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of Theology and Politics

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The Evangelical Review of Theology and Politics

Volume 8
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Edited by
Stephen M. Vantassel
& P. H. Brazier

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The *Evangelical Review of Theology and Politics* subscribes to the historic decisions of the early church councils. We hold dearly to the deity of Christ, the virgin conception, salvation through Jesus Christ, and the Trinity. We also believe in the unity of Scripture and consider the Bible as the final authority on all issues of faith and practice. This high view of Scripture requires submissions to be underpinned by a thoughtful biblical and theological analysis. The Editors also welcome non-Evangelical contributors to submit critiques of Evangelical political and social thought, providing they are suitably respectful of our values and beliefs, and that submissions are of interest and relevance to the aims and readership of the journal. Articles appearing in the journal do not necessarily reflect the views of the Editors.

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(Published August 17, 2020)

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(Published October 26, 2020)



Introduction

Stephen M. Vantassel

About

The Evangelical Review of Theology and Politics is an online journal. All articles and reviews are published online as PDF files, and are downloadable.

All articles and reviews are published in real time. Once peer reviewed and typeset they are immediately published online. This takes the place of a printed journal. All material can be printed and bound in a folder for future reference. This means there is no delay between acceptance and publication of an article: the material becomes available immediately to the academic and Church communities.

What you have here are the articles, review articles, and reviews from 2020 collected together in a single edition for subscribers to print-off, or consult in electronic mode on Kindle or an e-Book reader.

In addition all past volumes of The Evangelical Review of Society and Politics are available for subscribers from the website: www.theevangelicalreview.net.

The Evangelical Review of Theology and Politics is a peer-reviewed,

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The Evangelical Review of Society and Politics and *The Evangelical Review of Theology and Politics*, are international peer-reviewed journals exploring Evangelical issues from an interdisciplinary perspective. The purpose of the journal is to bring an international and scholarly Evangelical analysis to bear upon various social and political issues of national and international interest. The Editors are committed to presenting the full spectrum of Evangelical thought to provide readers (whether Evangelical or those analysing Evangelical phenomena) with thoughtful, scholarly debate and original research that is biblically based and theologically sound.

Core Values

The Evangelical Review of Theology and Politics subscribes to the historic decisions of the early church councils. We hold dearly to the deity of Christ, the virgin conception, salvation through Jesus Christ, and the Trinity. We also believe in the unity of Scripture and consider the Bible as the final authority on all issues of faith and practice. This high view of Scripture requires submissions to be underpinned by a thoughtful biblical and theological analysis. The Editors also welcome non-Evangelical contributors to submit critiques of Evangelical political and social thought, providing they are suitably respectful of our values and beliefs, and that submissions are of interest and relevance to the aims

and readership of the journal. Articles appearing in the journal do not necessarily reflect the views of the Editors.

Submissions

Scholarly submissions that are suitably respectful of the Evangelical tradition are invited from across the disciplinary spectrum. Given the broad and interdisciplinary nature of the subject matter covered by the journal, contributors should refer to our core values and submission instructions, which provide further details of material suitable for inclusion.

Intending authors should see our guidance notes for articles, review articles, and reviews and use an electronic submission form:

https://www.evangelicalreview.net/ter_authors.html

Evangelical Review of Theology and Politics
Articles





Pannenberg's Trinitarian Theology and the Use of Theological Sources

Jae Yang

KEYWORDS:

| Sources | Pannenberg |
| Trinity | Scripture | Christ |

ABSTRACT:

In this paper, I address the problem of determining which traditional sources (scripture, reason, tradition, experience) are authoritative in the construction of theology. The solution, I suggest, is not favouring one source against other, but including them all in a holistic and mutually affirming manner. To do so, I apply Wolfhart Pannenberg's trinitarian theological method of part and whole, and particular and universal. In Pannenberg's theology, Christ is both the norm of revelation and the agent of self-differentiation. Therefore, with Christ as the norm, I relativize theological sources as contextual revelations of Christ based on context. While I affirm Christ as the source of self-differentiation, I also affirm the universalizing ministry of the Holy Spirit. My hope is that theology will focus less attention on theological sources and determining which source is authoritative, and focus more on the God who reveals. If all of history itself (including all of the traditional Christian sources) is affirmed as a theological source, God's omnipotence, eternity, and glory will be all the more glorified...

INTRODUCTION

Theological prolegomenon is constitutive of any coherent theological systematization. Theology proper, defined as the study of God, implies a kataphatic posture relative to the works and attributes of God, for human concepts and expressions are said to say something positive. Among others, the systematic theologian uses historical, exegetical, and linguistic methods to articulate a larger philosophic worldview¹ apologetically relevant to a *Sitz im Leben*. Part and parcel to theological method, and the primary focus of this paper, are theological sources. Where does the theologian mine the data she subsequently selects, uses, interprets, and applies in her context? Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience are traditionally posited as primary sources. But herein lies the difficulty in systematic theology. Methods and sources are many, but a clear and consensus voice remains elusive. Theologians are increasingly methodologists, who, according to one ethicist, are preoccupied with clearing their throats, and not using it; the throat clearing goes on on for so long that the audience loses interest.² But it seems theology is not only preoccupied with throat clearing but determining which throat to clear in the first place.

The purpose of this paper is not to adjudicate the various sources but to subsume them under a higher norm. This paper assumes that the primary norm of Christian theology is neither scripture, tradition, culture, nor experience, but Christ. Utilizing Wolfhart Pannenberg's trinitarian theology in which part and whole dialectically interact and supplement one another, I argue that the self-differentiation of the second person of the Trinity in the economy which witnesses to Christ's eternal differentiation also makes possible the incorporation of the various sources as they progressively, and contextually, reveal differentiated parts of the one

1 For instance, postmodern, postcolonial, postliberal, fundamentalist, or existential.

2 Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 163.

revelation. Moreover, I also consider the Spirit and its unifying (making whole) role in history. For Pannenberg, the Holy Spirit is not simply an external divine inspiration of sources, but a “force field” already inherent and active within creation. This, I argue, broadens the potential source of theological knowledge to everything. And everything as a potential source means mental energy can be refocused from methodological throat clearing to the constructive theological task itself.

WHAT ARE SOURCES AND NORMS?

Before I do all that, I will define what sources are and how they adjudicate Christian theology. I use James Cone's definition as he offers a helpful distinction between sources and the norms that govern them. For Cone, “Sources are the relevant data for the theological task, whereas the norm determines how the data will be used. It is often the case that different theologies share the same source, and it is the theological norm which elevates one particular source (or sources) to a predominant role.” To illustrate his definition, Cone exemplifies two leading theologians, Karl Barth and Paul Tillich. Both theologians share sources (Bible and culture), but each theologian respectively assigns one source a higher normative status than the other. Barth norms the Bible; Tillich norms culture.³ For Cone, the uniqueness of a theological project is not necessarily the source, but the norm that interprets it. Although “sometimes it is possible to perceive the norm of a particular theology by an evaluation of the selection and analysis of its sources... this is not always the case, because most theologies share common sources.”⁴ Thus, the foundational question to ask in theological construction is which norms are authoritative.

Roger Olson identifies several authoritative sources in Christian theology. “While there is no uniform agreement about the sources and

3 James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 22-23.

4 *Ibid.*, 27.

norms of Christian theology for Christian belief, a rough consensus has developed...that there are *four main specific sources and norms* properly used by Christian theologians...scripture, tradition, reason and experience.”⁵ Among the four, Olson upholds scripture as the primary “common ground” of all Christian methodologies with a “special status of authority for determining who God is and what God wants with people ... scripture may be the sole supreme source and norm for Christian belief but it is never alone.”⁶

Similar to Cone, Olson’s account delineates primary (scripture) and secondary (everything else) sources in Christian theology. But as Cone’s analysis indicates, theologies sharing a primary source (in this case the Bible) does not necessarily entail that scripture acts as the primary norm. As all Christian theology ostensibly upholds the authority of scripture, the issue is one of hermeneutics. Which source is the norm, the hermeneutical lens by which one interprets the primary source of scripture? Is the norm scripture self-reflexively communicating itself? Tradition? Reason? Culture? As Cone indicates:

The theological norm is the hermeneutical principle which is decisive in specifying how sources are to be used by rating their importance and by distinguishing relevant data from irrelevant. For example, most theologians would agree that the Bible is important for the work of theology. But there are sixty-six books in the Bible, and how are we going to decide which books are more important than others? The answers to this question range from the fundamentalist’s verbal-inspiration view to the archliberal view that the Bible is merely one of many records of religious experiences. In all cases, the importance and use of the Bible are determined by the theological norm which is brought to the scripture. Theologians with a kerygmatic consciousness would like to think that the norm arises from scripture itself, but this is not always easy to determine.⁷

5 Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 57-58.

