seem to have believed the message and even sorrowed over the consequences of his actions for his progeny: “he tore his clothes . . . and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went about mourning” (21:27). In response to Ahab’s humbling himself, God delayed the pronounced judgment until after Ahab’s death (21:29).

Micah 3:12 is another example of implicit conditionality. Following a blistering censure of Judah’s political leaders (v. 1), prophets (v. 5), and priests (v. 11), Micah prophesied what sounded like an imminent threat: because of them, Jerusalem would be plowed under like a piece of farmland (v. 12). But Jerusalem bustled on for another century. We might almost suppose it was merely a vague, chronologically indeterminate warning, were it not for the explanation in Jeremiah: the imminent

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<sup>15</sup> This same context in 1 Samuel 2 offers another window into understanding contingency. Immediately before Eli’s rebuke from the man of God (v. 27), the text states that Eli’s sons “would not heed the voice of their father, because the Lord desired to put them to death” (v. 25, my translation). The biblical explanation of the disconcerting juxtaposition between those two statements (human responsibility vs. divine determination) is that God chose not to intervene with the grace of repentance, but rather to punish them for their own freely chosen evil. Within the context of contingency expressed in Jer 18:7–10, therefore, the responsibility for choosing either “to turn from evil” (v. 8) or “to do evil” (v. 10) rests entirely with the humans involved, but the *inclination* “to turn from evil” ultimately comes from God. This will factor into God’s final determination to judge Israel.

threat was averted by repentance (26:18–19). In that sense, Micah’s prophetic warning did not fail but succeeded.<sup>16</sup>

### *The Intercession of Others on Behalf of Those to Be Judged*

The second criterion (intercession) needs a bit more explanation, because God nowhere directly says that intercession may divert judgment. It can, however, be inferred and demonstrated from a number of passages. The earliest example is Abraham’s intercession for Sodom because Lot lived there (Gen 18:20–33). The city was not spared, but only because it lacked the requisite number of righteous inhabitants. In keeping with the spirit of Abraham’s intercession, however, the Lord delivered not only “righteous Lot” but also his unrighteous family before destroying the city.

When Israel exposed her idolatrous heart in the golden-calf debacle, God threatened to wipe out the “stiff-necked” newborn nation, telling Moses, “I will make of you a great nation” (Exod 32:9–10). That proffered divine proposal did not happen, however, because Moses interceded on behalf of the nation for divine mercy (vv. 11–14). Some may wish to theologize, saying it was only a bluff, a test for Moses, and that Moses’ intercession did not *really* change anything because God never *really* intended to follow through. But the Bible’s own explanation is different: “So he said he would have destroyed them—if Moses his chosen one had not stood before him in the breach to turn his wrath away from destroying them” (Ps 106:23 HCSB, emphasis added).<sup>17</sup>

Later, when they were poised to enter the land God had promised to them, Israel balked in unbelief. God reiterated the same intention to destroy them and start over with Moses. Again, Moses interceded for them (Num 14:11–19)—this time with only partial success. The nation survived but the offending, unbelieving generation died in the wilderness (14:20–24). Before Israel was even in the land, then, an important principle surfaces: *God may respond to intercession, but he is not obligated to*. Indeed, the time came in Israel’s history when he positively forbade such intercession.

God laid down the law for Israel from the beginning, prophesying exactly what would happen to her if and when she wandered from her covenant privileges (Lev 26; Deut 28–29). And from the beginning she repeatedly showed her uncircumcised heart—through three centuries under judges and four to five more centuries under kings—before God finally executed the judgment he had threatened. The only explanation for Israel’s existence through all those centuries, despite her roller-coaster addiction to idolatry and her habitual worldliness, is the intercessory prayer of prophets such as Elijah (1 Kgs 18) and Amos (Amos 7:1–6), priests such as Samuel (1 Sam 12:23), and kings such as Hezekiah (2 Kgs 19). One day there were no more intercessors to be found (Ezek 22:30),<sup>18</sup> and the nation slid

<sup>16</sup> “The success of prophetic threats ironically results in avoidance of the judgment they threaten.” Gary Edward Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use of Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021), 278.

<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, either Exodus 32:9–10 or Genesis 49:10—or both—would have to be considered *implicitly* conditional pronouncements. The soundest conclusion is that Exodus 32 is the implicitly conditional pronouncement, as “Moses took the divine ‘let me alone’ as a challenge”—indeed, “an invitation”—“to pray.” Michael P. V. Barrett, *The Gospel of Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2020), 140–41.

<sup>18</sup> Some question whether this passage is referring to an intercessor. See, e.g., Daniel L. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 1:728. But the reference to one who would “stand in the gap before me on behalf of the land” seems clearly to refer to an intercessor in light of similar language in other passages (Ps 106:23; Jer 15:1; 18:20).

so far so fast for so long that God positively forbade anyone to intercede anymore for the nation (Jer 11:14; 14:11; 15:1).<sup>19</sup> The contingency had expired. The conditions God offers in grace he may withdraw in justice.

One passage is particularly instructive in this regard. Jeremiah's famous Temple sermon begins with an earnest and extended appeal, "as generous as it is searching, reopening the door of mercy which had been so often slammed back in God's face."<sup>20</sup>

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. . . . For *if* you truly amend your ways and your deeds, *if* you truly execute justice one with another, *if* you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, *and if* you do not go after other gods to your own harm, *then* I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever. (Jer 7:3–7, ESV, emphasis added)

But this express statement of conditionality is followed by a damning description of their determined sin (7:8–12) and, consequently, God's determined declaration that the game was up: "And now, because you have done all these things . . . therefore . . . I will cast you out of my sight" (vv. 13–15, ESV). We might be able to chalk this up as one more typical example of the open-ended contingency of a judgment prophecy, were it not for what comes in the next verse: "Therefore, do not pray for this people, nor lift up a cry or prayer for them, nor make intercession to Me; for I will not hear you" (v. 16).

The divine prohibition to Jeremiah pounded the final nail into Judah's coffin so loudly that it drowned out the condition with which the message opened. The condition is there—explicit, genuine, and yet impotent. And for the first (and only?) time God removed the only other means by which judgment could be averted—the prophet's intercessory prayer. God forbade Jeremiah to pray *not*, as Pratt suggests, "precisely because prayer usually had the potential to affect outcomes"<sup>21</sup>—as though Jeremiah's prayer would necessarily have *compelled* God to relent yet again. Jeremiah 15:1 disabuses

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<sup>19</sup> The juxtaposition between these passages in Ezekiel and Jeremiah is a curious one, because they were contemporaries. On the one hand, God lamented that there was no intercessor (Ezek 22:30–31); on the other, he forbade Jeremiah to be one (Jer 11:14; 14:11; 15:1). Some think that "if an intercessor like Moses had emerged, the Lord would have relented from his announced intention and would not have poured his anger out on the people (v. 31)" (Chisholm, 566). But God asserted exactly the opposite; *even if* a Samuel or a Moses had "emerged" God would *not* have "relented from his announced intention" (Jer 15:1). A feasible solution seems to be the historical construction I have suggested above, that at some point the intercessors disappeared and the nation deteriorated to a point of no return. The most likely timeframe for that to have happened, in my opinion, is the fifty-five-year reign of Manasseh. Not only is that period depicted as the tipping point for Judah even well after his reign ended (2 Kgs 23:26–27; 24:3–4; Jer 15:4), but there is no definitive evidence for any prophets who ministered during his reign even though known prophets spanned the reign of every other king. The reference to prophets in 2 Kings 21:10–15 seems to refer to the later prophets who explained the Babylonian disaster as the result of Judah's debauchery under Manasseh. Though 2 Chronicles 23:10 says that "the Lord spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they would not listen," it does not specify the means.

<sup>20</sup> Kidner, 49.

<sup>21</sup> Richard L. Pratt Jr., "Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions," in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 187.

the reader of that notion; not even the combined prayers of Moses and Samuel could have averted God's judgement this time. The "No" option is always on the table when prayers impinge on God's will. Even David's intense prayer and fasting could not dissuade God's expressed intention to take the life of his first son by Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:13–22). God, not prayer, is omnipotent. Intercession at this point would have had zero impact on the determination of God. Such intercession would have been praying for something in direct violation to the expressed determination of God—indeed, *praying itself* would have been in direct violation of the divine will at this point.<sup>22</sup> In other words, *even a prophecy that is technically explicitly conditional can be effectively unconditional.*<sup>23</sup> That means one must give some thought to how Scripture itself fences this concept of conditionality.

### *Qualifications for Contingency*

Are all prophecies inherently contingent? Just how much can contingency explain? And how does contingency fit with propositional assertions that God neither lies nor repents? Scripture restricts the application of contingency in a number of ways.

#### Contingency Does Not Necessarily Mean That the Pronounced Judgment Is Cancelled; Often It Is Merely Delayed.

"One must not think that once disaster has been averted prophecies of judgment were no longer relevant."<sup>24</sup> Israel and Judah received repeated prophetic warnings which, though delayed, were eventually carried out. The Ninevites who repented at the preaching of Jonah were followed by a generation that was destroyed by God (see Nahum). God's pronouncement of judgment on Ahab's posterity was delayed until after his death, not cancelled (1 Kgs 21:21, 27–29).

This was also the case with Micah's prophecy mentioned earlier. Under Hezekiah, Micah prophesied that "Zion will be plowed as a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins" (Mic 3:12). A century later, the elders of Jerusalem actually quoted Micah's prophecy (Jer 26:19) and explained that the reason it had not happened was because "Hezekiah king of Judah and all the people of Judah" responded to Micah's warning by fearing God and seeking his favor (Jer 26:19). The Judah of Jeremiah's day, however, rejected the warnings of both Jeremiah and Micah, bringing the prophesied judgments on their own heads.

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<sup>22</sup> God expressly forbids Jeremiah from interceding for the nation at least two times (7:16; 11:14) and possibly three (14:11); but cf. also 15:1.

<sup>23</sup> So, why express the conditionality at all? Jeremiah's message almost certainly made an impact on many individuals within the nation. Individual repentance would put one right with God in the midst of a wicked generation; but it would not necessarily exempt one from experiencing collateral damage amid God's national judgment. Only national repentance could avert national judgment, and that was not going to happen. And only prophetic intercession could delay national judgment, but that was no longer going to happen either.

<sup>24</sup> Chisholm, 567.

### Contingency Cannot Be Automatically Applied to All Prophecies.

Some have argued that Jeremiah 18 implies that *all* prophecies are inherently conditional—at least those that are not *explicitly* unconditional. “This is a statement of first-class importance for our understanding of all prophecy,” says Kidner. “However stark the prediction (except where God has expressly declared it irreversible), it is always open to revision.”<sup>25</sup> Walter Kaiser asserts, “In Scripture at large there is always a suppressed or an expressed ‘unless,’ or even a conditional ‘if’ embedded,” apart from a few covenantal exceptions.<sup>26</sup> This assertion, however, overlooks the diverse nature of prophecy and whitewashes the biblical data with too broad a brush.

*Conditionality Is Irrelevant to Prophecies That Predict Unilateral Divine Actions Irrespective of Human Actions (e.g., Isa 11:1–9; 55:3–5).*

Most examples that come to mind hinge, as Kaiser suggests (see note 26), on major covenants such as the Noahic (Gen 9), Abrahamic (Gen 12, et al.), Davidic, (2 Sam 7), and New (Jer 31, et al.). Other prophecies, however, are anticipatory but pre-covenantal—a divine determination to set the stage for such a covenant (e.g., 1 Sam 2:35; 13:14; 15:28). Still others are divine determinations of eschatological judgment (e.g., Ezek 30; Joel 2, 3) or grace in the face of present disobedience—a sovereign overruling of Jeremiah 18:9–10 (e.g., Isa 1:24–27). It is an oversimplification to regard all, or virtually all, prophecy as hortatory in intent. Scripture reveals an array of purposes behind God’s use of prophecy. Certainly one of those purposes is to effect a change in people. But that is only one, and it is shortsighted to make that the sum and substance of the function or goal of all prophecy.

*Some Prophecies Are Expressly Irrevocable.*

God communicates this in different ways. Sometimes it is divinely affirmed as irreversible (“I will not relent,” Amos 2:1, 4, 6 HCSB). Sometimes it is accompanied by a binding divine oath such as the seed promise to Abraham (Heb 6:13–18), the timeless existence of Israel (Jer 31:35–37), the perpetuity of both the Davidic and Levitical lines (Jer 33:19–22), and the Melchizedekian priesthood of Christ (Ps 110:4). Sometimes it is solemnized by a divine appeal to God’s immutable determination such as the total yet temporary decimation of the land (Jer 4:27–28).

*Just as Some Prophecies Are Implicitly Conditional, Some Prophecies Are Also Implicitly Unconditional.*

If it is implicit, how would we know? God has ways of asserting unambiguously that what he is saying will certainly come to pass. Several examples are cited below. Some of them may fit into more

<sup>25</sup> Kidner, 76–77; cf. Pratt, 189–90.

<sup>26</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr. with Tiberius Rata, *Walking the Ancient Paths: A Commentary on Jeremiah* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2019), 232. Cf. also Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Preaching and Teaching the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 111–12; Alan S. Bandy and Benjamin L. Merkle, *Understanding Prophecy: A Biblical-Theological Approach* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2015), 79–84. The only examples of unconditional prophecy cited by Bandy and Merkle are the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants. To these, Kaiser adds the Noahic Covenant, the prophecy of the new earth, and predictions “attached to [God’s] promised salvation in the protoevangelium of Gen 3:15.”

than one category, but all represent different reasons that many prophecies are unconditional without being explicitly stated as unconditional.

Sometimes a Prophecy Is Implicitly Unconditional Because God Simply Stakes the Prophecy's Certainty on Who He Is, Without Ever Making the Prophecy Expressly Unconditional.

Consider Isaiah 44:24–28 (NKJV, emphasis added):

Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, and he *who* formed you from the womb: I am the Lord, *who* makes all things, *who* stretches out the heavens all alone, *who* spreads abroad the earth by Myself; who frustrates the signs of the babblers, and drives diviners mad; *who* turns wise men backward, and makes their knowledge foolishness; *who* confirms the word of his servant, and performs the counsel of his messengers; *who says to Jerusalem*, You shall be inhabited, to the cities of Judah, You shall be built, and I will raise up her waste places; who says to the deep, Be dry! and I will dry up your rivers; *who says of Cyrus*, he is my shepherd, and he shall perform all my pleasure, saying to Jerusalem, You shall be built, and to the temple, Your foundation shall be laid.

God stakes the certainty of these predictions on his very being and identity. There is no express assertion of unconditionality; but if these prophecies of the rebuilding of Jerusalem or the human instrumentality of a future king named Cyrus are contingent and therefore uncertain, then God is not who he claims to be. At the very core of this oracle, he claims to be the God who always “confirms” and “performs” what his prophets say, making such prophecies absolute and unconditional, “reliable and trustworthy.”<sup>27</sup>

Sometimes Contingent Prophecies Are Effectively Unconditional Because the Condition Is Certain to Be Met.

A classic example is the proto-New Covenant passage of Deuteronomy 30:1–10. God speaks of Israel's experience of both the blessings and the curses of the covenant, their exile to foreign nations, and their return to the land as a done deal (30:1, 3). Of course, all this is conditioned on their repentance and return to the Lord (30:2); but as Merrill observes, the nation's repentance is as certain as the other prophetic promises. “The grammatical pattern suggests a lack of any true conditionality here. When the exile came to pass, so would these acts of repentance and restoration. The reason is that the Lord, who promised Israel to make them his people forever, would bring about a spirit of repentance and obedience among them.”<sup>28</sup>

Another example where the condition is as certain as the rest of the prophecy (indeed, the condition is *part* of the prophecy) is the seventy-year prophecy of Jeremiah 29:10–14. On the one hand, Judah's return after the specified probation period is conditioned on their seeking God with all

<sup>27</sup> Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009), 248–49.

<sup>28</sup> Eugene Merrill, *Deuteronomy* (Nashville: B & H, 1994), 387. As 30:5–10 signify and Merrill goes on to clarify, the return from the Babylonian exile was only the first stage of a progressive fulfillment and a microcosm of a universal future fulfillment.

their heart; on the other, God makes it clear in the passage that's exactly what *would* happen. Daniel 9 demonstrates that's exactly what *did* happen; his response to his discovery of this passage echoes several expressions directly from Jeremiah 29.

Table 2. The Seventy-Year Prophecy

Hebrew	Jeremiah 29	Daniel 9
שְׁבַעִים שָׁנָה	when <i>seventy years</i> have been completed (v. 10)	namely, <i>seventy years</i> (v. 2)
מָלֵא	when seventy years have been <i>completed</i> at Babylon (v. 10)	for the <i>completion</i> of the desolations of Jerusalem (v. 2)
בִּקַּשׁ	you will <i>seek</i> Me (v. 13)	I gave my attention to <i>seek</i> Him (v. 3)
פָּלַל	then you will . . . <i>pray</i> to Me (v. 12)	I <i>prayed</i> to the LORD my God (v. 4)
שָׁמַעַ	and I will <i>listen</i> to you (v. 12)	So now, our God, <i>listen</i> to the prayer of your servant . . . incline Your ear and <i>hear</i> . . . O Lord, <i>hear</i> (vv. 17, 18, 19)

The response Daniel personifies and epitomizes is as prophesied and certain as the return itself. Daniel's freely chosen response is just as much the result of the inworking grace of God as any believer's righteous choices. The Spirit of God was at work to accomplish what the omniscience of God purposed and predicted—not for the last time (cf. Zech 12:10).

Sometimes a Prophecy Is Implicitly Unconditional Because the Object of the Prophecy Is Beyond Conditions.

The interpretation of Isaiah 14 is complex and contested. Some take it to be a prophetic picture of the destiny and ultimate destruction of Satan; others (like me) take it as a prophetic depiction of the future Antichrist as the personification (if not incarnation) of Satanic ambition. Whichever is correct, no hope is held out for repentance even though there is no express statement of unconditionality. The same would apply to the prophecies relating to both Antichrist and Satan in Revelation 13 and 19–20.

Sometimes a Prophecy Is Implicitly Unconditional Because It Predicts the Broad, Universal, Long-Range Outworking of God's Kingdom Purposes.

Contingency tends to be a characteristic of relatively short-term prophecies aimed at a specific person or group. In contrast, the course of nations predicted in Daniel 2, the domination and downfall of Antichrist described in Daniel 7 and Revelation 13, or the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments in Revelation 6–18 are not hanging in the balance of contingency. None of these include any explicit assertion of unconditionality, yet they clearly are.

Sometimes a Prophecy May Be Implicitly Unconditional If It Repeats or Expands Explicitly Unconditional Prophecies Without Restating Its Unconditionality.

Just because every statement of a complex of prophecies does not restate its unconditionality does not mean these can be carved up and treated in isolation from each other. The most pervasive example of this would be the New Covenant. For the purpose of this discussion, it is enough to note that though its classic statement in Jeremiah 31 includes an oath signifying its certainty, many other passages expand on its details under other terms (covenant of peace, everlasting covenant) without including express statements of its unconditionality.<sup>29</sup>

#### Contingency Does Not Apply to Incidental Prophetic Details That Do Not Meet the Criteria for Contingency.

Scripture defines contingency within very specific and narrow parameters. There is no biblical warrant for lifting the concept of contingency out of its biblical boundaries and applying it arbitrarily to explain other prophetic phenomena. Contingency cannot legitimately be used to defend apparent differences between prediction and fulfillment that fall outside the criteria for contingency. When the concept of contingency is broadened beyond its biblical boundaries and applied to aspects of prophecy that fall outside its scriptural constraints, problems are created rather than resolved.

#### *Misapplications of Contingency: Two Case Studies*

So far I have cited Robert Chisholm's 2010 *JETS* essay fairly frequently and approvingly; that has not been accidental. His work on contingency is quite helpful. When the article pivots to application, however, Chisholm's explanations become (in my opinion) hermeneutically questionable and theologically problematic.

Having established the fact that prophecies can be contingent, we will now examine three especially problematic passages, each of which appears to contain unfulfilled prophecy. In each case, we suggest that alleged "failed" prophecy can be explained adequately, if one assumes that the principle of contingency is at work.<sup>30</sup>

Chisholm addresses three examples, one of which is Huldah's prophecy of Josiah's death "in peace." Reasserting his contingency explanation a few years later in a different essay, he includes the seemingly failed Ahab prophecy (1 Kgs 21:19; 22:38).<sup>31</sup> The rest of this paper will address these two passages as case studies of Chisholm's application of contingency.

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<sup>29</sup> For a more thorough treatment of the complex of New Covenant passages, see Layton Talbert, "Interpreting the New Covenant in Light of Its Multiplexity, Multitextuality, and Ethnospecificity" in *JBTW* 3, no. 1 (Fall 2022): 72–104.

<sup>30</sup> Chisholm, 568.

<sup>31</sup> Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Israel According to the Prophets," in *The People, the Land, and the Future of Israel*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Mitch Glaser (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 53–68.

God’s Pronouncement of Ahab’s Death (1 Kgs 21, 22)

God informed Ahab, “In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, the dogs will lick up your blood, even yours” (1 Kgs 21:19). Most interpreters assume that Naboth both lived and (at the instigation of Jezebel) died in Jezreel. The fulfillment, however, specifies that the canine component occurred “in Samaria . . . according to the word of the Lord” (22:38).

Table 3. The Death of Ahab

1 Kings 21:18–19	1 Kings 22:37–38
<p><sup>17</sup> Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, <sup>18</sup> “Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who is in Samaria; behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth where he has gone down to take possession of it. <sup>19</sup> “You shall speak to him, saying . . . ‘Thus says the LORD, “In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth the dogs will lick up your blood, even yours.” ’”</p>	<p><sup>37</sup> So the king died and was brought to Samaria, and they buried the king in Samaria. <sup>38</sup> They washed the chariot by the pool of Samaria, and the dogs licked up his blood (now the harlots bathed themselves <i>there</i>), according to the word of the LORD which He spoke.</p>

Wray Beal notes matter-of-factly,

The difficulty in the fulfillment is of course that the blood is lapped up in Samaria (the location is noted three times, vv. 37–38), when the prophetic word indicates Jezreel, the place of Naboth’s death (21:19). The narrative is unconcerned about the discrepancy (and one cannot imagine no editor saw it). Rather than attempting to relocate the death of Naboth to Samaria (as is common in commentaries), or translating the original prophecy to read “Instead of dogs licking up Naboth’s blood, they will lick up yours” (so Provan), this discrepancy reveals the living nature of the prophetic word. The central thrust of the prophecy is realized and the variation of circumstances is inconsequential.<sup>32</sup>

The last sentence echoes Chisholm’s posture, but he additionally appeals to the principle of contingency for explanation.

To understand how the fulfillment of prophecy works, we must move beyond the purely descriptive level of prophetic language, and consider its primary intention. When a prophecy is fulfilled essentially, the main point of the prophecy (its primary intention) is realized with a degree of literality, but some of the accompanying details may not materialize. . . . God makes room for human freedom, which gives the prophecy a degree of contingency, or conditionality.<sup>33</sup>

Chisholm insists that “the inexact nature of the fulfillment” in no way undermines the accuracy of the prophecy, since “God’s sovereignty and justice won out in the end.” After all, the prophecy’s

<sup>32</sup> Lissa M. Wray Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, AOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2014), 286.

<sup>33</sup> Chisholm, “Israel According to the Prophets,” 59.

bottom line was accomplished: Ahab's death. He explains this prophetic "lack of precision" as an accommodation to human freedom.

God makes room for human freedom and resulting contingencies in the outworking of his plan. God did not prevent the king's men from taking Ahab to Samaria. . . . God had dogs stationed in Samaria as well and the prophecy was fulfilled in its essence. In this case, the inexact nature of the fulfillment actually highlights God's sovereignty over the affair. . . . God makes room for human freedom in the outworking of even irrevocable prophecy. This means that some of the details of the prophecy may not be fulfilled exactly, yet the prophecy is realized in its essence. . . . There appears to be some room for flexibility in the outworking of incidental details, but only within the prescribed framework of essential fulfillment.<sup>34</sup>

### *Problems with the Contingency Explanation*

The problem with this explanation is twofold. First, the use of this incident as an example of the concept of prophetic contingency is an illegitimate extension of that principle. As the foregoing discussion (and Chisholm's own analysis) demonstrates, prophetic contingency pertains to the certainty of prophetic fulfillment, not whether bits and pieces of a prophecy may or may not come to pass. Second, it is impossible to dichotomize between a prophetic "lack of precision" and a divine "lack of precision." God so closely identifies his words with the words of his true prophet that he commits himself to fulfilling whatever the prophet says: Yahweh "confirms the word of his servant, and performs the counsel of his messengers" (Isa 44:26 NKJ). A legitimate prophet's "lack of precision," then, is *by definition* God's "lack of precision." The conflict this creates with God's omniscience, integrity, and discretion—*unnecessarily* including details that he *knows* will *not* come to pass—is inescapable.<sup>35</sup> These two major weaknesses invite three elaborative observations.

First, if this explanation of the fulfillment is correct, we are not dealing with minor imprecision but outright error. The cities of Jezreel and Samaria were twenty-five miles apart—fairly close. But is "fairly close" good enough when it comes to the prediction of an omniscient God?

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 60. Chisholm (60n6) credits his "methodological approach" to D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002). Sandy's distinction between transparency and translucence in dealing with prophecy can often be quite helpful. Much of his pedagogical methodology, however, relies merely on raising and multiplying questions—sometimes badly framed, occasionally misleading, and often unanswerable: "Were the pronouncements of judgment on Ahab and his family fulfilled? Yes, but we would have had a difficult time figuring out how in advance. . . . [W]hy was Ahab's blood not licked by the dogs whereas [sic?] Naboth's was? Why were the judgments against Ahab imposed instead [?] on Joram?" (144). Many of the "questions" he raises are matters of mere curiosity that are entirely irrelevant to the accuracy of the prophecy (138, 140). Our curiosity about the outworking of details not included in the fulfillment description does not negate a precise fulfillment of those details, whether those details work out as or when we would have imagined them or not.

<sup>35</sup> I have chosen my words intentionally. If God is *omniscient* in the classical sense (as Chisholm defends), then he knows the details of future events; that he knows that certain details will *not* come to pass yet includes them anyway compromises his *integrity*; and the fact that including such details is entirely *unnecessary* (why not "just as dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood?") implies that God is inexplicably *indiscreet*.

Second, the interpretation makes room for human freedom, but at the expense of divine freedom. If an omniscient God freely chooses to include incidental details in a prophecy, by what logic or right may we dismiss those details as negotiable and disposable? Details are the icing on the prophetic cake—the glory of a God who distinguishes himself from all false deities as the one who both knows and controls the future (Isa 41:21–24; 44:6–7; 45:20–21).<sup>36</sup> He could have foretold either the location or the dogs, but he need not have included both (or either); yet he chose to. God does not need to include prophetic details, but when he does they are infallible; no word from his mouth ever echoes back empty (Isa 55:11). That includes “in the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth.” If God chooses to include prophetic details that turn out to be erroneous, the result is not an essentially accurate fulfillment, but an allegedly omniscient God who overcommits himself and is, in the end, simply mistaken—and, therefore, not entirely reliable. The stakes are far higher than “essentialist” interpretations allow. Chisholm insists, however, that this view of prophetic fulfillment in no way impinges on the attributes or reliability of God. “By making room for human response, God does not compromise his omniscience (defined in the classical sense), sovereignty, and immutability. God fully knows what will transpire because he has decreed the future. But this decree, by God’s sovereign decision, accommodates the choices and actions of creatures to whom he imparts a degree of freedom.”<sup>37</sup>

However reassuring this caveat is intended to be, to assert that God sovereignly decides to permit humans the freedom to contradict pronouncements informed by his omniscience is implausible. God’s sovereignty cannot contradict his other attributes without undermining his character and the reliability of his words. If God is omniscient, then he knew not only whether but also *where* dogs would lick up Naboth’s blood. Why, then, would he give what he *knew* to be ultimately false information? On this theory, God knowingly mis-predicted the location, when he could have either (a) given the ultimate correct location by virtue of his omniscience, or (b) omitted any specific reference to location at all and actually left that detail genuinely open to human freedom.

Third, the “essential fulfillment” argument undercuts one of the major theological themes that dominates the Books of Kings: the reliability of God’s words. The sacred writer repeatedly insists on an infallible alignment between “the word of the Lord” pronounced by the prophet, and what then transpired “according to the word of the Lord.”<sup>38</sup> The Ahab narrative includes one of the heavier concentrations of this theme, including his interactions with Elijah and Micaiah (1 Kgs 21–22). Indeed, the idea “that God’s prophetic word is certainly fulfilled . . . could, arguably, be understood

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<sup>36</sup> God declares his uniqueness not in mere generalities; the context of these passages in which God asserts the absolute uniqueness of his prophetic ability is riddled with specific details regarding the origin, actions, and even the name of the man whom God would raise up a century later as a key instrument in the post-captivity restoration of his people. What is more fraught with human choice than five generations of marriages leading to the birth of a son—let alone the parental choice involved in *naming* that child—who would execute God’s purposes for Israel? God prophetically identified this personage by name as Cyrus (44:28; 45:1). The parents were free to name their child whatever they wanted—Cleetus, Clovis, Dyrus, or Tyrus. But Yahweh knew exactly what they would freely choose to name him when the time came.

<sup>37</sup> Chisholm, “When Prophecy Appears to Fail,” 564.

<sup>38</sup> These two interconnected expressions occur in Kings thirty-two times and seventeen times respectively.

as the central assertion of the whole narrative.”<sup>39</sup> Chisholm’s application of “essential fulfillment” in this case undermines both a macro-theme in Kings and a micro-theme in this section of Kings.

### *Alternatives to the Contingency Explanation*

So how does one resolve the dilemma? The apparent discrepancy between prophecy and fulfillment is widely ignored in commentaries.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, a feasible solution requires neither Wray Beal’s quixotic reliance on “the living nature of the prophetic word” nor Chisholm’s theologically thorny appeal to prophetic contingency. Benjamin Foreman critiques six approaches to this prophetic conundrum (including Chisholm’s) and then offers a seventh.<sup>41</sup> Of those, two (besides Chisholm’s) are worth noting, followed by my own proposal(s).<sup>42</sup>

### Mistranslation of 1 Kings 21:19

Provan argues that the prophecy has simply been mistranslated and should be read, “Instead of dogs licking up Naboth’s blood, dogs will lick up your blood”—making the location a non-issue.<sup>43</sup> If Provan accurately renders the intended reading here, the tension between 21:19 and 22:38 dissolves.

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<sup>39</sup> P. J. Williams, “Lying Spirits Sent by God? The Case of Micaiah’s Prophecy” in *The Trustworthiness of God: Perspectives on the Nature of Scripture*, ed. Paul Helm and Carl R. Trueman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 65.

<sup>40</sup> E.g., Patterson mentions no potential discrepancy. R. D. Patterson, “1, 2 Kings,” in *EBC*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 4:160, 166. Likewise, Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings* (Nashville: B & H, 1995), 233, 239–40. Dale Ralph Davis zeroes in on the expression “in the *place*” and suggests: “If . . . the pool of Samaria was outside that city, we could understand the ‘place’ of 21:19 as indicating not a precise but a generic location. That is, the dogs would also lick Ahab’s blood outside of [a] town (not necessarily Jezreel).” *1 Kings*, FBC (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2007), 326. For a similar view, see C. C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*, NASB (Chicago: Moody, 2012), note on 1 Kings 21:19.

<sup>41</sup> Benjamin Foreman, “The Blood of Ahab: Reevaluating Ahab’s Death and Elijah’s Prophecy,” *JETS* 58, no. 2 (2015): 249–64. Foreman seems initially to mis-categorize Chisholm’s view. He notes Chisholm’s *JETS* article on contingency (and correctly acknowledges that Chisholm does not talk there about the Ahab prophecy) but lumps Chisholm under the view that the Ahab prophecy was modified; he then later notes (correctly) that Chisholm actually seems to align with the view that the prophecy was fulfilled generally, not specifically.