6 *Ibid.*, 57.

7 Cone, *Black Theology*, 37.

Cone identifies black experience along with biblical revelation as the norm and source of his theology.⁸ Another biblical theologian is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who, though critical of the androcentric “kyriarchy” of certain sections of scripture, still emphasizes the norm of female experience⁹ along with “the Bible as a source of empowerment.”¹⁰ Heiko Oberman identifies two types of tradition in the Roman Catholic Church. Tradition I represents scripture as the final norm; Tradition II represents the dual authority of scripture and the church.¹¹ Even in Tradition II, the authority of scripture is necessary. Adolf Harnack, who demythologizes the gospel into a “simple gospel” of love, still sees scripture as holding the kernel of the true gospel.¹² In these theologies, the focus is not on scriptural authority, but the source that normatively interpret scripture. Scripture is interpreted via tradition, reason, experience, or scripture itself, or specifically, as a verbally inspired document, a witness to liberation, a feminist source of empowerment, and a source of inerrant and propositional truths among others.

But in a postmodern and pluralistic milieu the determination of the norm can become problematic. Anthony Thiselton thus comments, “All claims to knowledge, indeed what is deemed to count as knowledge, arises only from within some given social tradition.”¹³ Moreover, Sallie McFague argues that theological metaphors and models are useful only insofar as they are ‘shocking,’ that is, relevant.¹⁴ Theological models in

8 Ibid., 38.

9 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2015), 17.

10 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), xiii.

11 Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Briel and Late Medieval Nominalism*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 371-373.

12 “The Debate on the Critical Historical Method: Correspondence between Adolf von Harnack and Karl Barth,” in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology, Vol. 1*, ed. James M. Robinson (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1968), 166-174.

13 Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Harper Collins, 1992), 395.

14 Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 35.

one context do not easily translate onto another and “each generation must venture through an analysis of what fulfillment could and must mean for its own time, the best way to express that claim.”¹⁵ In a relativistic culture how do we discern truth? If all sources and norms are particular manifestations of context, is truth revelation impossible?

I disagree with McFague’s call to replace traditional models and sources deemed anachronistic¹⁶ for two thousand years of theological history should not just be discarded. Thus, my proposal is as follows. If the norm is Jesus, less energy will be spent qualitatively determining which source is primary, or contextually relevant, in interpreting scripture. Instead, the various sources will quantitatively reveal parts of the norming norm that is Jesus as interpreters interact with the biblical text. Applying this to theological sources, each part (source) will be a contextual instrument that reveals parts of God’s revelation through Christ. In this model, revelation discerned via sources do not compete for normativity but are part of the greater whole. Information discerned via particular sources are provisionally normative revelation relevant to a particular cultural or historical context or even the type of knowledge communicated (e.g. propositional, experiential, aesthetic, spiritual, etc.), progressively building toward a greater knowledge of Christ which then retroactively clarifies the initial parts. In sum, I agree with Thiselton’s hermeneutical diagnosis. But as an alternative to McFague, I propose the dialectical and mutually affirming interplay of part and whole, and particular and universal of Pannenberg’s trinitarian theology. God is “the unifying unity of the totality of the finite,”¹⁷ the “fundamental ontological vision” is a “differentiated totality” in which parts are not eliminated but affirmed in relation to the whole.¹⁸ The dialectical interplay between part

15 Ibid., x-xi.

16 Ibid., xi.

17 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 143.

18 Christiaan Mostert, *God and the Future: Wolfhart Pannenberg’s Eschatological Doctrine of God* (London: T & T Clark, 2002), 88.

and whole preserves not only the integrity of provisional revelations via specific sources but affirms finitude itself in addition to the transcendent norm that is Jesus.

THE TRINITARIAN ONTOLOGY OF ECONOMIC PART/WHOLE

Pannenberg's part and whole relationship is supported by the self-differentiated (part) but united (whole) relationship of the three persons of the Trinity as each member is unique but also united into one divine essence.¹⁹ In creating the world, God turns outward. Subsequently, the unique identity of the Father as monarch, divine, and father is conditionally dependent on economic happenings. According to Pannenberg, "The action of the one God in relation to the world is not wholly different from the action in his trinitarian life. In his action in relation to the world the trinitarian life turns outward, moves outside itself, and becomes the determinative basis of relations between the Creator and the creatures."²⁰ Foundational to the differentiated totality of the triune God is the ministry of Jesus Christ, who as the Word of God is the "quintessence of the divine plan for creation and history and of its end-time but already proleptic revelation."²¹ As the immanent and economic trinities are identified, the historical actions of Jesus self-differentiate not just the historical Jesus but the eternal Son from the Father. The self-differentiating acts of Jesus Christ through his historical actions can be described as such:

The premise is that Jesus distinguishes himself from the Father as one who bears witness to him, as we again see in John (8:18, 50). Along this line the Johannine Christ says that the Father is greater than he (14:28) and that his own word is "not mine but the Father's

19 The trinitarian structure is particularly important as sources are communicating trinitarian revelation.

20 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 5.

21 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 257.

who sent me” (14:24). Here again John stresses a point that is found in the Synoptic tradition. Jesus will not let himself be called “good Teacher” because “no one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:18). He thus distinguishes himself from God and sets himself as a creature below God as he asks his hearers to do in his message of the nearness of the rule of God. The same subordination to the Father may be seen in his not knowing the time of the end (Mark 13:32 par.), in his reply to the sons of Zebedee that it was not for him to assign places of honor at his side in the heavenly kingdom (Matt. 20:23 par.), and finally in his subjection of his own will to that of the Father in the prayer in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36 par.).²²

As Jesus self-differentiates, he confirms his identity as the unique second person of the economic and eternal trinity. The self-differentiation is mutual, the Father’s deity and kinship is dependent on the Son’s activity in the world and whether the Son properly glorifies him and fulfills his mission.²³ But as a differentiation without boundaries completely disconnects the Son from the Father, Pannenberg also speaks of the self-differentiated characteristics of the Father and Son that is nonetheless united in divine essence:

Precisely by distinguishing himself from the Father, by subjecting himself to his will as his creature, by thus giving place to the Father’s claim to deity as he asked others to do in his proclamation of the divine lordship, he showed himself to be the Son of God and one with the Father who sent him (John 10:30)...As Jesus glorifies the deity of the Father by his sending and in his own relation to the Father, he himself, in corresponding to the claim of the Father, is so at one with the Father that God in eternity is Father only in relation to him.²⁴

Finally, as a member of the trinity, the Holy Spirit is also self-differentiated from the Father and the Son but united to both:

As Jesus glorifies the Father and not himself, and precisely in

22 Pannenberg, *ST I*, 309.

23 Pannenberg, *ST I*, 313.

24 *Ibid.*, 310.

so doing shows himself to be the Son of the Father, so the Spirit glorifies not himself but the Son, and in him the Father. Precisely by not speaking of himself (John 16:13) but bearing witness to Jesus (15:26) and reminding us of his teaching (14:26), he shows himself to be the Spirit of truth (16:13). Distinct from the Father and the Son, he thus belongs to both.²⁵

The purpose of my paper is to discern how the differentiated unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit interact and inform the part and whole relationship of sources and norms. I argue that Christ is the norm of the Father's revelation, the interpretive lens by which sources can be understood. Moreover, as Christ is the instigating agent of self-differentiation, Christ enables the the contextual earthly sources which output the diverse theologies, revealing parts of himself through each respective provisional source and revealing the Father in the process. The Spirit, in turn, is the unifying agent that accumulates information gathered via provisional sources, propelling toward the ultimate unified knowledge of the eschaton. Christ and Spirit are mutually interactive, as both part and whole are consistently affirmed and reaffirmed in a historical process.