<sup>42</sup> One not worth noting nevertheless deserves mention because it is surprisingly common despite its implausibility—viz., that some specific details of the original prophecy were “suspended” because of Ahab’s sorrow. The geographical detail of *where* Ahab’s blood would be licked up “was not fulfilled because of his repentance (vv. 27–29) but was partially fulfilled in the licking up of Ahab’s blood by dogs at the pool in Samaria.” *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997), note on 1 Kings 21:19. *The NIV Study Bible* likewise views 1 Kings 22:38 as a partial fulfillment linked to “Ahab’s subsequent repentance.” *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), note on 1 Kings 21:19. Cf. R. D. Patterson and H. J. Austel, “1 and 2 Kings,” in *EBCRev*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2009), 3:796. John Woodhouse, *1 Kings* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 744. The explanation is remarkably arbitrary since “1 Kgs 21:27–29 has nothing to do with Ahab’s death in the first place” (Foreman, 254). Why should a temporary delay of divine judgment on Ahab’s house have any impact on the previously prophesied location of the poetic justice of Ahab’s postmortem desecration? As Spurgeon once remarked, commentaries, like sheep, often follow one another and all go astray.

<sup>43</sup> Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 160. Provan grounds his reading on the Hebrew term מְקוֹם which “in the construct state can simply mean ‘in place of, instead of (e.g., Isa. 33:21; Ezek. 6:13; Eccl. 3:16; and esp. Hos. 1:10 for the precise construction here: אֶשֶׁר בְּמְקוֹם אֶשֶׁר followed by a verb).” Besides Wray Beal, Oswalt also gives weight to Provan’s reading. John N. Oswalt, *1 Kings*, EEC (Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2025), 447.

Provan's rendering, however, does not seem to be supported by any other translation.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Foreman subjects it to a fairly rigorous examination and dismisses it as grammatically, exegetically, and logically untenable.<sup>45</sup>

### Mislocation of Naboth's Death

Foreman's own solution argues that whereas most readers assume that Naboth was killed in Jezreel (where his coveted property was located), Naboth was actually tried and executed in Samaria.<sup>46</sup> His argumentation is not without merit, and he may be right. Most importantly, he pointedly asserts that "the death of Ahab was fulfilled exactly as [Elijah] prophesied"—dogs, location, and all. There remain, however, two alternative explanations. I have yet to come across these in the literature, either as positive proposals or even as possibilities examined and rejected. They do not seem to have received any consideration at all, despite their simplicity.

### Erroneous Assumption Regarding "Samaria"

All the information needed to unravel the apparent discrepancy between 1 Kings 21:19 and 22:38 can be found in 21:1 and 18, along with a rudimentary knowledge of Bible geography. Chapter 21 introduces us to the fact that "Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard which was in Jezreel beside the palace of Ahab king of Samaria." The salient points include (a) the location of Naboth's property (Jezreel), and (b) the name of Ahab's royal domain (Samaria, used in the *regional* sense). "Samaria" was not only the name of a city, but also the name of the region Ahab ruled (cf. 1 Kgs 13:32; 18:2; 21:1; 2 Kgs 1:3; 17:24, 26). A few verses later, the Lord told Elijah to go meet Ahab, "who is *in Samaria . . . in the vineyard of Naboth*" (21:18, emphasis added).<sup>47</sup> This dovetails with the information we already received in 21:1—Naboth's vineyard is in the *city* of Jezreel, which is located in the *region* of Samaria. A straightforward reading of 21:18, then, suggests that Ahab was "in Jezreel" (the city) *and* "in Samaria" (the region) *simultaneously*. Since the "Samaria" in both the context (21:1) and the prophecy (21:18–19) is the *region* of Samaria (*not* the *city* of Samaria), then the "Samaria" in the

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<sup>44</sup> Contra Provan, Foreman notes the ESV, NASB, NIV, NRSV, RSV, but cites JPS, TNK, and NET as "notable exceptions" (260n45). All three of these "exceptions," however, also follow the traditional reading, or make it even stronger ("in the spot," NET; "in the very place," TNK). In addition, ASV, CJB, HCSB, DBY, GNV, (N)KJV, and VUL also follow the traditional translation.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 259–61.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 261–64. Though Foreman presents this as "a new proposal" that "scholars have failed to seriously consider" (261), Wray Beal (one year earlier) described this view as "common in commentaries." Wray Beal, 286.

<sup>47</sup> Oswalt echoes other suggestions for 21:18, including "[who ruled] in Samaria" or "who [resides] in Samaria." Oswalt, 447. Foreman observes in a footnote that some translate 21:18a as "Ahab, king of Israel, who *lives* in Samaria"—supplying the verb "live." His comment is confusing, however; on the one hand he seems to take issue with the translation, but then essentially relies on it, concluding that "YHWH's point in v. 18 . . . is to tell Elijah where he can find Ahab: he is travelling from Samaria towards Naboth's vineyard in Jezreel"—even speculating that perhaps Ahab is surprised because Elijah meets him along the road on his way to Jezreel (262). If one simply takes the text as it stands, however, Ahab is in Samaria and Jezreel *simultaneously* because Jezreel is in Samaria. It is not, as they say, rocket science. In the interest of full disclosure, I have not come across any published author who takes this view, but neither have I come across any published author who considers the possibility and rebuts it.

fulfillment (22:38) may equally be understood as the region, not the city, of Samaria.<sup>48</sup> Additional archaeological and geographical observations seem to corroborate this understanding.

According to John Woodhead, Ahab had a palace in the city of Jezreel, which archaeological excavations indicate was “Ahab’s chariot center.”<sup>49</sup> The reference to “the pool of Samaria” in 22:38 may be read more generically as “a pool in Samaria” (cf. NKJV, NIV).<sup>50</sup> Jezreel’s spring was a substantial fountain (1 Sam 29:1) forming “a limpid pool forty or fifty feet in diameter” that flowed out by “a stream sufficient to turn a mill.”<sup>51</sup> Moreover, Jezreel was closer to Ramoth-Gilead (the scene of the battle) than the city of Samaria; the most natural place for the soldiers to bring Ahab’s bloodied chariot after the battle, therefore, would have been his palace and “chariot center” at Jezreel “in (the region of) Samaria” (22:37–38). Finally, Ramoth-Gilead—a trade-route city under dispute between Ahab and the king of Aram (22:3)—lay across the Jordan, outside the region of Samaria; so the most natural way to describe their return with the dead king would be in terms of coming back to the region of “Samaria” (22:37), even though the specific city to which they returned was Jezreel. All these details accommodate the understanding that the chariot was cleaned (with canine assistance) at the very place where Ahab condoned, and personally profited from, the murder of Naboth—at Jezreel “in Samaria.”

A feasible alternative to this solution would be to regard 22:37 (“So the king died and was brought to Samaria. And they buried the king in Samaria,” NKJV) as a summary statement of the *final* disposition of Ahab’s *body*, delivered for interment in the city of Samaria. In that case, 22:38 (“Then *someone* washed<sup>52</sup> the chariot at a pool in Samaria, and the dogs licked up his blood . . . according to the word of the LORD which He had spoken,” NKJV) would be an almost parenthetical statement of the disposition of Ahab’s *chariot*, later taken to Jezreel and washed out at a pool of Samaria (in Jezreel)—where the dogs licked up the bloodied water used to wash out the king’s chariot. Either scenario assumes that, at least in 22:38, “Samaria” refers not to the city but to the region—a reading that chapter 21 has already conditioned us to expect.

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<sup>48</sup> Foreman traces a similar view back to Josephus (see *Antiquities*, 8:15:6), but the arguments and assumptions behind it differ. Astonishingly, however, few if any seem to have considered the significance of 21:1 and the dual use of Samaria in resolving the apparent discrepancy. Consequently, Foreman’s conclusion that this view “can only be sustained if 1 Kgs 22:38 is significantly emended” and therefore “must be abandoned” is remarkably short-sighted.

<sup>49</sup> J. Woodhead, “Jezreel” in *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd edition, ed. I. Howard Marshall, et al., (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1996), 587. Woodhead was personally involved in the extensive archaeological excavations of Jezreel.

<sup>50</sup> Andrew Goodwill offers the alternative argument that “pool of Samaria” is “a genitive of name and does not necessarily indicate location”—at least in the specific sense of the *city* of Samaria, though being in Jezreel it would still be in the *region* of Samaria. “The Contribution of a Literary Analysis of 1 Kings 16:29–2 Kings 8:15 to the Law Theme in the Book of Kings” (PhD diss., Bob Jones University, 2018), 133. Archer believes that the chariot was cleaned in “a pool outside Jezreel” and tentatively suggests the existence of a second pool in the vicinity of Jezreel called the “Samaria Pool.” But the explanation fails to address the references to Samaria in 22:37. Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 202.

<sup>51</sup> David Robinson and Eli Smith, *Biblical Researches in Ancient Palestine and the Adjacent Regions: A Journal of Travels in the Years 1838 and 1852* (1876; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2:323.

<sup>52</sup> The verb is 3MS, presumably referring to the unnamed underling charged with the gruesome task. I have yet to come across either of these solutions in the literature.

### *Conclusion Concerning Ahab's Death*

To illustrate the problematic nature of the contingency explanation, if prophesied locations are negotiable and left open to human freedom, one might just as easily suggest that Joseph and Mary could have decided to lodge in Bethany instead of Bethlehem (they were both “little,” after all) without any significant impact on the accuracy of Micah 5:2 (the prophecy predicting that Messiah would emerge from Bethlehem). One cannot sever the prophecy from its setting. In the very *place* and *moment* of Ahab's gross abuse of power (1 Kgs 21:1–16), God sent Elijah with a specific and unnecessarily detailed prophecy dripping with irony: *right here, where dogs licked up Naboth's blood because of you, dogs will lick up your blood because of me* (vv. 17–19). God got it exactly right, details and all. There is no need to stretch the principle of contingency, however imaginatively, beyond its biblical definition and criteria. The words of Jehu are as applicable here as they are in their own context: “Know, then, that *not a word* that the LORD has spoken against the house of Ahab shall fail. The LORD has done what he announced through his servant Elijah” (2 Kgs 10:10, NIV, emphasis added).<sup>53</sup>

### God's Promise Regarding Josiah's Death (2 Kgs 22, 23)

God announced that he would bring unprecedented desolation upon Judah because of their rebellion (2 Kgs 22:16–17, 19), but he promised the godly, young King Josiah, “You shall be gathered to your grave in peace” (22:20). How, then, does one explain Josiah's death in battle at the hand of Pharaoh-Necho of Egypt, thirteen years later (23:29–30)?<sup>54</sup> Chisholm writes that

dying a bloody death on a battlefield can hardly be viewed as dying “in peace.” (Footnote: In the Chronicler's version of Josiah's death, the king cries out, “I am seriously wounded.” This is incongruous with dying “in peace,” for dying “in peace” is the antithesis of dying by the sword, as Jer 34:4–5 makes clear.) However, if we view the prophecy as implicitly conditional to begin with and make room for human freedom in the equation, we can conclude that Josiah's decision to become embroiled in international politics compromised God's intention for him to die in peace.<sup>55</sup>

### *Problems with the Contingency Explanation*

Two points merit attention. First, when God promised Josiah, “You will be gathered to your grave in peace,” he explained exactly what he meant in the very next phrase: “and your eyes shall not see all the calamity which I will bring on this place” (2 Kgs 22:20). God is free to define the terms of his own prophecy; we are not at liberty to impose our assumptions and preconceptions on God's language based on what “in peace” sounds like to us. Chisholm's appeal to Jeremiah 34:4–5 as proof that dying

<sup>53</sup> The NIV nicely captures here the sense of the value and precision of every one of God's words.

<sup>54</sup> Josiah came to the throne at the age of eight and reigned thirty-one years (2 Kgs 22:1; 2 Chr 34:1). Huldah's prophecy was delivered in conjunction with the discovery of the book of the covenant during the refurbishing of the Temple initiated by the twenty-six-year-old Josiah in his eighteenth year (2 Kgs 22:3ff; 2 Chr 34:8ff; cf. also 2 Kgs 23:23 and 2 Chr 35:19). Consequently, Josiah died thirteen years after Huldah's prophecy, at the age of thirty-nine.

<sup>55</sup> Chisholm, “Israel According to Prophecy,” 61.

by the sword is the antithesis to dying “in peace” is fallacious.<sup>56</sup> One might just as easily cite Genesis 15:15 (“you shall go to your fathers *in peace*; you will be buried *at a good old age*,” emphasis added) as proof that dying *young* is the antithesis to dying “in peace.” Neither Jeremiah 34 nor Genesis 15 furnishes a universal definition of what it means to die “in peace.” Every passage is governed by its own context, and God spelled out exactly what he meant by his promise to Josiah: Judah was irrevocably doomed to disaster, but Josiah would die before that chaos commenced. And he did. Within just four years of Josiah’s battlefield death, the Babylonian calamity commenced.<sup>57</sup> If Josiah *had* died a natural death in old age, the prophecy—as defined by God—would *not* have been fulfilled.

Chisholm argues in two different directions simultaneously. On the one hand, he denies that Josiah went to his grave in peace; but on the other hand, he asserts that the prophecy was *essentially* fulfilled because “Josiah still went to his grave without having to see Jerusalem’s downfall, which was the main point made by Huldah.”<sup>58</sup> But that was not the *main* point made by Huldah; it was the *whole* point, the only point. If 22:20b has *anything* to do with the accuracy of the prophecy’s fulfillment, it has *everything* to do with it. In the end, the rest of Chisholm’s explanation is entirely unnecessary—except for one thing.

That raises the second point that merits attention here. When Pharaoh Necho II set out to aid the flagging Assyrians in their last stand against the Babylonians at Carchemish, Josiah—for unexplained reasons<sup>59</sup>—set out to intercept him (2 Chr 35:20). Chisholm faults “Josiah’s decision to become embroiled in international politics.” But that’s what kings do. International politics is a king’s stock in trade, especially when his nation (like Judah) sits at the intersection between major international powers.

If that decision alone was the reason for Josiah’s “untimely” demise (he was only thirty-nine)—and, according to Chisholm, his loss of God’s *intended* blessing of a peaceful death—that leads to a larger question and problem for Chisholm’s contingency explanation. God’s explanation of prophetic contingency in Jeremiah 18 indicates that a divine pronouncement of intended blessing may be forfeited by disobedience. The Chronicler includes a curious detail that might suggest a *possibility* of Josiah’s disobedience. When Josiah challenged the passage of Pharaoh Necho’s army, the Egyptian king dispatched messengers to call on Josiah to stand down: “What have we to do with each other, king of Judah? I am not coming against you this day, but against the house with which I am at war. And *God has commanded me to hurry. Cease opposing God, who is with me, lest he destroy you*” (2 Chr 35:21, ESV, emphasis added).

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<sup>56</sup> Jeremiah 34:4–5 reads, “Yet hear the word of the LORD, O Zedekiah king of Judah! Thus says the LORD concerning you, ‘You will not die by the sword. You will die in peace.’”

<sup>57</sup> Josiah died in 609 BC. Babylon’s humiliation of Judah began in 605 with a first wave of captives, followed by another in 597, and culminating in the razing of Jerusalem in 586.

<sup>58</sup> Chisholm, “Israel According to Prophecy,” 61.

<sup>59</sup> Unexplained in Scripture, at least. Rainey and Notley note that “the attempt by Josiah, king of Judah, to stop the Egyptian advance makes perfect sense. He and the neighboring states had seen clearly that if the Egyptians should succeed in their plans, the Levant would be changing masters, from the Assyrians to the Egyptians. They had no desire for that to happen.” Anson F. Rainey and R. Steven Notley, *The Sacred Bridge: Carta’s Atlas of the Biblical World* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006), 259.

We might be surprised, even suspicious, to hear God's words coming from the Egyptian king. Perhaps Josiah was suspicious as well.<sup>60</sup> But it's not so easy to get around the Chronicler's own explanation in verse 22. Josiah refused to yield, disguised himself, and went into battle because he "did not listen to the words of Neco *from the mouth of God*" (2 Chr 35:22, ESV). Nothing in the text suggests that Necho's words were false or disingenuous. And if Necho was speaking the truth, it would seem to imply that Josiah's action was disobedience to a word from God that *might* have forfeited his dying "in peace"—as more traditionally understood, and in keeping with a biblical application of prophetic contingency. Second Chronicles 35:21–22 opens the door to that possibility, and it is the only piece of evidence that can salvage a contingency interpretation; but if Chisholm thinks that is the explanation, he never says so. In any case, God providentially employed Josiah's actions to facilitate his premature death in keeping with the prophecy.

Some commentators find this verse [22:20] troubling because they take it that "be gathered to your grave in peace" can only be understood to be a prediction that Josiah will die in a peaceful manner, something that was, in fact, not to be the case (23:29). . . . But the phrase, which only occurs here and in 2 Chronicles 34:28, need not be understood in this way. In fact, the statement that indicates a king died a normal death is "he slept with his fathers." That one does not occur here. I suggest the point of Huldah's words is to say that Josiah will not die in some conflagration when all Jerusalem's and Judah's sins are being visited upon them. He will die before that happens while his country is still in a state of peace. "Your eyes will not see all the calamity" Yahweh is going to bring. That is the point, and not the manner of his death, about which Huldah does not intend to say anything.<sup>61</sup>

If one ignores on the front end that 2 Kings 22:20a (dying "in peace") is explained by 22:20b ("your eyes will not see all the calamity I will bring")—as Chisholm does—then one cannot patch up the failure of v. 20a on the back end by appealing to v. 20b as the real "essence" of the prophecy. One might argue that v. 20a was forfeited because of Josiah's disobedience to the word of the Lord (2 Chr 35:21–22), and v. 20b was providentially fulfilled through that disobedience. But that's not how Chisholm argues.

### *Conclusion*

The purpose of this article has been to survey and codify the larger issue of prophetic contingency, with a view to challenging an application of contingency that would allow human freedom to alter prophetic details previously specified by God. Such explanations not only raise serious questions about God's omniscience and the reliability of his words but also fail to meet the scriptural criteria for the principle of contingency. The mitigation of prophetic details that have nothing to do with either obedience or disobedience, repentance or intercession, is an unprecedented, unsound, and unnecessary

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<sup>60</sup> "This idea that, [sic] the word of God could be delivered through an unbeliever, is a very remarkable development." John N. Oswalt, *2 Kings*, EEC (Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2025), 433.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 412; cf. 433. Cf. House, 385, 392.

application of the principle of prophetic contingency. Simpler solutions are suggested by a more rigorous investigation of biblical principles of contingency, a more attentive reading of the text, a more imaginative quest for other interpretive possibilities, and a more robust application of certain divine attributes.

One cannot make up one's own rules for interpreting prophecy.<sup>62</sup> Using contingency to explain the apparent detail discrepancies between prophecy and fulfillment in the case of the deaths of Ahab and Josiah is more problematic than helpful. If such prophetic details are negotiable, their inclusion in a prophecy is not only unnecessary and inexplicable but misleading, undermining the character and attributes of God.

“When prophecy appears to fail,” Chisholm counsels in his *JETS* article title, “check your hermeneutic” (see note 3 above). That's good advice. But first, *check all the details of the text*—both the prophecy and the fulfillment. Many interpreters warn against pressing the details of a prophecy, lest it crumble like a fragile ancient archaeological artifact. In my experience, however, the harder one presses the details of prophecy from a sovereign, omniscient, and trustworthy God, the firmer one finds them to be. God does not need us to cover for his overstatements or misspeaks; we do better to trust his character and pay closer attention to his words in the text.

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<sup>62</sup> On this principle I agree wholeheartedly with Chisholm. Over a decade ago when this topic first attracted my attention, he kindly responded to my query via personal email (06/24/15) and referred me to his *JETS* article for more detail. Chisholm wrote: “I think you misunderstand the contingent nature of biblical prophecy and have imposed your own preconceptions on the text. You've pre-decided how prophecy must work and then impose that on the text, rather than allowing the text itself to inform your categories. That inevitably leads to faulty exegesis.” I have tried not to pre-decide how prophecy must work; that is why I began this study by staking down a thorough and biblical-theologically grounded hermeneutic of prophetic contingency. If I have pre-decided anything, it is how divine integrity and omniscience work—though I would argue that that, too, is just as rooted in a biblical-theologically grounded view of God's attributes.

*Appendix:*  
*Fulfillment of “the Word of the Lord” in 1 and 2 Kings<sup>63</sup>*

#	Historical Fulfillment	Content	Original Statement	Time Lapse
1	1 Kgs 2:27	Eli’s descendants removed from priesthood	1 Sam 2:31–35	50 yrs
2	1 Kgs 5:12	God gives Solomon wisdom	1 Kgs 3:12	-
3	1 Kgs 8:20, 24	Solomon reigns and builds the Temple	1 Chr 22:6–10	yrs
4	1 Kgs 12:15	Jeroboam receives the kingdom of Israel	1 Kgs 11:31–37	-
5	1 Kgs 13:4–5	Bethel altar splits, spilling its ashes	1 Kgs 13:3	-
6	1 Kgs 13:26	Man of God dies for eating/drinking in Bethel	1 Kgs 13:9, 17	-
7	1 Kgs 14:18	Jeroboam’s son dies and is mourned	1 Kgs 14:12–13	-
8	1 Kgs 15:28–29	Jeroboam’s descendants cut off	1 Kgs 14:7–11, 14	yrs
9	1 Kgs 16:12	Baasha’s descendants cut off	1 Kgs 16:1–7	yrs
10	1 Kgs 16:34	Hiel lost his children in building Bethel	Josh 6:26	600 yrs
11	1 Kgs 17:5–6	Elijah sustained by ravens at Cherith Brook	1 Kgs 17:2–4	-
12	1 Kgs 17:10ff	Elijah sustained by widow at Zarephath	1 Kgs 17:8–9	-
13	1 Kgs 17:16	Widow’s food miraculously sustained	1 Kgs 17:14–15	-
14	1 Kgs 18:45	God sends rain	1 Kgs 18:1	-
15	1 Kgs 20:20–21	Ahab defeats Syrians	1 Kgs 20:13–14	-
16	1 Kgs 20:29–30	Ahab defeats Syrians again	1 Kgs 20:28	7 days
17	1 Kgs 20:36	Man killed by lion for not striking prophet	1 Kgs 20:35	hrs?
18	1 Kgs 22:37	Ahab forfeits life for disobedience	1 Kgs 20:42	-
19	1 Kgs 22:29–37	Ahab killed in battle	1 Kgs 22:19–28	-
20	1 Kgs 22:38	Dogs lick up Ahab’s blood	1 Kgs 21:19	-
21	2 Kgs 9:36	Dogs eat Jezebel in Jezreel	1 Kgs 21:23; 2 Kgs 9:10	~15 yrs
22	2 Kgs 9:25–26	Judgment/loss of kingdom on Ahab’s sons	1 Kgs 21:28–29	yrs
23	2 Kgs 1:17	Ahaziah dies from injury	2 Kgs 1:4, 6, 16	-
24	2 Kgs 2:22	Bad water cleansed	2 Kgs 2:21	-
25	2 Kgs 3:20	God provides water for armies	2 Kgs 3:16–17	1 day
26	2 Kgs 4:17	Shunammite woman has a son	2 Kgs 4:16–17	1 yr
27	2 Kgs 4:44	God multiplies bread for Elisha’s followers	2 Kgs 4:43	-
28	2 Kgs 5:14	Naaman washes and is cleansed of leprosy	2 Kgs 5:10	-
29	2 Kgs 5:27	Gehazi becomes leprous	2 Kgs 5:27	-
30	2 Kgs 6:18	Syrians struck with blindness per Elisha’s word	2 Kgs 6:18	-
31	2 Kgs 7:16	Miraculous provision in siege-famine	2 Kgs 7:1	1 day
32	2 Kgs 7:17–20	King’s officer dies because of unbelief	2 Kgs 7:2	1 day
33	2 Kgs 9:13ff	Jehu becomes king of Israel	2 Kgs 9:1–12	-
34	2 Kgs 10:10–11	Ahab’s seed exterminated by Jehu	1 Kgs 17:21–24, 29	yrs
35	2 Kgs 14:25	Jeroboam II restores Israel’s territory	2 Kgs 14:25	-
36	2 Kgs 15:12	Jehu’s dynasty lasts exactly four generations	2 Kgs 10:30	100 yrs
37	2 Kgs 19:35–37	God delivers Jerusalem from Sennacherib	2 Kgs 19:21–34	-

<sup>63</sup> The chart is adapted from Talbert, *Trustworthiness of Gods Word*, Appendix 4. Shaded entries do not expressly include the “word of the Lord” fulfillment formula, though they do include some form of the “word of the Lord” pronouncement formula.

#	Historical Fulfillment	Content	Original Statement	Time Lapse
38	2 Kgs 20:4–6	Hezekiah given 15 more years to live	2 Kgs 20:4–6	15 yrs
39	2 Kgs 23:15–16	Josiah burns priests’ bones on Bethel altar	1 Kgs 13:1–2	~300 yrs
40	2 Kgs 23:28–30	Josiah dies “in peace”	2 Kgs 22:18–20	13 yrs
41	2 Kgs 24:2	Babylon overruns Judah	2 Kgs 23:27, et al.	yrs
42	2 Kgs 25:11–21	Babylon carries away Jerusalem’s wealth/people	2 Kgs 20:16–17	yrs
43	2 Kgs 25:1ff	Babylon overruns Judah	2 Kgs 21:12–15	yrs
44	2 Kgs 25:1ff	Babylon overruns Judah	2 Kgs 22:15–17	yrs

Gribben, Crawford. *J. N. Darby and the Roots of Dispensationalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. 154pp. + 16pp. (front matter) + 94pp. (back matter).

Crawford Gribben, a professor at Queen's University Belfast, pairs an intriguing interest in John Owen and John Nelson Darby, in the Puritans and the Plymouth Brethren. This volume is a major study in Darby's thought. The latter part of the title is explained in the last sentence of the book: "He saw the roots, but not the birth, of dispensationalism." Dispensationalism, in Gribben's telling, is a simplification and distortion of Darby's thought. The focus of the book is about Darby's soteriology, ecclesiology, pneumatology, and eschatology. Gribben summarizes Darby's positions as Calvinist, catholic, charismatic, and catastrophic, respectively. These designations need some unpacking, however, since Darby's views include some surprises.

Gribben describes Darby's soteriology as developing out of "Anglican high Calvinism" (35). However, this brand of Calvinism is different from what many today would think of as flying under the Calvinist banner. For instance, Gribben observes, "Like other high Calvinists, he rejected the confessional view that believers were under the moral law as a rule of life in their sanctification" (36). One might think that this was a kind of antinomian hyper-Calvinism, but the Brethren recognized the Scriptures as morally binding and held that the imitation of Christ is a higher standard than the Decalogue (144, 146). This emphasis led Darby to argue against justification on the grounds of Christ's imputed righteousness. He wanted to excise any thought that righteousness could come through obedience to the law—even Christ's obedience to the law. In this Darby claimed that he was closer to the Augsburg Confession, the Formula of Concord, Calvin's *Institutes*, the Thirty-Nine Articles, and the Westminster Confession than his opponents. Darby thought that this "was his most important contribution" to the recovery of true theology (52). Darby's soteriology, not his eschatology, provoked the most opposition in Darby's own day. Gribben highlights especially the opposition of Free Church of Scotland minister George Smeaton, whom, Gribben asserts, misunderstood some of Darby's claims. Gribben also notes that Darby's soteriology did not persist even among the Brethren.

Gribben describes Darby's ecclesiology as "catholic" (32). This may seem an odd appellation to apply to the leader of a group that called for separation from denominations that contained a mixture of believers and unbelievers. In Darby's thought, however, the church had fallen away from its purity in the first centuries and would never be restored (the Reformation did not restore it, according to Darby). Thus, the Brethren called all true Christians to gather apart from the denominations. Much of the chapter on ecclesiology outlines the practical challenges the Brethren faced in trying to live out this theology, including a split among the Brethren themselves.

Darby's pneumatology was, as Gribben puts it, "laundered charismaticism" (91). Darby rejected cessationism, but he also believed that Irving and his followers were not truly receiving special gifting from the Spirit. Later he would deny that the miraculous gifts continued even while rejecting the cessationist position: "The gifts had been withdrawn not because the canon of Scripture had been completed, as nineteenth-century cessationists routinely argued, but because of the church's failure" (97). Darby also developed a two-stage view of the Christian life in which the sealing of the Spirit was a subsequent experience, but he rejected Wesleyan perfectionism and thought the Higher Life

movement was a distortion of his doctrine. He also innovated by distinguishing between definitive and progressive sanctification. According to Gribben, this distinction was later picked up by Westminster Seminary professor John Murray. Gribben also claims that D. Martyn-Lloyd Jones adopted Darby's view that the sealing of the Spirit was a subsequent experience in the Christian life. Interestingly, later dispensationalists did little with Darby's pneumatology: "Hardly anything of Darby's pneumatology made it into the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909)" (91).

Darby's eschatology was, in his lifetime, the least controversial aspect of his theology due to the wide variety of eschatological positions among evangelicals in the nineteenth century. In addition, Darby was not entirely innovative. Gribben notes that "Darby combined existing eschatological ideas in a distinctive structure" (116). These factors explain why Darby's eschatology was widely adopted in a variety of denominations where his other theological views would not have been welcome. In his examination of Darby's eschatology, Gribben draws three contrasts between Darby's eschatology and that of dispensationalists who followed him. First, Darby did not base his eschatology upon a literal reading of the prophets. Instead, Darby examined whether a prophetic passage referred to Israel or to the church and then developed his interpretative approach from that starting point. Second, even though Darby believed that Jews would return to the land of Israel and be converted, Gribben thinks it inaccurate to label Darby a Zionist. Gribben notes that Darby had "high Tory sensibilities" that led him to be "opposed to popular democracy" (117). This combined with his belief that the church should avoid political campaigns. Thus, Darby's belief regarding the restoration of Israel had no political component to it. Third, Darby's understanding of dispensations differed from the definitions of later dispensations. He moved away from using *dispensation* to describe "a period in redemptive history," opting to use the terminology of "age" or "administration" (133). He used the term *dispensation* "to refer to a particular expression of divine grace within these redemptive-historical periods" (133). In addition, dispensations only existed in the time when God was specially working among the Jews. Thus, for Darby there were no dispensations before the Flood or after the Cross. The sharp distinction between Israel and the church led to another innovation that did not endure. Darby argued that the material promises of the OT would be fulfilled for Israel on the new earth while the spiritual promises given to the church would be fulfilled for the church in heaven.

Gribben opens his book by citing Donald Akenson's claim that Darby is the fourth most influential Protestant theologian, following only Luther, Calvin, and Wesley. He emphasizes the scope of Darby's writing ("one of the nineteenth century's most prolific and varied writers," 3) and his vast learning (noting his extensive library, positive reviews of his *Synopsis* in the *Princeton Review*, his work with Bible translations in German, French, and English, and his engagement with textual criticism). Despite impressions, sometimes fostered by the Brethren themselves, that Darby was an innovator, Gribben holds that Darby was historically informed. He concludes, "'But if the substance of his ideas was not especially distinctive, his combination of ideas was often unique" (x). And yet for all his learning and writing, Gribben finds Darby's thought neglected, overshadowed by the dispensationalism that followed him.

Gribben closes the book by drawing on evaluations of early critics and defenders of Darby and the Brethren. While acknowledging Darby's distinctive thought, Gribben seems to side with those who

find greater continuity between Darby and the broader Reformed tradition. For instance, Gribben writes of a critic of Darby (146–47):

He might have discovered in the works of Johannes Piscator Darby's argument that believers were not justified through the imputation of the righteousness of Christ; he might have learned from John Owen Darby's argument that believers should meet for Bible study without clerical oversight and for the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper; he might have found in the works of Johannes Cocceius the idea that redemptive history progressed through a sequences of ages, as a consequence of which believers were not bound to keep the Lord's Day as the Christian Sabbath; and he might have located the idea that Jewish people would be converted to Christianity and restored to the Promised Land in the Geneva Bible and in the works of many English puritans. In other words, just as Reformed tradition could be used to critique the distinctive claims of the brethren, so it could be used to support them.