REVELATION AS THE NORMATIVITY OF CHRIST

As Christianity does not concern relative or provisional truths but seeks truth, it is crucial to identify an absolute norm. In Christianity, the norm is Christ. In Barthian terms, Thomas Torrance helpfully describes this norm:

Jesus Christ is the Truth of God actualized in our midst, the incarnate faithfulness of God, but He is also man keeping faith and truth with God in a perfect correspondence between His life and activity in the flesh and the Word of God. In Him there is utter consistency between God the Word revealing Himself to man and man hearing, believing, obeying, and speaking His Word. Not only

25 Ibid., 315.

is He the incarnation of the divine faithfulness but the embodiment and actualization of the divine faithfulness in answer to God's.²⁶

Indeed, Pannenberg's use of sources can be explained by comparing and contrasting it with Karl Barth's theology of the Word. Barth famously established the primacy of the Word (Christ) in an act of revelation that manifests itself through three forms (or as I have been calling it, sources), the Word preached, the Word written, and the Word Revealed. For Barth, the primary form is the Word of God revealed, the incarnate person of Jesus Christ; Scripture and preaching are merely derivative revelations: "Among the three forms of the Word of God, that can be said unconditionally and with strictest propriety only of revelation, not with the same unreservedness and directness of Holy Scripture and of Church proclamation as well."²⁷ Scripture and proclamation only become the Word when acted upon from above.²⁸ However, though scripture and proclamation are derivative forms of the Word, there is "no distinction of degree or value between these three forms."²⁹ The economic revelation of Christ in the economy via the threefold form of Christ, speaks of a unity-in-differentiation that not only reveals the same Christ through different forms, but also mirrors the immanent trinity.³⁰ Derivative sources (Word of God preached, Word of God written) are relativized in a part and whole matter that reveal pieces of the one Christ as it is acted upon from above.³¹

Like Barth, Pannenberg sees knowledge arriving via the self-revelation of Christ. But for Pannenberg revelation arrives via *Historie*, the process of actual history, not through a special history called *Heilseshichte*.³² As

26 Thomas F. Torrance, "The Foundation of the Church" in *Theological Foundations for Ministry* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 125.

27 Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God. Vol. 1.1 of Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 349.

28 *Ibid.*, 133.

29 *ibid.*, 136.

30 *Ibid.*, 121.

31 Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of God. Vol. 2.2 of Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 101.

32 Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Redemptive Event and History," in *Basic Questions in*

the ministry of the earthly Christ establishes a trinitarian ontology in which Christ is self-differentiated from the rest of the trinity, the revelation of Christ in history is revealed via the process of history. For Pannenberg, "The eternal act of the Son's self-differentiation from the Father would then contain the possibility of the separate existence of creatures. As the self-distinction of the Son from the Father is to be regarded as an act of freedom, so the contingency in the production of creatures would be in continuity with such freedom."³³ The fullness of the revelation of God is revealed indirectly through concrete and differentiated events in history. "Theological questions and answers are meaningful only within the framework of the history which God has with humanity and through humanity with his whole creation—the history moving toward a future still hidden from the world but already revealed in Jesus Christ."³⁴ The fullness of revelation will only be revealed at the end of history, as revelation progresses through history as part and whole continually and dialectically supplement and complement one another. But in Jesus, the incarnate one, who represents the fullest sense of differentiation-in-unity and part and whole, the fullness of the revelation has already been revealed. In Jesus, "The resurrection of the dead has already taken place, though to all other men this is still something yet to be experienced,"³⁵ and the "fate of Jesus Christ is the anticipation of the end, and thus the revelation of God."³⁶ Therefore, the revelation of God through the indirect acts of history is the ministry of the second person of the Trinity who instigates and establishes the legitimacy of differentiated revelations via differentiated sources in differentiated periods of history. Cornelius A. Buller thus comments, "In this conception of the Trinity, the Son distinguishes himself from God the Father, and in so doing he becomes the source of everything that is

Theology, Vol. 1. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1970), 15.

33 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 42.

34 Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Redemptive Event and History," 15.

35 Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Dogmatic Theses on the Concept of Revelation," in *Revelation as History* (London: Sheed and Ward Ltd, 1969), 141.

36 *Ibid.*, 143.

distinct from the Father.”³⁷

If Barth minimizes history for fear of its abuse, Pannenberg affirms it by relativizing it under an eschatological future. “Eschatology exposes secular man’s illusions about the possibilities of self-realisation in this world, and therefore eschatology is at the heart of a Christian realism in appraising the conditions of human existence in the present world.”³⁸ Therefore, it is my contention that Pannenberg’s historical model affirms all theological sources as differentiated expressions of Jesus in history as pieces of information are progressively revealed (until its eschatological completion) and incorporated into the greater whole. As Christiaan Mostert comments, “Human essence is not above time; it is historical. History does not illustrate a constant human essence but determines even constitutes it.”³⁹

The revelation of Christ revealed in history will utilize all sources and methods found in history. But how does Pannenberg interact with the four traditional sources I indicated above and how do they progressively reveal information while also utilizing a part and whole dialectic? To that question I will now turn.

PANNENBERG’S USE OF SCRIPTURE, TRADITION, REASON AND EXPERIENCE

In his essay “The Crisis of the Scripture Principle,” Pannenberg asserts scripture as that which attests “the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.”⁴⁰ But if scripture has a particular task of revealing Christ, the universal task of theology uses reason and relatedly, knowledge derived from other

37 Cornelius A. Buller, *The Unity of Nature and History in Pannenberg’s Theology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 44.

38 Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Constructive and Critical Functions of Christian Eschatology,” *Harvard Theological Review* 77, no. 2 (1984), 124.

39 Mostert, *God and the Future*, 71.

40 Pannenberg, “The Crisis of the Scripture Principle,” In *Basic Questions in Theology*, Vol. 1, 1.

disciplines.⁴¹ As “the word ‘God’ is used meaningfully only if one means by it the power that determines everything that exists,”⁴² the two sources, scripture and reason, are neither mutually exclusive nor compete against one another. The relationship between the particular (scripture which reveals Christ) and universal (reason which reveals meaning) is a part and whole relationship that “proceeds by a constant dialectic of the particular and the universal. For Christian theology, therefore, universal meaning through reason requires grounding in the historical particularity of Jesus of Nazareth himself, but this particularity is not rightly understood until its universal meaning is articulated.⁴³ As Mostert indicates, “Every event has its meaning in connection with other events, and ultimately with the totality of events. The flow of time will always give rise to new understanding. Historical meaning is therefore always provisional. Understanding reality as history implies openness to the future.”⁴⁴

But because Pannenberg is a Christian theologian, he upholds scripture as the primary interpretive source. “A theology that remains conscious of the intellectual obligation that goes along with the use of the word ‘God’ will try in every possible way to relate all truths, and therefore not least of all the knowledge of the extra-theological sciences, to the God of the Bible, and to attain a new understanding of everything by viewing it in the light of this God.”⁴⁵ And connecting this to my earlier discussion on sources and norms, Pannenberg’s norm is not a “Scripture-positivism,” a kind of rational and universal task, a science of everything which scripture is not meant to perform.⁴⁶ Instead, scripture reveals the Christ (the *de facto* norm) as experienced and recorded in the Judeo-Christian Bible.⁴⁷

Experience is another valuable source. Human beings are ecstatic in nature “and to that extent spiritual...To the extent that human beings

41 Ibid., 1.

42 Ibid.

43 Mostert, *God and the Future*, 61.

44 Mostert, *God and the Future*, 72-73.

45 Pannenberg, “The Crisis of the Scripture Principle,” 1-2.

46 Ibid., 3.

47 *ST I*, 15.

exist exocentrically...and experience themselves from that vantage point, the life-giving power of the spirit which raises them above their own finiteness, manifest itself in an intensified form.”⁴⁸ These experiences are then tested against the particular revelation of the Bible (historical experiences of Christ that have been codified), as universal history then debates, tests, and critiques the validity of these experiences.⁴⁹ So with Pannenberg’s understanding of experience, we also see how the particular and the universal interact and complement each other toward greater knowledge. The fourth source for theology, tradition, operates similarly. Tradition is a depository of accumulated experiences, interpretations, and authorities, which, like experience, is subject to testing, refining, and transmission” through the process of universal history.⁵⁰ Thus, scripture, reason, experience, and tradition reveal different aspects and perform different functions of revelation holistically, mutually, and dialectically. Underlying the epistemological process is the norm of Christ.