Early dispensationalism, on the other hand, Gribben takes to be something that Darby intensely disliked: a “simplified and reductive” rendering of his thought. These modifications have taken some odd turns (Gribben mentions Clarence Larkin, Hal Lindsey, and the *Left Behind* series). Gribben sees progressive dispensationalism as a move back toward Reformed theology (though not necessarily a move back to Darby).

Gribben has written a fascinating account of the thought of a clearly influential figure. The major shortcoming of the book is its brevity. For instance, the soteriology chapter clearly explains why Darby rejected the imputation of Christ's righteousness, but his alternative scheme is not clearly explained. Gribben writes as an historian. He is not evaluating Darby's views. One might feel some regret in reading Gribben's account that Darby's complex thought was simplified or abandoned. But when evaluated theologically, Darby's view of imputation, his view of the church, his views on the sealing of the Spirit, and his distinctive definition of *dispensation* all should have been abandoned. In the almost century and a half since Darby's death, his best ideas (such as the distinction between definitive and progressive sanctification and some of his eschatological thought) have endured, while the less valuable ideas have fallen away.

Finally, Gribben's work stands as a caution to contemporary critics of dispensationalism. It will not do to simply critique Darby and Scofield and think that dispensationalism has been discredited. Dispensationalism is a developing theological tradition. Many critiques of Darby and Scofield do not apply to present-day dispensationalists, especially progressive dispensationalists. Gribben's observation that Darby was often drawing on earlier theological ideas should move some Reformed theologians to examine whether some of the opposition to dispensationalist positions is too reactive. The restoration of Israel to the land and a national conversion has a long Reformed pedigree. Must it be abandoned simply because it was also adopted by Darby and the dispensationalists who followed him?

**Brian C. Collins**

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Lundeen, Erik. *The Reformation of the Literal: Prophecy and the Senses of Scripture in Early Modern Europe*. T&T Clark Studies in Historical Theology. New York: T&T Clark, 2025. 219pp. + 12pp. (front matter) + 30pp. (back matter).

The Reformers famously emphasized literal interpretation and rejected the allegorical approaches common in earlier eras of the church, or so the popular history goes. In the past half century scholars have pushed back against this narrative by arguing that the Reformers stood in greater continuity with their medieval predecessors than many think. Eric Lundeen, a pastor at Village Church of Gurnee (IL) and a fellow with the Center for Pastor Theologians, steps into this discussion with a detailed analysis of what the Reformers practiced when they claimed to interpret according to the literal sense.

Lundeen approaches the issue of Reformation interpretation by examining Johannes Oecolampadius's commentary on Isaiah (1525) in conversation with commentaries by Jerome, Cyril of Alexandria, Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas, Nicholas of Lyra, Martin Luther (lectures given from 1527–1530), Conrad Pellican (1534), Johannes Brenz (1550), John Calvin (1551; 2nd ed., 1559), Wolfgang Musculus (1557), and Lucas Osiander (1578). As the earliest Reformation commentator on Isaiah, Oecolampadius is a key transitional figure.

The first chapter introduces readers to Oecolampadius. He worked with Erasmus on his famed Greek NT. Nonetheless, Oecolampadius broke with Erasmus over his controversy with Luther. Oecolampadius sided with the Swiss reformers against the Lutherans in the Eucharistic controversy. He was highly regarded for his facility with the Hebrew language.

Chapters 2 through 4 compare Oecolampadius's exegesis of Isaiah with select interpreters who preceded him. At the end of each of these chapters, Lundeen briefly looks at how the six Reformation-era commentators handled the same passages. Chapter 2 compares Oecolampadius's exegesis of Isaiah 5:1–7, 13:1–14:23, and 21:1–10 with that of Jerome, Cyril of Alexandria, and Chrysostom, with an eye to how they handle figures of speech and extended metaphors or literary allegories (that is, allegories written by the author). Chapter 3 turns to the medieval period and compares Oecolampadius with Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Lyra on Isaiah 7:14, 8:1–4, 9:7, 11:1, and 49:1. The chapter examines how Christological passages in Isaiah are read in their OT context. Chapter 4 demonstrates that Oecolampadius was shaped by medieval Jewish exegesis. Whereas patristic and medieval exegesis tended to take passages piecemeal and to read them Christologically, medieval Jewish interpretation tended to read the prophets as literary works to be interpreted in light of the whole and as relating to the prophet's own time. Lundeen summarizes these two tendencies with the words "coherence and contemporaneity." Oecolampadius adopted both emphases in his commentary on Isaiah while also advocating for Christological readings of the prophets. Lundeen proposes that Oecolampadius may have been attracted to Jewish exegesis due to a Renaissance emphasis on the interpretation of texts as literary wholes.

Chapters 5 and 6 turn to Isaiah 40–66 and place Oecolampadius in more detailed conversation with the six Reformation commentators on Isaiah. Chapter 5 focuses on three issues: the interpretation of metaphors, the interpretation of texts quoted or alluded to in the NT, and the "coherence and

contemporaneity” of Isaiah’s prophecies in these chapters. Chapter 6 looks at the issue of referentiality, particularly with regard to the Cyrus oracle in Isaiah 44 and 45.

A few examples of the comparative work that forms the heart of this book will give the reader a sense of the similarities and differences among the various interpretive traditions. Isaiah 5:1–7 is, in Lundeen’s terminology, a “literary allegory.” Notably, Chrysostom recognized the difference between literary allegory and allegorical interpretation while Jerome and Cyril did not. Jerome and Cyril also identified symbolic significance in each detail of Isaiah 5:1–7, while Chrysostom simply took the main point of the metaphor as found in v. 7. Oecolampadius warned against finding a symbolic meaning in each detail of the passage, but in the end he did just that. In this he was followed by five of the six Reformers Lundeen surveyed, with Calvin alone adopting the approach of Chrysostom.

The interpretation of Isaiah 13–14 is likewise intriguing. Jerome and Cyril understood Isaiah 13–14 to be about the fall of Babylon to the Medes and Persians according to the historical sense, but about the devil’s fall, the church’s present triumph over Satan, and yet future eschatological judgments according to the spiritual sense. In broad strokes Oecolampadius agreed, but he sought to link tightly the historical and spiritual senses and to justify the spiritual sense from the letter. He noted that the language of Isaiah 13 in the historical sense had to be understood as hyperbolic. In addition, the details of Isaiah 13 did not match historical events precisely. Thus, Oecolampadius proposed that Babylon served as a type, with the text partially fulfilled historically (the literal sense) and partially fulfilled eschatologically (the anagogical sense). The six Reformation interpreters were not inclined to recognize a spiritual sense, and they universally rejected the fall of Satan interpretation of Isaiah 14. Interestingly, those interpreters who distinguished between a literal sense and a spiritual sense read the text metaphorically when reading according to the literal or historical sense and non-metaphorically (one would say *literally* except that term has already been applied to the historical reading) to arrive at the spiritual or eschatological sense.

Isaiah 16:1–5 serves as an example of a shift from patristic and medieval readings of Scripture toward readings that valued coherence. In his comments on Isaiah 16:1, Jerome proposed that Isaiah shifted sharply away from a historical prophecy about Moab to speak of Christ (the Lamb) descended from the rock (Ruth the Moabitess), shifted back to an oracle regarding Moab in verses 2–4, and then shifted back to Christ in verse 5. This became the dominant Christian reading, and this is the view found in the commentaries by Thomas and Lyra. Medieval Jewish interpreters understood Isaiah 16 to be a continuation of Isaiah 15. The sheep in 16:1 referred to tribute that Moab paid to Israel. Verse 5 referred to the rule of Hezekiah. Oecolampadius followed the Jewish reading, but he then claimed that Hezekiah was a type of Christ. He applied the passage to Christians by paralleling the tribute paid to Hezekiah with the requirement that Christians offer themselves up to Christ. The other Reformers also followed the Jewish interpretation of verse 1, but they divided regarding verse 5. Luther read verse 5 as about Hezekiah alone. Brenz and Osiander followed Jerome and the tradition in holding it was about Christ alone. The Reformed interpreters, Pellican, Musculus, and Calvin, followed Oecolampadius in seeing Hezekiah as a type of Christ.

Isaiah 65:25 provides a case study in the handling of metaphor. Luther, Osiander, and Musculus followed the traditional interpretation that understood the wild beasts as metaphors for the wicked;

their gentling referred to conversion. Oecolampadius adopted this symbolic reading, but he also argued that it was fulfilled literally in Christ's first coming (cf. Mark 1:13; Acts 28:3–6; Mark 16:18; Luke 10:19). He posited, "Any harm from animals that happened in this life, he wrote, could surely only be due to their unbelief" (169). Calvin opted for a nonmetaphorical reading and a fulfillment at the Second Advent, but he also taught that the main point of the text was a metaphor about sinners brought to obedience in Christ. Brenz rejected these metaphorical readings and read the text to teach that the beasts who became ferocious due to Adam's sin could not ultimately harm Christians who have eternal life in Christ.

The Cyrus oracle in Isaiah 44 and 45 provided an opportunity to examine different approaches to referentiality. The patristic and medieval commentators held that the literal sense had only a single referent but that additional referents could be found in the spiritual senses. Oecolampadius is aligned with the preceding tradition on this point. The Lutherans, however, rejected the spiritual sense while maintaining that the literal sense could only have one referent. They saw Cyrus as the only referent of this prophecy. The Reformed interpreters who followed Oecolampadius likewise rejected spiritual senses, but they were willing to see multiple referents and fulfillments in the literal sense, often due to their view of typology.

Lundeen concludes from this survey that the Reformers had a complicated and diverse understanding of what it meant to read a text literally. However, it seems instead that a variety of generally valid interpretive strategies were deployed by the Reformers. Each of these could be valid depending on the passage. Recognizing this deflates, in my opinion, Lundeen's emphasis on the diversity of literal interpretation.

Lundeen is not opposed to the scholarly trend of finding Reformation hermeneutics in line with the preceding tradition. For instance, he observes that Calvin is to a certain extent the outlier in refusing to make any use of multiple senses. I confess that I don't see this entirely borne out in the preceding text. Oecolampadius seemed unique among the Reformers in admitting a spiritual sense, and his spiritual sense in Isaiah 13–14 is arguably getting at the literal sense of the passage. In addition, Lundeen also notes that his chapter on the influence of medieval Jewish exegesis "bucks current scholarly trends by pointing to significant discontinuities between the exegesis of the reformers and that of their patristic and medieval Christian predecessors" (126). He also observes that those who claim that Calvin engaged in non-literal exegesis operate with a narrower conception of the literal sense than Calvin did. He does not reject their definition of the literal sense, but he does hold that they ought to make this fact clear in their discussions.

At the end of this volume Lundeen suggests other avenues for extending his research. The avenue that would most interest me would be a similar study on biblical books of genres other than prophecy. It would also be worthwhile to advance this study into the post-Reformation era. If those projects go forward, this learned, informative, and clearly written work will provide an excellent model.

**Brian C. Collins**

Biblical Worldview Lead Specialist | BJU Press

Beale, G. K., and Benjamin L. Gladd, eds. *CSB Connecting Scripture New Testament: A Study Bible of Biblical Allusions & Quotations*. Nashville: Holman, 2025. 531pp. + 21pp. (front matter) + 27pp. (back matter).

The editors of *CSB Connection Scripture New Testament* have produced an impressive version of the NT that focuses on biblical quotations, allusions, and parallels between the two Testaments. Although this volume contains 592 pages, it is relatively thin due to Holman's use of durable opaque paper and a readable 9.25-point type. Both hardcover and leather versions are available.

Each of the books of the NT in this volume contains helpful introductions, tables, and articles concerning key biblical themes that extend through both Testaments. Likewise, footnotes and cross references abound. Most notable, however, is the color-coding that exists throughout the biblical text. Blue text indicates an OT quotation, while green text points to a potential OT allusion. Beale and Gladd identify a third category flagged as a "parallel" reference, a conceptual "swath" of texts that align the NT text with the Old (vii). However, the authors rightly caution the reader to examine each potential allusion or parallel to affirm or deny the likelihood of an intentional link between the Testaments.

Although I believe that these three categories could have been better delineated, the value of having a version of the NT that marks so many potential OT references in the NT is great. I am unaware of another NT text that provides such an abundance of potential textual and conceptual references to the OT. In addition, two indices provide the reader with the added value of locating potential uses of the OT in the New in each of the books of the OT and then in each of the books of the NT. Both indices are color-coded as described above.

My generally positive review is somewhat diminished by the editors' uncritical approach to many of the texts. For instance, the editors argue that the stone of Matthew 24:2 ("not one stone will be left here on another that will not be thrown down," CSB) is an ironic allusion to the stone of Daniel 2:34–35 ("As you were watching, a stone broke off without a hand touching it, struck the statue on its feet of iron and fired clay, and crushed them. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth," xiii). Perhaps one might say that the context of judgment validates the linking of these two texts. The "stone" of Daniel, however, clearly points to the Messianic Kingdom, while the "stone" of Matthew is a common Temple stone, of which there were thousands that made up the structure.

The writers of the NT reference Psalm 118 frequently; so, it provides a good test case for Beale's and Gladd's thesis. They list twelve quotations and twenty-two allusions to Psalm 118 in the NT (539). Assuming the validity of these connections, one could conclude that the NT writers were well-acquainted with the Messianic elements of this psalm, especially as pertaining to the "rejected Cornerstone" theme.

Although each of the listed quotations of Psalm 118 appears to be a valid instance of the authors' reproducing this prior text, I detected some inadvertent errors. For one, the text indicates that Luke 13:35 cites Psalm 118:25, which should read 118:26. Additionally, the editors color-code John 12:13 as an allusion instead of a quotation. It seems clear to me that John intends to reproduce part of Psalm

118:26. Thus, the number of quotations of Psalm 118 in the NT should be thirteen. It is understandable that minor mistakes would be made in a volume like this since the editors have covered a massive amount of material.

The category of “allusions” to Psalm 118 in the NT is more problematic. Clerical errors include John 10:14, which should be 10:24, and Luke 9:21, which should read 9:22. Regarding the appropriate identification of an allusion, I would suggest that eight of the twenty-two listed are possible allusions to Psalm 118: Matthew 11:3, Mark 8:31, Luke 7:19 and 17:25, John 11:27, 1 Peter 2:4, and Revelation 19:1. The remaining supposed allusions provide unlikely connections to Psalm 118. For example, the text suggests that the “rulers of the people” in Acts 4:8 is a possible allusion to the nobles of Psalm 118:9 (“It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in nobles”). Although the word for “rulers” or “nobles” is the same in the NT and the LXX, the context of the passages is dissimilar, and the term “rulers” is quite common in Scripture (583x in the OT; 37x in the NT), thereby making it unlikely that Peter referenced Psalm 118:9 while addressing Jewish leaders.

Likewise, it is difficult to imagine that Paul had Psalm 118:25–27 in mind when he told Titus that the “grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people” (Titus 2:11). Both texts extol the arrival of salvation, but Psalm 118:25–27 does not include the scope of this salvation as for “all people.” If Paul alludes to a text in Titus 2:11, it is more likely Psalm 67:1–3, where God’s “saving power” is offered to all the nations.

Perhaps the clerical errors and unconvincing allusions to Psalm 118 in this text are exceptional; more likely, similar features will be found by the readers of this volume who are interested in how the NT writers referenced the OT. Nonetheless, in spite of these failings, I am quite happy with this publication. It is a long-awaited reference tool for the study of biblical intertextuality. The reader is only left to examine and evaluate the data.

**Neal Cushman**

Dean | BJU Seminary

Williams, Peter J. *The Surprising Genius of Jesus: What the Gospels Reveal About the Greatest Teacher*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2023. 113pp. + 22pp. (front matter) + 17pp. (back matter).

*The Surprising Genius of Jesus* makes a compelling case for the genius (or “cleverness”) of Jesus as demonstrated through his biblical-theological technique, intertextual allusions, rhetorical brilliance, and storytelling savvy. It does so primarily through an extended case study centered on Jesus’ parable of the two sons (more commonly known as the parable of the prodigal son) presented in Luke 15.

In this book, Peter Williams (principal of Tyndale House, Cambridge, chair of the international Greek Testament Project, and member of the ESV translation oversight committee) leverages the combined strengths of an articulate apologetic and a strong grasp of NT Greek and Gospels studies. Williams’s central thesis is that “Jesus should be considered a genius . . . because of the cleverness and wisdom of his teaching” (2). Williams supports and develops this theme in five major moves, each move taking one chapter.

Chapter 1, “A Brilliant Story,” explores the genius of Jesus that is discernable even from a surface reading of the story of the two sons. Williams points out Jesus’ ability to address two different audiences simultaneously with different issues and needs. “It is a powerful story in any setting for what it conveys . . . even before we consider its wider scope in handling human relationships with God” (29). But Williams points out that “it is even more powerful when considered in the context in which it is reported, with tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and scribes all present” (29). Sinners and tax collectors are invited to repent and taste of the Father’s lavish forgiveness upon the son who was “lost away from home,” while Pharisees and scribes are challenged by the negative example of the older brother who was “lost at home.” By the end of this chapter, the reader is prepared to agree with the author that “to convey all this in under four hundred words is a work of great artistry of the kind that . . . displays genius” (30). But here the book points out that “beneath the surface there are layers of deeper meaning in the story which show it to be cleverer still” (30).

Chapter 2, “Connecting with Genesis,” arguably represents the heart of the book. This substantive chapter argues that “Jesus’ story echoes details from most of the major stories in Genesis” (34). Moving from more readily apparent allusions to more nuanced or even potentially debatable points of connection, Williams argues multiple points of intentional connection between Jesus’ parable and the accounts of Jacob and Esau, Jacob and Laban, Joseph, Judah, Abraham, and the account of Cain and Abel. In thirty-three pages, Williams presents an array of lexical and thematic connections Jesus’ 400-word story makes to these major episodes across the Book of Genesis. As Williams points out, one could easily imagine a careful scribe, practiced in copying the first book of the Torah, perking his ears up at some of the allusions this chapter presents as woven throughout Jesus’ parable.

A full recapitulation of chapter 2 is neither desirable nor possible. But sampling the treatment of the first of the five Genesis narratives covered will help the reader anticipate what to expect from this key chapter. In the Genesis accounts dealing with Jacob and Esau, Williams identifies eleven areas of striking correspondence to Jesus’ parable of the two sons: (1) “a man with two sons,” (2) “a younger brother going into a far country,” (3) “the younger brother herding animals in that far country,” (4) “someone saying he is dying of hunger,” (5) “a younger brother wearing the best robes given by a

parent,” (6) “an older brother coming in from a field,” (7) “the use of the word ‘draw near’ (Luke 15:25),” (8) “an older brother being angry,” (9) “concern about an older brother losing some inheritance to a younger one,” (10) “young goats as a meal,” and (11) the wording, occurring only in these two places in the entire Bible, “ran . . . and fell on his neck and kissed him” (Luke 15:20; Gen. 33:4).

Esau’s response alluded to in connection (11) above is, to the first-time reader of Genesis, quite surprising, just as the father’s reaction in Luke 15 is a surprising response for Jesus’ audience. While this seems to connect ungodly Esau awkwardly with a God-like figure in Luke 15, this is apparently exactly the way Jacob felt about the encounter himself, for as “a careful reader of Genesis” would know, “just six verses after Esau runs and falls on Jacob’s neck and kisses him, Jacob declares that encountering Esau is like seeing the face of God (33:10)” (40).

But why would Jesus care to draw the attention of scribes and Pharisees to the story of Jacob and Esau? “If even a person like Esau . . . could accept his returning brother, how much more should the older son accept his brother?” What conclusion should the “older-brother” portion of Jesus’ audience reach? “The Pharisees and scribes should not resent that Jesus, and therefore God, welcomes tax collectors and sinners. They should not resent God’s grace shown to the undeserving or react as if they stand to lose through God’s generosity” (42).

In addition to this kind of textual and thematic work across the five major connected episodes in Genesis, chapter 2 also explores wider OT connections, as well as arguably meaningful echoes of Rabbinic parables. According to Williams, “the deeper references are . . . both an invitation and a challenge to experts in Scripture to recognize the knowledge of the storyteller and heed what he says” (66).

Chapter 3, “More Stories Inspired by the Old Testament,” explores whether other of Jesus’ parables also show “a pattern of Old Testament allusions in other stories and parables of Jesus” (67). Williams overviews fifteen other stories from various Gospels to show how they also feature strong connection to the OT, backing up the claim that “such allusions are a common feature of Gospel parables, not merely of those found in Luke’s Gospel” (87). Foreshadowing chapter 4, Williams argues: “The most natural thing is to suppose that Old Testament references go back before the written Gospels to Jesus, the teacher whose words they claim to report” (87).

In chapter 4, “Was Jesus the Genius?” Williams tackles the potential objection that the extremely clever connections between Jesus’ stories and the OT (especially in Luke) could have come from the mind of the Gospel writer. Williams successfully demonstrates that the parables recorded in Luke show strong evidence of an author who was “deeply familiar with (1) Palestine, (2) the Old Testament and (3) rabbinic ways of talking” and argues that Jesus “fits just this profile” while Luke does not (94). Williams also identifies “Six Hallmarks of Jesus” that “show a common mind behind Luke 15 and what is attributed to Jesus elsewhere especially in Matthew’s gospel” (95).

Finally, Williams briefly addresses a remaining potential challenge—how were these stories passed on until recorded in the Gospels? Williams concludes: “The stories attributed to [Jesus] in the Gospels show numerous common features and . . . are not readily explained as creations by the Gospel writers

but are easily explained as the records of a brilliant teacher with a profile that closely matches what we know about Jesus” (107).

In chapter 5, “Much More Than a Storyteller,” Williams reviews the key points of the argument and lands with a focus on the identity of Jesus himself in unity with the entire record of Scripture. The book reaches a fitting conclusion in an apologetic, evangelistic challenge. “If the storyteller Jesus Christ is God himself [as the Gospels claim], who made the world, invented language, oversaw history, and then became human to tell us about God and to rescue us from our alienation to him, then his wisdom and genius make sense. And if he is that smart and if he also loved us enough to die to save us, the only sensible thing to do is to accept him unreservedly as our teacher, guide, and Savior” (113).

*The Surprising Genius of Jesus* is an enjoyable book to read. The accessible prose, clear and persuasive tone, fascinating argument, and engagement with the details of Luke and Genesis make it easy to keep turning the page. The style gives the impression of an author who knows more than he has space to say but who understands the need to carefully guide his readership to grasp and internalize an argument, even if it means strategic repetition and restatement.

This is the type of book a specialist might consider to be *popular* and that a non-specialist might consider *academic*. Some readers might wish for fewer original language references (although these are contained and no biblical language knowledge is necessary to appreciate even the details of this book). Another set of readers may wish for deeper engagement with scholarly sources. But one strength of the book lies in the way it integrates a substantive argument with accessible presentation. Busy pastors, professors, and serious lay readers will appreciate the combination.

A key strength of this book is that it makes the reader hungry to pick up the Gospels and take a closer look at the teachings of the genius, Jesus. It will also encourage the reader to read both the Gospels and the Pentateuch through a more canonically conscious lens. Seeing Jesus as “the genius” also invites the reader to see Jesus as the master interpreter teaching and modeling the interpretive approach behind the *other* OT/NT connections in apostolic teaching.

In case the “making of many books” about the use of the OT in the NT, filled with debates and differing models, has already made the reader weary in the flesh, it is worth pointing out that this is not one of those books. The nature of the case studies in this book entirely bypasses this well-trod territory. The focus is on Jesus leveraging scriptural language, echoes, and allusions to strengthen his argument as he weaves OT narratives into his parable. The reader will look in vain for arguments that depend on a debated hermeneutical approach or systematic-theological viewpoint. Issues such as typology, levels of authorial intent, pattern-fulfillment, various versions of *sensus plenior*, etc., are not relied upon or even mentioned in the book. The material being treated and the nature of the connections being claimed simply do not call for or rely upon such concepts. While such issues have their place, it is refreshing and frankly relaxing to read a book so concerned with intertextuality yet so devoid of the knotty hermeneutical concerns that of necessity often permeate a fair bit of OT-in-the-NT literature.

This is not to say that there is nothing debatable in the book. At times the reader could be forgiven for suspecting Williams of some confirmation bias, and, in places, this reviewer scribbled “Stretch?” in the margin. For example, not all will be completely convinced by the suggestion that the collocation

of the words *goat*, *friend*, and *prostitute* in Luke 15 are designed to evoke the Judah narrative of Genesis 38 (although it is the only other place in Scripture the three words occur together). It is also possible to argue that the surface connections pointed out between Jesus' parable and Cain and Abel, though striking, could be coincidental. Other places may raise the eyebrows of skeptical readers as well. Williams seems to realize the vulnerability of some of the specific points and himself shows sensitivity to the fact that readers could legitimately quibble with some of the details without invalidating his larger argument: "Even if some of the connections explored above are explained away as common elements that occur in any story about family dynamics, many connections are striking and cluster together" (59). Elsewhere he admits the *possibility* that he may have "occasionally seen parallels that are merely coincidental" but points out that "this does not invalidate my central argument that Jesus' story contains allusions to stories right across Genesis" and argues that "it is still hard to credit all these parallels merely to hard searching" (60). This honesty makes it easier to follow and accept the general argument while marking certain "connections" for more thorough review.

In terms of evangelical commitment, the argument of the book is made possible by Williams's healthy conviction that the Gospel writers accurately transmit the teaching of Jesus. Williams argues and insists that we give Jesus credit for his faithfully transmitted teaching. And in the end, the reader's eyes are turned to Jesus Christ, the genius, the storyteller, and much more, the Savior and King who deserves our praise, trust, and devotion.

**Timothy Hughes**

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Strickland, Darby A. *When It's Trauma: A Biblical Guide to Understanding Trauma and Walking Faithfully with Sufferers*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2025. 262pp. + 46pp. (back matter).

Having counseled trauma cases—everything from abuse to combat PTSD—for over twenty-five years, I have experienced the absence of biblical writing on trauma. The recent interest in study and writing has been both refreshing and alarming—refreshing because of helpful contributions; alarming because, like most studies in soul care, the temptation to import secular worldviews into the discussion seems irresistible.<sup>1</sup> Strickland's book, another in the line of several on abuse and trauma she has authored, seeks to provide a biblical approach to counseling trauma sufferers.

Although Strickland doesn't state her thesis succinctly, her emphases in the introduction establish what she endeavors to prove: (1) Trauma is a soul-level issue that mirrors exile; (2) Christ meets sufferers in the ruins of their life; and (3) caregivers must be present with sufferers to gain their trust. Strickland structures her book in three sections: "Foundations of Care," "Wounds of Trauma," and "Hope of Restoration."

After her introduction, Strickland provides a primer on the "Terrain of Trauma" in which she sets the parameters of what trauma is and isn't. Here, she provides a description of what it means to be traumatized (16) and identifies characteristics of trauma by the wounds it inflicts and the disorientation it causes (19–20). The biblical theology she establishes in this section is helpful and sets the tone for the rest of the book in her use of the Scriptures. Here she provides examples from Psalms 22 and 88, Tamar, Elijah, Job, and the exile of Israel.

### *Foundations of Care*

In the first chapter, Strickland uses two case studies, Abby and Charlotte, to demonstrate the need for both seeing the hurt and for drawing near to sufferers. She draws her theology for this chapter from God's abiding presence with Israel (31) and several examples of Jesus' presence with the disciples and others (32–35). She ends this chapter with several encouragements to churches to evaluate their approach to those in the pews who are suffering. At the end of each chapter, she provides a reflection section using the same format for each: (1) "Seeing the Sufferer," (2) "Entering Their World," and (3) "Engaging My Own Story."

For chapter 2, Strickland focuses on providing time for the sufferer by listening and lamenting. Especially strong is a section entitled "The Gospel for Those Who Suffer" in which she offers biblical principles concerning suffering such as (1) suffering is never wasted, and (2) our presence prepares

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<sup>1</sup> One such example is the broad acceptance among believers of *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, by Bessel A. van der Kolk (New York: Penguin, 2014). Even secular authors have questioned his emphasis. For more, see Michael S. Scheeringa, *The Body Does Not Keep the Score: How Popular Beliefs About Trauma Are Wrong* (N.p.: Michael Scheeringa, 2024); Julia Shaw, *The Memory Illusion: Remembering, Forgetting and the Science of False Memory* (Toronto: Penguin Random House Canada, 2017); and Susan A. Clancy, *The Trauma Myth: The Truth About the Sexual Abuse of Children—and Its Aftermath* (New York: Basic, 2009). For biblical treatments, see Francine Tan, "A Critical Evaluation of Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score*," *The Journal of Biblical Soul Care* 7, no. 1 (Fall 2023): 23–57, available at <https://biblicalcounseling.com/resource-library/essays/a-critical-evaluation-of-bessel-van-der-kolks-the-body-keeps-the-score>.

sufferers to hear gospel truths by “embodying” these truths as we speak them (45–47). She follows this section with good descriptions of how to offer our loving presence. Here she emphasizes listening, avoiding premature solutions, serving sufferers, enduring with them, and honoring God’s pace (49–53). One additional section stresses the need to “Remember our Mission” (52).

“Laying the Foundation for Effective Care” is the focus in chapter 3. This chapter provides helpful essentials for understanding the sufferer’s situation, including providing for safety issues (60–63). Additionally, this chapter alerts the counselor to potential physiological and spiritual issues (63–66), including self-injury and suicidal ideation (65). Strickland’s emphasis in this chapter is on laying the proper foundation through building trust, knowing the person well, being aware of interventions such as EMDR (69), and remaining humble and hopeful (67–72) before arriving at right answers (73). These foundational principles are working off the theology she previously addressed from the failures of Job’s friends in chapter 1.

### *Wounds of Trauma*

Part 2 of Strickland’s book describes the wounds of trauma, beginning in chapter 4, the longest chapter, with a focus on the suffering of the body. Her stated purpose here is as follows: “Yet a large part of trauma is expressed physically. As we tend to its victims, we need to understand how God made us and how our bodies and souls interplay with each other” (78). This interaction is evident in this chapter when she addresses spiritual issues such as shame or anxiety as a person manifests them through his body. She covers a range of physical issues such as fatigue, tension, sleep problems, dissociation, digestive problems, and others (78–81). In the middle section she interacts with Scripture and cautions against over emphasizing either the spiritual or physical (83). For her final section, she provides a lengthy discussion on how trauma affects the body and brain (85–88), with the rest of the chapter devoted to how to care using Psalms 42–43 as the foundation (90–105).

In the remaining chapters of part 2, Strickland provides helpful expositions on the most common problems from trauma: shame (ch. 5), faith questions (ch. 6, one of the strongest chapters in my opinion), relational hypervigilance (ch. 7), reexperienced trauma (ch. 8), and avoidance (ch. 9). In each of these chapters, Strickland defines and explains the nature of the problems and then provides a “how to” section on helping sufferers. In many of these chapters she includes both helpful questions and principles that guide the counselor in helping the sufferer (115, 120–22, 144–45, 169, 189–92, 217–18, and 220). It is here that the biblical counselor will see the most prolific opportunities for repentance and growth in the suffering saint (223).

### *Hope of Restoration*

The final two chapters comprise counsel for sufferers. In chapter 10, Strickland focuses on the broad theme of restoration by using the Book of Ezra for her theological foundations, returning to the concept of trauma as exile. Here her emphasis on worship is important (229–32), since the imperatives of Scripture flow from the nature and redemptive work of God in our lives through Christ. We are most receptive to changes God makes in us when we admire him most. Strickland offers practical

insights here, including gentle reminders that restoration takes time and patience and that God is the one who restores (237–38).