THE HOLY SPIRIT, CHRISTIAN SOURCES, AND PANNENBERG

But even if Christ is established as the norm by which the contributions of various sources are understood, and even if Christ is the means by which the sources are differentiated in the first place, a questions remains unanswered. How do we determine when particular sources during particular times act as or become revelation? Meaning cannot be determined by the text (not just in the literal sense of scripture, but also reason, experience, and tradition) itself, but as an interpreter reads and

48 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 524.

49 Ibid.

50 Wolfhart Pannenberg, “What is Dogmatic Statement” In *Basic Questions in Theology, Vol. 1* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1970), 186.

understands it.⁵¹ Grenz and Franke assign to the Spirit a necessary role in the historical development and formation of Christian sources and their interpretation.⁵² Thus, the Holy Spirit can be seen as a “reader” who determines meaning as she “reads” text (scripture), reason, experience, and tradition; meaning is not “in” these sources themselves but as the Holy Spirit acts upon them. For instance, the authority and meaning of the Bible does not lie in the Bible itself, but as meaning is derived via “the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture, which are the product of the Spirit’s revelatory and inspiring action.”⁵³ For tradition, congregants “suffer” the work of the Spirit in church practices.⁵⁴ And for reason, only the Spirit can transform that which “has been so twisted by sin that the humans inevitably attempts to transform the revelation she receives into an idol.”⁵⁵

To Pannenberg, the Spirit is a created grace, a “breath of life that is already given to humanity at creation (Gen 2:7).⁵⁶ And the Spirit as the “breath of Yahweh is a creative life force” present everywhere in creation⁵⁷ so that all of creation via the universalizing power of the Holy Spirit is a potential source for Christian theology.⁵⁸ The universal Spirit reads the various sources not only within the context in which they appear but as a universal framework by which universal meaning is supplied. Thus, the Spirit is the agent of the eschaton.

This pneumatological approach has three advantages. First, the

51 Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 107.

52 Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 116.

53 Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Religious Authority* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 28.

54 Hutter defines this as a “cultural-pathic model.” Reinhard Hütter. *Suffering Divine Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 26.

55 Keith L. Johnson, “Natural Revelation in Creation and Covenant,” in Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: *An Unofficial Catholic-Protestant Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 142.

56 *ST III*, 9.

57 *ST I*, 373.

58 To Pannenberg, subsequent spiritual endowments are not new but “topping up” of created endowments. John R. Levison, *Inspired: The Holy Spirit and the Mind of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 3.

Spirit seen as supernatural, contra created, grace belies the incarnational ministry of the Word and the Spirit, a determinism in which the natural processes of creation and freedom are not given proper agency; the danger is absolutist concepts with little concern for context. Second, when authority is derived via external inspiration of the Spirit, focus shifts to the source and not on the inspiring power already latent in creation. The results are theological debates on prolegomena which often leads to an overemphasis on justifying sources. By emphasizing all of creation as a potential Spirit-laden source of theology, Pannenberg returns the attention to God, sub *ratione Dei*. Pannenberg's approach, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen explains, "Funds a dynamic, multifaceted divine action, providence, and causality. To be the Creator is far more than being the world's cause. While causality should not of course be eliminated from the theological thesaurus, the main focus should be placed on the living, dynamic, creative presence of the Creator in the world."⁵⁹

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I attempted to address a problem in contemporary theology, the problem of determining which sources are authoritative. I suggested that the solution is not favoring sources against each other, but including them all in a holistic and mutually affirming manner. To do so, I applied Wolfhart Pannenberg's trinitarian theological method of part and whole, and particular and universal. With Christ as the norm, I relativized theological sources as contextual revelations based on context. While I affirmed Christ as the source of self-differentiation, that is, the source of the particular and the present, I also affirmed the universalizing ministry of the Holy Spirit. My hope is that theology will focus less attention on theological sources and determining which source is authoritative, and focus more on the God who reveals. If all of history itself (including all

59 Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World, Vol.3: Creation and Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 185-186.

of the traditional Christian sources) is affirmed as a theological source, God's omnipotence, eternity, and glory will be all the more glorified.

A persistent criticism placed at Pannenberg for decades is distinguishing between the action and inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the demonic spirit of the world. If Pannenberg's doctrine of revelation assumes a universal Spirit suffused throughout creation is there any way to differentiate between good and evil? As Pannenberg writes, "According to the NT witness the world as a whole has come indeed under the tyranny of an ungodly force, the prince of this world gives us cause to reckon with the dominion of a destructive power of this nature."⁶⁰ The differentiation between good and evil spirits comes insofar as the Holy Spirit is able to overcome egocentric sin and create new life through the power of exocentric relationality. Thus a demonic spirit can be seen in the presence of entropy in the world for "the temporal inversion in the structure of natural forces and their operation causes them to become ungodly and demonic forces only when they close themselves against the future of God."⁶¹ Pannenberg necessitate the proclamation of the gospel as a present application of Christ's reconciliation of the cross. He avoids associating the Spirit with a supplementary inspiration of a gospel that is already Spirit-filled. Nonetheless, the proclamation, insofar as it proclaims the life-affirming and exocentric gospel of Christ provides at least a noetic recognition and epistemological authority of an eschatological reality

60 *ST* 2, 108.

61 *Ibid.*

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A Survey of Evangelical Hermeneutical Approaches to Conservation

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KEYWORDS:

| Christian Environmentalism | Conservation | Biblical Interpretation |
| Evangelical attitudes | Eschatology | Premillennialism | Creation |

ABSTRACT:

As environmental concerns have risen to prominence within many quarters of Evangelicalism, this article seeks to discover how scholarly evangelical attitudes towards conservation are informed by interpretation of Scripture. The literature of Western evangelical scholars is surveyed and chief hermeneutical approaches to conservation analysed and discussed. It is found that evangelical hermeneutical approaches are largely influenced by five principal factors, namely: (i) attempts to resolve the tension between the dominion and cultural mandates of Gen. 1:28 and 2:15 respectively (ii) understanding of creation's 'original state' (iii) interpretation of the relationship between the Adamic and Edenic covenants (iv) eschatological outlook (v) hermeneutical literalism. It is concluded that many post- and amillennialist evangelical scholars – in stark contrast to dispensational premillennialists – are responding to past criticisms of Christianity's perceived environmental indifference by embracing an eco-centric stewardship paradigm that views mankind's chief ecologic function as guardian and protector of creation, not exploiter..

INTRODUCTION

Whether they are concerns such as anthropogenic global warming, species extinctions and tropical deforestation; or more local issues such as overcrowding, air quality and noise pollution, environmental concerns have become deeply ingrained within the social fabric of the contemporary First World. For those living in economically developed Western nations, it has become customary to hear the latest gloomy prediction of impending ecological catastrophe from filmmakers, scientists and mainstream media alike. Whether it be the Hollywood blockbuster ‘An Inconvenient Truth’, the IPCC ‘hockey stick’ temperature graph, the 10:10 Climate Change campaign¹ or Extinction Rebellion’s dire warnings of impending climate catastrophe, society is being bombarded with neo-Malthusian scares over resource shortages and rising global temperatures. Unless mankind radically alters course, it is argued, ecological doom is heading our way.