After establishing this foundation, in chapter 11 Strickland focuses on the role of the church community via two avenues—pastors and truth blended with compassion (246–48). Here she draws on the theology of Nehemiah 3 and several NT passages such as Ephesians 4 and 1 Peter 2. She also challenges the church to be a community that both welcomes and aids in healing trauma sufferers. She explicates principles and questions here that contribute well to a church seeking to grow in this area of care (244–50).

Strickland concludes with an invitation to the wounded Christ in Isaiah 53. Here she reminds the reader that “our wounded Savior shows us that healing is not about forgetting, pretending, or moving on [all false assumptions this reviewer has encountered in counseling trauma]. It is not about becoming people who have never suffered. Healing is about being transformed—about being brought back into fellowship with our triune God” (255). This transformation she joins tightly to our union with Christ (256).

In the back matter, Strickland includes seven appendices on identifying trauma (267), a case study (269), a plan for distress (275), secondary trauma (281), exploitation and weaponization in trauma (285), empathy vs. enmeshment (291), and referring to medical professionals (297).

### *Strengths*

Strickland has provided both a helpful breakdown of trauma and biblical responses to the struggles overall. Her use of Job in capturing the spiritual and physical dynamics is quite helpful. Her organization moves logically and systematically through the various issues one encounters. I found the faith questions (ch. 6) to be most helpful since, in my experience, these are some of the largest challenges a trauma sufferer faces, i.e., questions about faith, God, and one’s relationship to him. These strengths far outweigh the weaknesses, but the weaknesses require a call for both discernment and caution.

### *Weaknesses*

While the gospel emphasis in Strickland’s conclusion was engaging and strong, I puzzled over why it would be her conclusion rather than her introduction. These strong emphases provide the necessary foundational hope for the sufferer that I believe should move forward in the counseling process. There is no greater hope for the individual than the redemptive presence of Christ in the life of the believer through the Spirit. I certainly understand the need for patience and pacing. It seems, however, Strickland would postpone the offering of hope until the counselor gains the trust of the individual. This claim is apparent when she stresses Jesus’ presence (a point I wholeheartedly promote) but seems to overlook the prophetic function of Jesus (34), since he was not only present in the storm but also challenged the disciples to greater trust (Mark 4:35–41).

In this section Strickland provides several examples of Jesus’ presence: Lazarus’ death, the Samaritan woman, the disciples in the storm, the healing of Bartimaeus, and the Upper Room

Discourse. But in each of these examples, Jesus also provided gentle correction and teaching, not just his presence. To be clear, I agree with Strickland's emphasis on Jesus' presence, including his intercessory work, as the source of great comfort in loss. The weakness I see is one of emphasis, since she acknowledges the need for instruction in later chapters. Strickland states, however, "Our role as helpers is not to *force premature hope* or spiritual growth on people but to talk patiently with them as they learn to trust again" (45, emphasis added). If I'm understanding her correctly, we are most comforting when we are present without teaching truth too soon. I agree that wisdom and tact are essential in this process, but I'm not sure how offering hope from the Scriptures can be premature. Isn't it the authority of the Word that provides the basis for the hope of his presence (Ps 130:5; Heb 13:5; 2 Pet 1:17–19)?

The second weakness is an overemphasis on the body. At the time of writing, this is the controversial issue of trauma counseling. Both secular clinicians and integrationists have placed a lot of eggs in the body basket. This emphasis has lured some biblical counselors the same direction. I appreciate Strickland's use of Psalm 42 as a theology of suffering, especially in connecting spiritual/emotional responses to what we see in the body. I agree with her assessment that there is a close connection between the body and spirit. But we should always remember that the body isn't in charge; it is the inner man that controls what our bodies are doing (Prov 4:23; Mark 7:14–23). Strickland writes, "When [sufferers'] minds and bodies are hijacked by past trauma, we want them to find refuge in the Lord so that they can come closer to experiencing the climactic, and most familiar words of Psalm 46: 'Be still, and know that I am God'" (v. 10). I understand what she means by this explanation, that is, sights, sounds, smells, etc., can trigger physical responses in sufferers. The problem, however, isn't the body but the beliefs the individual maintains that associate such elements with trauma even when trauma is no longer occurring. My goal in counseling the trauma sufferer is to disconnect their responses from the trauma through truth by targeting the person's beliefs. I suspect Strickland also shares that goal, but I believe her emphasis here places too much agency with trauma, resulting in some degree of physical determinism.

Related to this emphasis, Strickland spends several pages describing how trauma affects the various parts of the brain (86–88). Commendably, she admits that research is still young and that the data are suggestive rather than conclusive (86). Discussions of the effects of trauma on the brain, however, seem more intellectually stimulating rather than practical for counseling. Furthermore, this emphasis opens the door to a medical model for counseling trauma. In the end I say, even if these facts were true, how do we address these constituent parts of the brain? Are we certain that these parts of the brain control these responses? It seems a bit (no pun intended) like asking a computer what fragments of data are stored on which segments of the hard drive. The problem isn't where the data are stored but the nature of the data. In fairness, Strickland concludes this section with some implications for counseling (88). I assert, however, that we could better draw those conclusions from lament Psalms than from brain theory. The psalmists often struggle with their understanding of trauma, of the people who afflicted them, of the circumstances they face, overwhelming emotions, lack of trust in God and others, an incoherent timeline, etc. (see Ps 88, for example). God didn't include brain science for them to understand such struggles. He provided them, and us, with both his presence and life-sustaining

theology for their trauma and terrors. It is God's truth that renews the inner man, even while the outer man is wasting away (2 Cor 4:16).

Third, Strickland opens the door to secular and unproven therapies such as EMDR (69) and psychiatry (195, 298). There are two issues at stake in this discussion: We agree that true medical intervention is required when there are genuine organic problems, an issue that she addresses in more detail in Appendix G (297–300). Where we disagree is with unproven “medical” interventions such as EMDR or other treatments rooted in psychiatry and psychotherapy. We urge continuing to provide compassionate biblical counsel for ongoing spiritual roots, including mental and emotional needs. Biblical counseling strives for a more carefully nuanced position here.

There is much to commend in Strickland's work, but I have issued some notable cautions for biblical counselors regarding critical areas of concern. I believe her work would be much stronger if she began with a concentrated biblical and exegetical theology of suffering and trauma to lay the foundation for the praxis.

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DeYoung, Kevin. *Daily Doctrine: A One-Year Guide to Systematic Theology*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2024. 373pp. + 14pp. (front matter) + 34pp. (back matter).

In his introduction, DeYoung relates his dream of writing a book such as *Daily Doctrine* ever since he was in college. This work reflects both his interest in Christian doctrine and the need to present a wide variety of theological topics in a format that can help “busy pastors, students, leaders, and laypeople.” The unique result is a blend of a systematic- and historical-theology textbook and *Our Daily Bread*—intended to be read as a devotional companion. With a daily schedule in mind, DeYoung anticipates the reality that many readers will face; rather than 365 entries, he has written 260 entries, leaving space for his busy readers to miss two days each week. In addition, he aims to make each entry manageable in length—just one to one-and-a-half pages.

DeYoung acknowledges that his unique blend may evoke criticism from some who think the work should address topics more thoroughly or from others who believe that he addresses topics in a way that is too deep for many readers. Nevertheless, DeYoung’s work provides a unique format that invites readers to a broad series of theological conversations, suited for everyone from the novice to an “old-hand.”

DeYoung works through the 260 entries in traditional systematic-theology categories, starting with preliminary issues and the doctrine of Scripture, then moving through the doctrines of God, man and sin, covenant theology, the person and work of Jesus Christ, salvation, the church, and eschatology. Within this framework, DeYoung addresses a wide array of topics, from long-standing issues of hermeneutics and theology to contemporary issues that might not have been addressed if the book had been written ten to twenty years ago.

As a Presbyterian minister, DeYoung naturally and openly writes from a covenantal and Reformed perspective. Most Christians will find common ground on many topics, however (e.g., inerrancy, the canon, justification, and the mission of the church). Further, since his goal is to help his reader think biblically, he provides a great deal of relevant Scripture within each topic, both in how terms are defined and in how the ideas are developed. Beyond this goal, DeYoung models a traditionally Calvinistic approach to organizing the topics and analyzing various doctrines through a Reformed lens. This approach allows him to introduce (or remind) his readers of the relevance of the development of doctrine throughout history; thus, he draws attention to the value of various creeds and catechisms on a regular basis.

Nevertheless, this approach will naturally divide his readers between those who read with anticipated agreement and those who expect to find areas of disagreement. Reformed believers will find succinct entries that introduce, define, and defend the Reformed view on topics such as the relationship between Israel and the church, the scope of the atonement, reprobation, and the recipients of baptism. Given the length of each entry, non-Reformed readers should not expect much treatment of non-Reformed perspectives on these topics, although DeYoung does at times anticipate and provide brief answers to arguments against Reformed positions.

The titles of the various entries vary from common theological terms (e.g., “Effectual Calling,” “Hypostatic Union,” “Millennial Views”), to longer descriptions (e.g., “The Newness of the New

Covenant,” “The Law and the Christian,” “Church Officers in the New Testament Church”), to questions (e.g., “Is Predestination Fair?” “Is Every Sin the Same in God’s Eyes?” “Does James Contradict Paul?”). Some entry titles demonstrate DeYoung’s desire to increase the theological vocabulary of some of his readers (e.g., “Aseity,” “*Perichoresis*,” “Middle Knowledge,” “*Berith* and *Diatheke*”). In these cases, DeYoung provides clear definitions, from either Scripture or from their historical use as appropriate. In such entries, readers will perhaps learn new terms for somewhat familiar concepts; in others, they will likely be introduced to entirely new concepts (with entirely new terms), depending on their theological background and knowledge.

Many entries deal with common theological topics that should unite orthodox believers across denominational lines. In some cases, however, he is silent on topics and terms while addressing key terms and passages that could easily have been addressed. His entries on Scripture—dealing with the topics of inspiration, inerrancy, and the canon—provide an excellent summary and defense of Scripture on these topics. Nevertheless, DeYoung provides no entries dealing with the preservation of Scripture or the reliability of its transmission. Given both the biblical data and the Bible’s history on these points, one or two entries on these topics would certainly remind the reader of the scriptural and historical defense of the reliability and authority of Scripture in these critical areas.

Similarly, DeYoung includes several entries on human origins. For day 63, he explains and defends the idea that the days of Genesis 3 are best understood as twenty-four-hour periods, and for day 64, he emphasizes the critical importance of Adam being an historical (rather than a mythological or merely literary) figure. These entries, along with some others surrounding it, provide a scriptural and rational basis for rejecting the basic tenets of theistic evolution, particularly attempts to make the theory fit within Scripture. However, DeYoung does not name evolution or theistic evolution in this section (and there are no entries for these terms in the index).

Despite omitting mention of some controversies, DeYoung provides some clear arguments in entries on contentious contemporary issues. On days 75 and 76, he deals directly and clearly with the biblical basis for recognizing two distinct genders (both in their distinctive bodies and roles) and marriage (as a permanent union whereby God intends the role of a wife to complement her husband). On day 77, he tackles the issue of transgenderism, drawing from Scripture and the previous two entries to conclude that “we do not have an inalienable right to do whatever we want with our physical selves,” applying this from how we attire ourselves to what we do with our God-given, biological differences.

In entry 179, DeYoung tackles the question of the “New Perspective on Paul,” acknowledging that while recent writers (James Dunn and N. T. Wright) have drawn proper attention to the “Jewishness of the New Testament,” they have nonetheless blurred key doctrines, particularly the basis for how God imputes Christ’s righteousness to sinners, both in the present and the future. On the topic of universalism (day 243), although he does not name any figure more recent than Origen, he is clearly addressing a present, forceful undermining of a clear biblical doctrine. Once he gets to annihilationism (day 244), he does identify contemporary advocates, including P. E. Hughes and John Stott. It is particularly in topics such as these that DeYoung’s appeal to historical doctrine comes through, albeit in ways that most Christians will agree with. In such cases, DeYoung argues, Christians

must stand with the “author of Christianity . . . in spite of selfish prejudices and appeals to human sentiment” (352).

In this vein, on days 191 through 195 DeYoung provides both an excellent summary of the doctrine of the church, dealing with the nature, unity, holiness, and catholicity of the church. He argues that the oneness of the church does not require fellowship with anyone who claims to be Christian, stating that “if we do not share ‘one faith’ with Mormons or liberals or Unitarians (and we do not), then we have no unity to maintain” (280). However, he omits any mention of how Christians, even within the Reformed tradition, have attempted to apply these principles of unity and holiness. In light of his appeals to historical doctrine in other areas, the omission is glaring. Even Martin Luther—despite being cited on a number of doctrinal issues—is not specifically credited with his critical protest against the heresies of the Roman Catholic Church. J. Gresham Machen likewise receives no mention despite being a clear historical example (within DeYoung’s own theological tradition) of delineating clear lines of fellowship between truth and error.

Further, DeYoung acknowledges the basis for such application in both moral and doctrinal arenas: “According to the apostle Paul, some factions—when the result of moral laxity or theological heterodoxy—can be an occasion for true Christians and true churches to stand apart from counterfeits (1 Cor 11:19)” (280). But other passages that could provide the basis for such actions (Gal 1:8–9; 2 Cor 6:1–7:1; 2 John 7–11) receive either little or no attention with regards to what a believer should do when he finds himself among professing believers who have chosen to violate the moral or doctrinal boundaries found in God’s Word.

The simplest approach to a work such as *Daily Doctrine* is to recognize what it attempts to accomplish rather than what it does not. If someone wants more in-depth treatment on topics, there are already many fine (and lengthy) works available. If someone wants a basic devotional, that space is similarly well-populated. Christians who want an introduction—or a review—on a wide variety of theological topics will benefit from many of the entries, although non-Reformed believers will quickly notice that the selection and treatment of topics reflect Reformed doctrine in soteriology and a covenantal approach to ecclesiology. (In this light, if someone from another theological perspective decided to produce a work uniquely for their own tradition within Protestant Christianity, DeYoung’s work provides a helpful template of topics for doing so).

DeYoung’s greatest strength in *Daily Doctrine* is his succinct biblical and historical treatment of a range of interesting theological and contemporary issues. The most notable weakness—perhaps inherent in its purpose—is that the work aims primarily for the head. Although some entries touch on matters of the heart, the work as a whole tends to omit or bypass practical implications and applications. A second edition that adds such material—while providing a succinct treatment of these topics, if that is possible—would increase this work’s value to any reader who wants to know God with his head and follow the Lord with his heart.

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Eveson, Philip H. *Baptised with Heavenly Power: The Holy Spirit in the Teaching and Experience of D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones*. Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2025. 393pp. + 26pp. (back matter).

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was one of the leading evangelical voices of the twentieth century in the United Kingdom particularly but also around the world. The study of his views of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is a fascinating but controversial part of his heritage.<sup>1</sup> Philip Eveson offers a careful and sympathetic overview of Lloyd-Jones's views, a study which one would probably not call "critical" but which is still honest in its approach. The structure of the book shows the author's concerns. The subtitle, *The Holy Spirit in the Teaching and Experience of D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones*, reveals his concern for the role of experience both theologically and personally in understanding Lloyd-Jones's pneumatology. The work divides into four parts—"Theological Background," "Theology of the Holy Spirit," "Revival and the Holy Spirit," "Preaching and the Holy Spirit"—with major analysis coming in the last three sections.

There is much both enriching and informative about the book. The author helpfully explores Lloyd-Jones's Welsh background. Not only does he deal with Lloyd-Jones's personal biography, but he also provides a full discussion of the overall Welsh context going back to the Evangelical Awakening. Eveson demonstrates how this Welsh history is important in understanding the development of Lloyd-Jones's ideas. In addition, he provides two valuable appendices. The first is a previously unpublished address by Lloyd-Jones on Evan Roberts and the Welsh revival; this essay not only reveals aspects of Lloyd-Jones's approach to revival but also stands by itself as a useful introduction to Roberts and that awakening. The other appendix is a selection from a personal journal that Lloyd-Jones kept for a time that shows how his concerns about the Holy Spirit were far from merely academic but were the burden of his heart and soul.

Eveson addresses several concerns in this study. A key part of his argument, as odd as it sounds to those familiar with the Welsh preacher, is that Lloyd-Jones was genuinely Reformed. He answers charges that Lloyd-Jones's pneumatology put him outside the bounds of Reformed orthodoxy. The author shows how Lloyd-Jones's ideas are rooted in the approaches of some Puritans to the doctrines of the Spirit. He may not be typical of Reformed expositors on this point, but neither does he stand as unique. The greater question is whether Lloyd-Jones is biblical in his views, and that issue takes up a much larger portion of the book's discussion.

Eveson also stresses a concern with revival as a major component of Lloyd-Jones's theology. This topic is a natural extension of pneumatology, as the nature of the Holy Spirit's work is a major concern in discussing the nature—even validity—of revival. Lloyd-Jones in fact bemoaned the lack of the discussion of revival among theologians, with the exception of J. C. Ryle, James Buchanan, George

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<sup>1</sup> One can start delving into this topic by reading Lloyd-Jones himself in *The Baptism and Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996). For secondary studies other than Eveson's, see Michael Eaton, *Baptism with the Spirit: The Teaching of Martyn Lloyd-Jones* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1989), or my own briefer study, "Pentecostal Puritan? D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones on the Baptism of the Holy Spirit," *Journal of Biblical Theology & Worldview* 5, no. 2 (2025): 41–60.

Smeaton, and of course Jonathan Edwards, who is likely the most prominent theologian in church history to address the theological nature and meaning of revival.

Of course, it is the details of Lloyd-Jones's view of the work of the Holy Spirit that take the central place in Eveson's discussion. The meaning of "baptism" of the Spirit is central to the analysis (cf. 145–46). Lloyd-Jones, for example, denied that Spirit baptism always referred to conversion, rejecting the idea that Christians already have all of the Holy Spirit they will ever possess and that their need is to surrender fully so that they can enjoy what they already have (193). Instead, he argued vigorously for particular experiences of baptism or fillings (the two terms seem interchangeable in Lloyd-Jones's thought), experiences that were not permanent and could be repeated.

Considering Lloyd-Jones's work as an exegete, it is no surprise that discussions of scriptural evidence take a central place in the discussion. Eveson surveys Lloyd-Jones's examination of relevant passages throughout the Bible, although unfortunately there is no Scripture index. One point of contention is the role of the Book of Acts. Are passages in Acts descriptive or prescriptive? Those opposed to Lloyd-Jones's approach to spiritual gifts tend to see references to Spirit baptism in Acts as simply Scripture's descriptions of events that happened in the first century. Lloyd-Jones argues that they are prescriptive, recording matters that are still normative for the church.

The place of experience in Lloyd-Jones's thought shows his view of assurance. He recognized the importance of views other than his own. Assurance may be a deduction from the promises of God or may be validated by the "tests of life" as in 1 John, the fruit of one's life providing evidence for assurance. But Lloyd-Jones believed the highest form of assurance was the direct testimony of the Spirit to the believer.

Some of Lloyd-Jones's arguments are less than convincing. He said that the reason the NT never urged people to be baptized in the Spirit was that believers were already evidently baptized with the Spirit. As to why John in his epistles used, in the words of Jason Meyer, "lower forms of assurance" based on matters such as the tests of life instead of experiences of the Spirit, John wrote for "a later generation of believers" whose fervor had cooled.

Eveson traces the outworking of these views first in Lloyd-Jones's approach to revival but even more in his preaching. Lloyd-Jones appears to model the classic evangelical understanding of the Holy Spirit in the ministry of the church. One may not presume the Spirit's work in preaching but must seek the blessing of the Holy Spirit every time one enters a pulpit.

Eveson observes, "Lloyd-Jones's calling was not to write systematic or even biblical theology works on the Holy Spirit, preaching, and revival" (325). Eveson's treatment bears out this point. Lloyd-Jones often touched on the subject of the Holy Spirit but not in a progressively structured manner. Rather as the occasion arose, such as when pneumatology related to a passage he was expositing or when he was discussing historical manifestations of revival, he delved into the topic. I wonder whether this tendency could be a source of confusion. To some extent readers must construct a "systematic theology" of Lloyd-Jones's pneumatology on their own.

Of course, every study will leave some matters for further consideration. Does Lloyd-Jones's stress on revival raise questions about the value of the regular means of grace? Eveson's discussion on 217 at least seems to refute or modify that criticism. What about Lloyd-Jones's apparent diminishing of the

importance of objective evidences of assurance? Was he simply correcting those who avoid subjective approaches because they seem too “Pentecostal,” or did he reduce the value of such evidences?

Certainly, on the whole Eveson’s book provokes thought on the subject of Lloyd-Jones’s views on pneumatology and their ramifications. Furthermore, the work’s tone makes it not only historical informative but also edifying.

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Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024. 424pp. + 52pp. (back matter).

Few books in evangelical biblical studies can be called a magnum opus, as this book can; few raise readerly expectations to a fever pitch, as this book did; even fewer satisfy those expectations—as, indeed, this book did not.

Those expectations came in part through the promise in the title: Kevin Vanhoozer, the great hermeneutician, was going to deliver to serious believing readers of Scripture a *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, a hallway where the various denominations and reading cultures (more on that term in a moment) who read Scripture might find some hermeneutical unity amidst our never-ending theological cacophony. “I argue,” he says, “that interpreters need to leave their interpretive silos and mingle in the hall to converse with those who read the Bible differently” (xxi). He was going to accomplish this feat via the method in his subtitle: *Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically*. And as any reader of Vanhoozer knows, he was going to use verbal panache unlike that of any other writer. This humble reviewer was very, very eager to read this book.

What came when the volume was delivered was a wide-ranging read of nearly 400 pages. A 2,000-word review must content itself with the high points. And the low points. There were, for this reader, two key promises Vanhoozer made that he failed to fulfill, two expectations which were left unsatisfied. I will discuss these before offering sincere praise for this incredibly stimulating book.

First, Vanhoozer promises to rescue the reputation of the fathers as careful readers of Scripture. This is, admittedly, not an explicit promise but rather a clear implication of the rhetorical structure of the work. Vanhoozer, a leader in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture movement, brilliantly lays bare the two “reading cultures” that are often found fighting in the mere Christian hallway rather than working together: biblical studies and theology. Each of these reading cultures (one thinks of Stanley Fish’s “interpretive communities”) has its own rules and expectations for the hermeneutical task; “each culture devalues or perhaps dismisses the contribution of the other” (50).

Can the two be unified? Vanhoozer says that his own “transfiguring interpretation,” his “grammatical-eschatological exegesis,” is “shorthand for the attempt to combine scholarly exegesis, with its philological attention to the letter, and spiritual interpretation, with its concern for reading in such a way that readers understand in ways that conform them to the image of Christ” (25). Vanhoozer continues (25):

What earlier generations called the spiritual sense is, according to the view set forth here, the “transfigural” sense, namely, the glory of the literal sense. To see Christ in the letter is not to see something “other” in the text, as in “allegorical” interpretation; Rather, it is to see “how much more” there is to the literal referent. Transfigural interpretation stands for the whole hermeneutical process of glorifying the biblical letter for the sake of the reader’s glorification.

Perhaps Vanhoozer did not intend this, but his subsequent forays into precritical interpretations and his regular reminders that these earlier readers brought a better frame of reference than so many of us moderns, a reference beyond Charles Taylor’s “immanent frame”—all of this led me to expect a

defense of at least some of the fathers' allegorizations. Vanhoozer does helpfully point out that "even Origen distinguished between proper and improper figural exegesis" (166). Augustine, too, had hermeneutical controls. "Mere Christian readers have always worked with some such distinction," Vanhoozer says (166).

But this promise remained unfulfilled for me. I still react to far too many comments in InterVarsity's valuable Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture with the very syllables Vanhoozer uses to describe me: "Nothing bothers seriously literal interpreters more than the arbitrary lists of correspondences that allegorical interpretation apparently licenses ("This means *whaaat?*")" (165). I waited the length of the book to be told what I was missing; I highlighted countless lines full of wisdom, but I did not finally come to a decidedly positive view of the fourfold sense or of ancient Christian allegoristic practices.

Second, Vanhoozer promises to reveal the transfiguration as a kind of hermeneutical key to the "grammatical-eschatological exegesis" he argues for in the text. He makes numerous provocative and insightful connections between the light of Christ's face and the task of reading the Bible; there is a highly pleasing amount of clever wordplay regarding the common "light" metaphor in Scripture. I agree that Jesus' transfiguration showed off the truth of what he was all the time (268), much as moments of illumination while reading God's word only reveal light that was already being shed on our paths whether we saw it or not.

But Vanhoozer raises an expectation that Jesus' transfiguration would unlock all of Scripture. "In looking back to the Law and the Prophets, and forward to Jesus' exaltation, the transfiguration is an interpretive crux of the gospel narratives" (267). I wrote in the margin: "Really?" I admit that Vanhoozer brings forth stimulating quotations in which other writers have seen unexplored depths in the important events at Mount Tabor that all three Synoptics relate (Matt 17 | Mark 9 | Luke 9). But I prefer to see the passage as a profound illustration (note the "lustre" in the middle of that word) of what grammatical-eschatological exegesis can and should do, not a guide for how to do it.

Now, I am eager to agree with Vanhoozer when he says that we ought to engage in interpretation that "starts with the letter of the text and with the way the authors, human and divine, make the words run"—but does not stop there. Such exegesis "gives a thick description of the Bible's literal sense" (179) by reminding us that the "figures" in Scripture have ultimate eschatological referents. The words run to an end point: that God—in Christ, through the Spirit—may be all in all. I agree that the OT prophets could know the sense of what they were saying without necessarily knowing the referents. Vanhoozer sees in Isaiah's Servant Songs, for example, not a *sensus plenior* (a fuller sense) but a *referens plenior* (137) and a *sensus splendidior* (269)—a fuller referent and a "shining sense," namely Jesus Christ. But I found concrete specifics to be somewhat lacking in Vanhoozer's book. Granted, we should read the OT in the light of Christ. And the *sensus literalis* of a divine-human text can include eschatological referents, a spiritual sense, because God can mean more than his inspired writers do. But what makes for bad figural readings? This was left less than fully clear.

The major example of good figural reading that Vanhoozer adduces—at the very end of the book—felt like low-hanging fruit. It was the Song of Songs. But what about the Minor Prophets?

What about Genesis 3:15? Vanhoozer offers helpful categories for understanding these passages but little guidance for how to choose which categories apply.

I struggled to wrap my mind around this book as a whole. Academic reviewers are not supposed to admit such weakness, but I choose to say it this way rather than to criticize Vanhoozer for somehow failing—because I have immense respect for him. *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* is bursting with insight and quotable lines. Because I cannot with honesty point to a clear through-line, I will instead finish this review by simply noting individual instances of insight I appreciated. I will mention five out of literally hundreds. This is an experience I have had with several of Vanhoozer’s books: the sum of the parts adds up to more than the whole.

First, Vanhoozer’s concept of “answerability” accords well with the morality of knowledge I have already come to see in Jesus’ rhetorical question to the Pharisees, “Have you not read . . . ?” Christians are the New Covenant people; when God addresses us in Scripture, we are accountable to respond as young Samuel did: “Speak Lord, for your servant hears.”

Right reading is a [here Vanhoozer quotes Chretien] “process that requires a particular attention, vigilance, and availability.” These are not steps in a method but interpretive virtues: dispositions of the mind and heart that arise from a deep desire for understanding and for doing justice to the voice of the author, an author. No single method can guarantee right reading. Right reading requires right-hearted readers. (18–19)

Like his apparent ally, Iain Provan, Vanhoozer calls for “right readers reading rightly.” Good interpretation arises from desire, from love.

Second, Vanhoozer makes more brilliant uses of C. S. Lewis than simply echoing his famous book title (itself an echo of a line from Puritan Richard Baxter). Vanhoozer writes, with clear allusion to Lewis’s *An Experiment in Criticism*, “Instead of judging ‘right readers’ or ‘right readings’ on the basis of the critical methods they use, I propose *judging the rightness of critical methods by the kind of theological readings, readers, and reading cultures they beget*” (5). This point is profound, and it is (I judge) empirically observable in the various Christian communions that Vanhoozer hopes to help bring together through his work. I cannot say that Catholicism and Orthodoxy hold no appeal—clearly, many intelligent people with apparently sincere religious faith find each compelling. And Reformation Protestantism has plenty of flaws, of whom I am chief. But truly evangelical reading methods have produced better Bible-reading cultures than those of Catholicism and Orthodoxy. This feels indisputable to me.

Third, and following immediately on from the previous point, I definitely feel the tension between the two reading communities of biblical studies and theology, and it was helpful to have this tension named—and to have a solution described for me: “I define a *bad* exegetical method as one that forbids, forestalls, or frustrates any theological reading of the Bible, and a *good* exegetical method as one that is open to, facilitates, or necessitates some kind of theological reading” (5). Reading Vanhoozer reminded me to believe that if Scripture cannot be broken, neither can good theology. He pushed me to connect my examination of the biblical trees to the synthesis of the theological forest, and vice versa.

Fourth, Vanhoozer has picked up—perhaps due to his attention to postmodern theorists—some of the cast of mind of Stanley Fish, mentioned above; and one very Fishian point I found highly provocative and insightful came in a quotation Vanhoozer gives about typology and allegory. Vanhoozer quotes Peter Martens in a journal article on that topic: “The emerging consensus is that ‘typology and allegory are *competing* forms of non-literal exegesis, the former the successful variety, the latter its unsuccessful, non-literal twin” (163). This helpfully clarified my still-in-process feelings about the typological interpretations of influential (and clearly very knowledgeable and godly) contemporary exegetes such as Jim Hamilton and Mitchell Chase, both of Southern Seminary. Fish would observe that “typology” is not a neutral category that “sits above the fray, monitoring its progress and keeping the combatants honest.” No, typology is “right there in the middle of the fray, an object of contest that will enable those who capture it to parade their virtue at the easy expense of their opponents: we’re for [Christological interpretation] and you are for [unfettered hermeneutical flights of fancy].”<sup>1</sup> I believe in the existence of OT types and NT antitypes; it is simply helpful to be reminded that the line between typology and allegory is both blurry and contested.

Fifth and finally, I believe I will from now on style myself a “grammatical-eschatological” interpreter. As with Vanhoozer’s provocative self-designation—one I share—of “reformed catholic” (note the lower-case *c!*), Vanhoozer’s “grammatical-eschatological exegesis” is a playful and memorable and counter-intuitive pointer to important truths. I am not stuck in Taylor’s immanent frame or Schaeffer’s lower story. Though it is true that the Bible records the historical intentions of real writers in history who used linguistic forms accessible through historical study, and though it is true that a major aim of my interpretation is to read the Bible as it was read by its intended (historical) readers, the Bible is divine address that can and must be read in light of the future Trinitarian glories to which it has always pointed. Some people read the Bible and come away with their faces dulled by over-attention to historical tabulation: *So and so begat so and so, who begat so and so; yawn*. But I wish to come away from the Bible with my face shining like Moses’, shining like someone who has beheld the glory of God in the face of Christ, and who is changed into that same image from glory to glory.

Kevin Vanhoozer is an expert at prolegomena, a genre of theological writing I love. I do think readers need his words to run further: we need some *legomena*. I would like to see Vanhoozer cash out his reading strategies with more exegesis. But till that day, I remain grateful for his work.

A small postscript about Vanhoozer’s witticisms: the clever references that only certain people will get, the fascination with metaphor and wordplay—these feel genuine to me, and not ostentatious. They let the reader into the workings of a mind that delights in God’s good gifts of allusion and paronomasia. I commend Vanhoozer for writing in this way and his editors for letting him.

## Mark Ward

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Fish, *The Trouble with Principle* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 16 (interpolations my own).