Though a contentious issue within secular society, environmental concerns are particularly divisive within Evangelicalism due to disagreements over interpretation of Scripture, economics and science (McCammack 2007, 646).² Left-leaning evangelical scholars, disillusioned with Evangelicalism’s perceived indifference towards environmental concerns, are increasingly supportive of eco-centric secular environmental organisations such as Greenpeace, The World Wide Fund for Nature, and Friends of the Earth. Conservative right-leaning evangelical scholars often regard such support as tantamount to endorsing a neo-pagan, new-age and pantheistic ‘social gospel’; one that distracts the Church from its main task of evangelism (Davis 2000, 274). For premillennialist scholars, environmental concerns are often denigrated as unimportant in light of

1 Which produced “No Pressure”, a darkly satirical film depicting anthropogenic global warming sceptics/‘dissenters,’ including children, being blown up. The film was later removed from the campaign’s website and pulled from YouTube amidst mass public outcry.

2 Though scientific claims and economic policies are contentious within Evangelicalism, theological interpretations are particularly divisive due to Evangelicalism’s reverence for Scripture.

the earth's future conflagration and destruction (2 Pet. 3:5-13).

In keeping with Evangelicalism's theological and political diversity, a growing number of evangelical scholars are seeking to tread a middle ground between eco-fascist/atheistic and dispensationalist strains of environmentalism by constructing a practical, postmillennial environmental theology that interprets key passages of Scripture and biblical themes in environmentally sensitive ways.

II. WHY THIS APPROACH

Popular treatments often provide a broad overview of the contemporary environmental movement before constructing a Christian environmental theology (McGrath 2002; Schaeffer 1970; Grizzle and Barrett 1998; Wright 1995). Others seek to either critique various strands of evangelical environmentalism or rally support for particular environmental causes (Elsdon 1992; Bookless 2008). Whilst there is undoubtedly poor exegesis and doctrinal waywardness within evangelical environmentalism, a critique of evangelical environmental hermeneutics is beyond this study's scope. Similarly, this article avoids 'converting' the environmental heathen and instead seeks to present and analyse evangelical hermeneutical approaches to conservation³ dispassionately whilst allowing for personal expression and viewpoint scrutiny where appropriate.

Much work has been done investigating the impact of religion on environmental concern. Greeley, for example, develops the findings of a 1989 survey in Tulsa, Oklahoma to show a positive correlation between "biblical literalism" and "low levels of environmental concern" (1993, 19) and a similar link between 'looser theology'⁴ and "support for environmental spending" (ibid.). Similarly, Eckberg and

3 Conservation may be defined as "the efficient and non-wasteful use of natural resources" or more loosely as "any form of environmental protection" (Johnston et al. 2000, 106).

4 Defined by Greeley as one which encompasses "a gracious image of God" and is "Catholic" in outlook (1993, 19).

Blocker analyse 1993 General Social Survey data to conclude that Christian theology exhibits an “antienvironmental” effect as opposed to a “proenvironmental” one stimulated by more liberal expressions of Christianity (1996, 343). Building on this study, Sherkat and Ellison analyse the same data set and discover that willingness to “make personal sacrifices for nature” is negatively correlated with conservative forms of Protestantism and biblical inerrancy (2007, 77). Crucially, however, their study also found that conservative Protestants, biblical inerrantists and regular churchgoers take environmental concerns seriously through the “fostering [of] stewardship orientations” (80); an observation which suggests that conservative inerrantists acknowledge the gravity of environmental concerns but are reluctant to engage in personal forms of environmental action.

Whilst the aforementioned studies, written from a social science perspective, further understanding of the influence of varying expressions of Christian belief on attitudes to the environment, there is a pressing need to discover the hermeneutical and theological reasons why, for example, conservative inerrantists are less likely to engage in personal forms of environmental action than their liberal counterparts (and vice versa). Such a proposed shift in focus reflects the need to advance the research goal beyond a preoccupation with the question of what in order to explore the question of why. A social science approach with superficial or no scriptural treatment,⁵ though helpful in identifying trends and statistically significant relationships between variables, can never satisfactorily explore the interplay between biblical interpretation and resulting environmental attitudes. Only those familiar with evangelical theology and hermeneutics, willing to conduct an intertestamental survey of the evangelical conservation movement’s chief hermeneutical tenets, are sufficiently equipped to analyse how biblical interpretation affects attitudes towards environmental protection.

5 Sherkat and Ellison, for example, devote only half a page to a discussion of biblical texts pertinent to the environmental debate (2007, 74).

The constraints of this short article permit only a presentation and discussion of evangelical conservationists' chief hermeneutical linchpins. It is hoped that this study will enable evangelicals to make an informed decision regarding the exegetical and theological validity of hermeneutical approaches to conservation, filling existing niches in the current body of Christian environmental literature in two ways. Firstly, whilst there is no dearth of Christian literature on environmental themes, such texts often emphasise the importance of creation before seeking to construct a responsible environmental ethic (e.g. Bullmore, 1998; Grizzle et al. 1998; Wright 1995). Whilst these treatments are generally helpful, there is a growing need to push the debate forward by examining the hermeneutical and theological factors that underpin evangelical attitudes to of conservation. As this movement becomes increasingly strident and militant in outlook, now more than ever evangelicals must take up the challenge of scripturally engaging with its suppositions and demands.

Secondly, evangelical literature has largely yet to systematise the influence of eschatology on attitudes towards environmental concerns; an area this paper seeks to develop. Whilst Bridger's article explores the 'neglected' interplay between ecology and eschatology (1990, 291), he is primarily concerned with constructing an "anticipatory ecological ethic" (ibid.). Similarly, rather than examining how use of Scripture informs environmental outlook, Truesdale seeks to identify a "compelling alternative" to dispensationalist premillennialism (1994, 118) that draws on the writings of Jewett, Dyrness, Hall and Pinnock (118-120) to eschew apocalyptic/destructive interpretations of the environment's fate in favour of reconciliatory and restorative visions of planetary healing. This article, however, chooses to systematise the influence of eschatology on environmental hermeneutics by utilising a millenarian framework [post-, a- and premillennialism]⁶ to analyse and discuss the influence end-times thinking has on attitudes to conservation.

A fresh evangelical treatment is merited in light of Evangelicalism's

6 Chosen as it encompasses most evangelical eschatological outlooks.

avowed reverence for Scripture, its social conscience and its important role in forging nuanced intertestamental theologies of conservation.

III. THE CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT AND THE BIRTH OF EVANGELICAL ENVIRONMENTALISM⁷

The birthing of the contemporary environmental movement in the 1960s, wrought in large part by the seminal works of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), Kenneth Boulding’s concept of ‘spaceship earth’ (1966) and Garrett Hardin’s ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’ (Science, 1968), sparked widespread debate on issues such as pesticide usage (specifically DDT), the potential for exponential growth to outstrip the earth’s supply of finite natural resources, and the economic incentives that encourage overgrazing and environmental degradation of the commons (land, air and sea). Stemming from this environmental awakening, the concept of sustainable development emerged, first advanced by Ernst Schumacher in his 1974 work *Small is Beautiful* which espoused anti-growth sympathies. Later defined by the WCED/‘Brundtland Commission’ (1987, 45) as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”, it was not until the UNCED ‘Earth Summit’ in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 that the concept of sustainable development gained widespread recognition.

In the midst of heightened concerns over an impending environmental catastrophe, a number of secular and Christian scholars began to criticise Christianity’s perceived indifference, even exploitative attitude, towards the environment (White 1967, 1205). Dominionism was derided as “anthropocentric” (ibid.) and “instrumentalist” (Moo 2006, 499) for affirming that creation’s sole purpose is to serve mankind. The claim that the doctrine of mankind’s *Imago Dei* (Gen. 1:26f, 5:1-3, 9:6) somehow fosters

7 This section deals exclusively with the contemporary environmental movement (1960s –).

'anthropocentrism' is of course not new. As early as the mid-nineteenth century Ludwig Feuerbach (1843, 287) claimed: "Nature, the world, has no value, no interest for Christians. The Christian thinks only of himself and the salvation of his soul". This observation developed a more accusatory and confrontational tone, however, with the publication of White's (1967) 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis'. White essentially argued that orthodox Christianity's desacralized/anti-pagan view of nature fostered a utilitarian attitude towards the environment, one that legitimised exploitation of the earth's resources "in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects" (ibid., 1205). In eschewing "pagan animism" (ibid.) by worshipping the Creator and not creation, White contends that Christianity fostered a hostile view of nature; one bolstered by man's *Imago Dei*.⁸ Though critiqued for its "historical and theological superficiality" (McGrath 2002, 30), regarding Judeo-Christians as a homogenous group (Guth et al. 1995, 367),⁹ White's thesis – still accepted by many today – sounded a wake-up call for evangelicals who had previously given little theological consideration to environmental issues.

In response to White's thesis, many evangelicals have sought to construct environmental theologies that minimise the tension between the dominion and cultural mandates by developing the concept of stewardship. Ball (1998, 33) notes that 'Wise Use' evangelicals attempt to theologically justify mankind's exploitation of the earth's resources and are vociferously opposed to eco-centric stewardship ethics. 'Caring Management' or 'Creation Care' (ibid.; Grizzle et al. 1998, 8-11) is embraced by McGrath 2002; Schaeffer 1970 and Bullmore 1998 who observe, amongst other things, creation's intrinsic value to God and humankind's obligation to guard/protect the earth. 'Servanthood Stewardship' evangelicals interpret

8 There is evidence to suggest that White (1973, 57) tempered his criticism of Christianity's perceived environmental indifference in later years, writing "No sensible person could maintain that all ecologic damage is, or has been, rooted in religious attitudes" and again "All that can be said ... is that Christianity *in its Latin form* (which includes Protestantism...) provided a set of presuppositions remarkably favourable to technological thrust" (ibid., 58).

9 See McGrath 2002, 30-1 for a number of responses to White's paper.

dominion as “service rather than as a license for ungodly behaviour” (DeWitt 1998, 41). By insisting that mankind is to ‘serve’ non-human creation, they place less emphasis on humanity’s superior ontological status (Ball 1998, 33). ‘Social Justice’ approaches, usually associated with Catholics and mainstream Protestants, have made headway with American evangelicals and emphasise the “vicious cycle of poverty and environmental destruction” (Grizzle et al. 1998, 7-8). Proponents of ‘Environmental Justice’ draw attention to the fact that it is often the poor and socially disadvantaged who disproportionately suffer the consequences of environmental pollution (ibid., 11-12), whilst ‘Eco-Justice’, an approach commonly criticised for being devoid of evangelistic impulse, seeks to demonstrate how the marginalised in society as well as the earth’s biota suffer from the effects of mankind’s profligate consumption (ibid., 13-14).

Despite its mainstream evangelical appeal, ‘Creation Care’ is opposed by those who regard eco-stewardship to be an endogenous concept derived from eisegetical modes of interpretation. This view, known as ‘Dominionism’ or ‘Subjectionism’ (ibid., 6) teaches that God, as Creator, Ruler and Owner of creation, has endowed mankind with responsibility to wield dominion over the rest of creation, despite man himself being directly responsible to God. Beisner (1990, 24), a chief proponent of this view, contends that the cultural mandate was given to enable the earth “to meet man’s needs more fully than it naturally would”. He argues from a techno-centric viewpoint, affirming a belief that man’s technological expertise will enable him to successfully mitigate any environmental challenge. To this litany of views outlined above, ‘Shepherdism’ might be added; a perspective that expresses Dominionism sympathies yet seeks to harmonise humanity’s superior ontological status with a duty to responsibly care for the earth (Vantassel 2009, 160-78).

Though various schools have been presented, it is the author’s contention that only scholars writing from either a ‘Wise Use’, ‘Creation Care’, ‘Servanthood Stewardship’, ‘Subjectionism’ or ‘Shepherdism’

viewpoint offer truly evangelical treatments of hermeneutical approaches to conservation. In attempting to 'green' the Gospel by appealing to ecological proof texts and thereby ignoring the centrality of human salvation and evangelism in the biblical witness, it is argued that 'Social Justice', 'Environmental Justice' and 'Eco-Justice' approaches are largely incompatible with orthodox evangelical tenets and are thus excluded from this study.

IV. HERMENEUTICAL APPROACHES TO CONSERVATION

A. THE INTRINSIC VALUE AND 'GOODNESS' OF CREATION

Like secular conservationists, evangelical scholars who affirm the need to conserve species often emphasise creation's intrinsic value and beauty, yet additionally stress God's relationship with non-human creation alongside the pleasure He derives from His handiwork. Such an approach represents a departure from traditional environmental hermeneutics which usually appraised creation's value exclusively in the context of man's relationship to it.¹⁰ As God sustains and cares for creation (Matt. 6:26; Lk. 12:24), it is argued that mankind must not regard itself as the sole object of God's delight, but rather protect creation by conserving the earth's rich supply of biotic life and natural resources. Evangelical conservationists thus tread a thin line by seeking to uphold mankind's privileged place in creation whilst emphasising the independent value of creation to God. DeWitt (1998, 49-55), for example, observes God's admiration of charismatic megafauna such as the "behemoth"/hippopotamus in Job 40:15-24 (see also the "leviathan"/crocodile in Job 41:1-34), arguing that only God Himself has the right to destroy the works of His hands.

According to DeWitt, mankind's dominion over the animal and

¹⁰ Vantassel (2009, 1) notes that Dominionism, though neither universally nor uniformly held within the Church, was nonetheless the predominant view espoused by Christians for over two millennia.

vegetable kingdoms (Gen. 1:28, 9:1-3) encourages the protection and conservation of species – not their wanton destruction. To allow or precipitate the extinction of certain endemic species by hastening the degradation of their respective ecosystems is heinously disrespectful towards God’s “very good” creation (Gen. 1:31). Elsdon (1992, 53), for example, contends that “creation is good independently of our presence here and our ability to perceive it” (see Ps. 104). The cultural mandate is therefore interpreted as a command to conserve the earth’s biodiversity. However, when this conservation ethic encounters biblical passages that permit or even condone the slaughter of animals, such as Deut. 13:12-15 and 1 Sam. 15:2-3 (Vantassel 2009, 60), it is apparent that animal life is neither sacrosanct nor afforded protected status in Scripture.¹¹ Fully aware that mankind has excessively harvested animals throughout the ages, conservationists are presented with the task of choosing which species to conserve in order to avoid the spectre of further extinctions. It is often those species that are both charismatic and highly endangered that receive protected status.

This raises an important question. If, as DeWitt (1998, 52) affirms, the value of a species lies in its status as a work of God, it may be asked why some species are considered more valuable than others when all are created by God. By acknowledging the intrinsic value of all species, yet bestowing more ‘value’ on rare species, Grizzle and Barrett (1998, 240) argue that some hermeneutical approaches to conservation exhibit a logical inconsistency. They note that this conservational bias is cemented by evangelicals who choose to conserve only the benevolent aspect of creation (cf. Gen. 3:14-19). Why not, for example, conserve disease vectors and parasites such as mosquitoes and tapeworms? They are just as much a part of creation as the red squirrel, the black rhinoceros and the Bengal tiger. They argue that in overlooking the existence of a malevolent aspect of creation, many evangelical conservationists downplay or ignore the environmental effects of the Fall, resulting in a romanticised

11 Consider for example Gen. 4:3-5, 8:20ff, 9:1-3; Acts 10: 9-16; Mk. 7:19.

view of nature (ibid.). Bullmore (1998, 149), though he eschews such romanticism, embraces a nascent natural theology whereby “every species that is lost, every ecosystem that is destroyed results in a diminution of man’s opportunity to observe the perfection of God” (cf. Rev. 4:11). By weakening the evidential witness available to unregenerate man (cf. Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1:19-21), he contends that environmental degradation tarnishes the goodness and splendour of creation. His conclusion is partially embraced by Vantassel (2009, 169) who distinguishes between individual animals/organisms and their species/kinds (see Gen. 7:9); asserting that humans have a biblical right to kill animals but not to exterminate whole species (Deut. 22:6).

B. CREATION’S ORIGINAL STATE

Evangelical approaches to conservation are further influenced by what the exegete considers to be creation’s original state. For many post- and amillennial evangelical scholars, Gen. 1-2, in particular the Edenic state (Gen. 1:28-30, 2:4-25), provides an environmental blueprint for the conservation and restoration of creation’s ecological diversity and harmony. This view is embodied in the ‘Initial Chaotic Theory’ and ‘Pre-Creation Chaos Theory’ of Gen. 1:1-3. The former regards the chaos of v. 2 to have occurred in conjunction with the original creation in v. 1; the latter regards the chaos to have existed before the creation in v. 1 (the majority view today).¹² The third main view, ‘Restitution Theory’/‘The Gap Theory’, teaches that the chaos of v. 2 occurred after an undisclosed period of time – a ‘gap’ that separates v. 1 from v. 2 (see Fruchtenbaum 2009, 28-9). Whilst this theory has been extensively employed by old earth creationists to accommodate the geological ages in the creation account, Fruchtenbaum rejects the tendency to “dump in the fossil record, the geological ice ages ... “dinosaur space”” between verses 1-2 by noting that this gap need not be a

12 For a detailed discussion of these three views see Fruchtenbaum 2009, 25-9.

very long time at all (ibid., 37).¹³ He regards the ‘Mineral Garden’ of Ezek. 28:11-19 as illustrative of how the planet looked when it was created, and contends that the new earth will be adorned with the same types of precious stones that covered the earth before the fall of Satan (Ezek. 28:13f, 16 cf. Rev. 21:18-21) (ibid., 40-1; Fruchtenbaum 2003, 556, 564).

Espousing a modified version of ‘The Gap Theory’, Fruchtenbaum (2003, 556-69) argues that Satan is cast out of the ‘Mineral Garden’ (his second abode) and into the atmospheric heavens (his current third abode) during the small ‘gap’ between Gen. 1:1-2; relinquishing to mankind the authority he once held over the earth. As a result of Satan’s fall, a state of chaos/judgement ensues in v. 2, and water completely covers the earth before the first day of creation (Fruchtenbaum 2009, 40-1). Fruchtenbaum adduces evidence for this gap by observing the existence of a vav disjunctive in v. 2 [*ve-ha-aretz*], indicated by a *rebhia* notation in the Masoretic Text (ibid., 36), which results in the Hebrew reading “Now the earth” and not “And the earth” (ibid.).¹⁴ He therefore asserts that v. 2 is not sequential to v. 1 as the vav disjunctive introduces a new episode in the creation narrative (ibid.; Walker-Jones 2003, 164). He further demonstrates how the *syntagme* “formless [*tohu*] and void [*vohu*]” (v. 2 cf. Isa. 34:11; Jer. 4:23) always refers to divine judgement by connoting chaos and desolation (Fruchtenbaum 2009, 38-9) and notes how this language of judgement is reinforced by the phrase “darkness was over the surface of the deep” (v. 2) – darkness being “a symbol of divine judgement throughout the Old Testament” (ibid., 39).¹⁵

Though the water of v. 2 partially recedes and allows dry land to appear (v. 9f), Fruchtenbaum holds that the effects of Satan’s banishment from the Mineral Garden remain in that approximately seventy percent of the earth is covered by oceans and seas (Fruchtenbaum 2003, 564). As he argues

13 Fruchtenbaum’s modified ‘Gap Theory’ regards the days of creation as twenty-four hour periods, maintains that death came only as a result of the Fall, and is therefore compatible with a young earth.

14 Fruchtenbaum (2009, 36) notes that in v.2 the subject (‘the earth’) precedes the predicate (‘was formless and void’) which in Hebrew grammar indicates that the author wants to say something new about the earth.

15 See ibid., 38-9 for Scripture references.

that only the creation of the new heaven and the new earth will fully and permanently reverse the environmental effects of Satan's fall (Ezek. 28:13f, 16f cf. Rev. 21:1-22:5) (ibid.), it is understandable how one might regard attempts to conserve and restore creation to its Edenic state as misguided and futile. In particular, Fruchtenbaum notes how as a consequence of the Fall creation becomes doubly accursed; subjected not only to the environmental repercussions of Satan's fall, but also mankind's in Gen. 3. By stark contrast 'Initial Chaotic Theory' and 'Pre-Creation Chaos Theory', rejecting the notion that the earth is cursed by Satan's fall, embrace an eschatology that emphasises mankind's ability to reverse the planet's degraded condition.¹⁶

Even if one does not assent to Fruchtenbaum's interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2, the exegete who avows a belief in mankind's ability to restore the environment to its Edenic state must ponder how, in light of the Adamic curse, such a goal is achievable.

C. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ADAMIC AND EDENIC COVENANTS

One's understanding of the relationship between the Adamic and Edenic covenants profoundly influences attitudes towards conservation. As the sustainable development ethic emphasises mankind's duty to "keep" the Garden (Gen. 2:15), any form of human activity that embraces a utilitarian view of the environment – thus disturbing man's harmonious relationship with creation (Gen. 1:28-30, 2:4-25) – is regarded as unsustainable. Typically this approach deemphasises the change in relationship that occurs between mankind and the environment under the Adamic curse (Gen. 3:14-19) where man's harmonious relationship with the earth is severely disturbed. The ground is "cursed" (Gen. 3:17b), man and animal now adopt a carnivorous diet (Gen. 1:29f., cf. 4:4f 9:3), a malevolent aspect of nature is introduced (Gen. 1:12 cf. 3:18a), the land's

16 Vantassel (2009) argues that one must neither emphasise "otherworldly salvation to the detriment of the physical world" (88) nor "... turn back the clock to the Garden or fast forward to the *eschaton*..." (91).

productivity greatly decreases (Gen. 2:15-17 cf. 3:17b-19) and mankind is forced to work the earth harder for diminished agricultural yield (Gen. 1:29, 2:15ff cf. 3:17b-19) (Fruchtenbaum 2009, 107-8). Whereas under the Edenic covenant Adam and Eve's relationship with nature was one of earthly productivity (Gen. 1:28f, 2:15f), after the Fall labour becomes arduous and requires 'managing' – and not simply 'keeping' – creation (Gen. 3:17b-19). Evangelical hermeneutical approaches that emphasise the innate goodness of creation and man's duty to "keep" the Garden (Gen. 2:15) therefore deemphasise and sometimes ignore the effects of mankind's rebellion on the environment. The view that physical death, predation and environmental malevolency existed before the Fall is embraced by old earth creationists who assert that millions of years of death and decay preceded mankind's existence. By contrast, young earth creationists reject the notion of death before sin by affirming that death occurred as a result of the Fall. Evangelicals are therefore divided over their positions on Creationism as well as their interpretation of the Adamic and Edenic covenants.

For evangelicals who adopt a more disjunctive interpretation of the Edenic (Gen. 1:28-30, 2:4-25) and Adamic (Gen. 3:14-19) covenants, mankind's relationship with nature has now fundamentally changed, and so too has his ecological role. According to Fruchtenbaum (2009, 187), this change in ecological function is reflected in the Noahic covenant of Gen. 9, specifically vv. 1, 7 where man "retains the authority over the animal kingdom and the vegetable kingdom" yet forfeits his authority to "subdue" and "rule" the earth (cf. Gen. 1:28; see Lk. 4:6; Jn. 12:31; 2 Cor. 4:4). In light of the Adamic curse (Gen. 3:17bff), Beisner (1997, 188) argues that mankind's chief ecological function has changed from that of passively 'keeping' the Garden (Gen. 2:15) to that of "transforming the wilderness by cultivation into a garden" (Gen. 3:17b-19). He argues that the land's diminished productivity following the Fall requires mankind to adopt more intensive modes of development so as to facilitate and maintain present rates of industrial and economic growth.

Though Beisner rejects a harsh and exploitative view of nature, he is nonetheless techno-centric in his affirmation that mankind is to harness – and not simply conserve – creation's ecological potential (ibid., 184, 192-3): a potential that climaxes with a city (the New Jerusalem) and not a restored Garden (Heb. 11:10, 16; Rev. 21:10-27). In a similar vein, Vantassel (2009, 164-5, 166-8) acknowledges the environmental effects of the Fall yet argues that responsible stewardship is achievable by relying upon the Holy Spirit and following Christ's example in the Scriptures.

D. ESCHATOLOGIES OF REDEMPTION

1. Post – and Amillennialism

Postmillennialism asserts that Christ's return takes place after a future millennial period. Exponents of this view are typically ambivalent on whether the millennium is a literal thousand year period or whether it denotes a time when the church symbolically reigns on earth through Christ. Resulting from a desire to usher in God's kingdom on earth, many postmillennialists are socio-politically engaged and committed to 'winning over' secular institutions for Christ. Amillennialism, however, rejects outright the notion of an earthly reign of Christ and insists that the church is presently living in a symbolic millennium which will eventually culminate in the final judgement and Christ's return.¹⁷ Crucially, both post- and amillennialism deny a future Tribulation, a seven year period in which God's wrath is poured out on the earth and its inhabitants;¹⁸ favouring instead to downplay or ignore prophetic portions of Scripture depicting environmental destruction.

Hermeneutical approaches to conservation are therefore influenced

17 For an excellent critique of post- and amillennialism, see Vlach, Michael J. "The Kingdom of God and the Millennium." *The Master's Seminary Journal*, 23, no.2 (2012): 225-254 [available at: <https://www.tms.edu/m/msj23m.pdf>]

18 The environmental aspects of which intensify during the second half of the Tribulation.

by differing eschatologies of redemption. Postmillennial and amillennial outlooks both affirm creation's restoration (i.e. "set free" [Gr. *eleutheroō*] in Rom. 8:21) (Moo 1996, 517); the former prior to the Millennium before being redeemed at Christ's Second Coming; the latter here in the present before being redeemed at the Parousia. Consequently, post- and amillennial eschatologies often equate 'millennial' passages with the Eternal Order, and 'tribulational' passages with a process of transformation and renewal. Both teach that mankind is able to ecologically transform a fallen world by ushering in God's Kingdom. Such a grand motive fully aligns with post- and amillennialism's proclivity to over-realise aspects of inaugurated eschatology. Though neither of the eschatologies draw a comparison between a redeemed creation and the Mineral Garden of Ezek. 28:11-19, the majority of contemporary evangelical scholars agree that creation's 'groaning' [Gr. *sustenazō*] in Rom. 8:22 refers to the whole of creation, including the "sub-human"/ "nonhuman creation" (Moo 2006, 460; Moo 1996, 514; Bridger 1990, 299; Schreiner 2008, 435).¹⁹

In light of creation's value, as seen in God's plan to restore it (Rom. 8:19-23; Col. 1:15-20), many contemporary evangelical post- and amillennialists embrace a form of Christus Victor theology by emphasising Christ's cosmic redemption of both human and non-human creation. As Christ has reconciled "all things to Himself" (Col. 1:20) and is both Redeemer and Sustainer of creation, it is argued that mankind should seek to live in light of creation's inaugurated reconciliation by engaging in conservation efforts (Schaeffer 1970, 49-50) (cf. the New Testament's 'here/not yet' eschatological tension).²⁰ This tension is observed in Rom. 7-8 where Paul discusses the conflict between believers' sinful nature and the indwelling Spirit (Rom. 7:24). Just as believers are exhorted to live a sanctified life as 'new creations' (2 Cor. 5:17) despite present sinfulness and frailty, so Schaeffer argues that the future redemption of creation must be 'realised' in the present by effecting "substantial healing" between

19 Moo (2006, 459) argues that Rom. 8:19-22 and Col. 1:20 are "the clearest expression of future hope for the physical world in the NT".

20 See Bridger 1990, 297.

mankind and nature (ibid.). Bridger (1990, 300) notes that we are to look both backward (Col. 1:15-17) and forward (Rom. 8:19-23), concluding "The life of ethical obedience ... cannot be regarded as dualistic ... This forces us not to withdraw from the world but to take its [the earth's] fate seriously" (ibid., 296).

In so doing, the church would act, according to Schaeffer (1970, 58), as a "pilot plant" where man can see in our congregations and missions a substantial healing of all the divisions, the alienations, man's rebellion has produced". As Christ has reconciled "all things to Himself" (Col. 1:20), believers are exhorted to embrace a lifestyle that conforms to this inaugurated reconciliation rather than accept creation's "slavery to corruption" (Rom. 8:21). Schaeffer's approach thus softens the effects of the Fall on the environment by insisting that it is not only possible but morally imperative that mankind treats creation *not* as something accursed (Gen. 3:17b-19) but rather as a treasured soon-to-be-redeemed entity. Moo (2006, 484) endorses Schaeffer's argument whilst drawing attention to the danger of excessive homocentrism: "The 'not yet' of a restored creation demands an 'already' ethical commitment to that creation now among God's people" adding "To be sure, our efforts must always be tempered by the realization that it is finally God Himself, in a future act of sovereign power, who will transform creation". Similarly Bridger (1990, 301) argues that mankind, though unable to redeem creation, is nonetheless obliged to "preserve and enhance the created order", performing an act of ethical obedience that points to creation's eschatological redemption and "the coming rule of God in Christ".

Erecting signposts that point to creation's redemption is not, according to Bridger, a futile endeavour as these signposts demonstrate man's complete dependence on God's sovereign will and power (ibid.). Moo and Bridger thus pave a theological middle ground between two extremes: environmental apathy associated with ultra-dispensational premillennialism on the one hand, and naive anthropocentrism associated with amillennial eschatology on the other. Their shared conviction is

expressed by DeWitt (1998, 55): “The message of stewardship is an invitation with the children of God to meet creation’s eager expectation”. Before one regards these signposts as mere abstract or theoretical constructs, successful ‘real world’ examples of ‘substantial healing’ have already been observed, such as the vastly improved water quality of the River Thames in London; once so heavily polluted and oxygen-starved that fish populations could not survive (Southwick 1996, 339). The question, however, of whether the profound environmental effects of the Fall (detailed previously) can be mitigated or even reversed by human effort remains as stark as ever.

2. Premillennialism

Premillennialism states that the Parousia precedes the Millennium, the latter comprising a literal thousand year earthly reign of Christ. Prior to the Parousia, premillennialists assert that there is a seven year period of tribulation (see Matt. 24:21; Mk.13:19; Lk. 21:23; Rev. 2:22, 3:10, 7:14) where God judges the earth and its inhabitants. Though additional premillennial viewpoints are predicated on the timing of the rapture (God’s supernatural removal of believers from the earth), all premillennialists assent to a future environmental catastrophe occurring i) during the Tribulation before creation is renewed prior to the Millennium [Isa. 65:17-25]²¹ ii) prior to the establishment of the Eternal Order when a new heaven and a new earth will be created [Rev. 21-22]). As these episodes are exclusively futuristic, unavoidable and divinely appointed; premillennialists, in stark contrast to post- and amillennialists, typically espouse an ‘otherworldly’ faith characterised by socio-political disengagement and scepticism towards environmental concerns.²²

21 Examples of renewal/renovation include Mount Zion becoming the highest mountain in the world (Isa. 2:1-3) and the removal of many but not all of the effects of the Adamic curse (Fruchtenbaum 2003, 379-85). See Ps. 24:1-6; Isa. 11:6-9, 65:17-25; Micah 4:1-5 (ibid.).

22 With the exception of instances where environmental mismanagement/degradation negatively impacts quality of life/poses risk to life.

Evangelical* Approaches to the Environment	
(Ranked according to level of support given to environmental concerns) 1 = highest support / 5 = lowest support	Brief definition (key words italicised)
1. Servanthood Stewardship	Mankind is to sacrificially <i>serve</i> the environment by protecting its resources and species.
2. Creation Care / Caring Management	Mankind is to <i>steward</i> , protect and guard the earth's resources.
3. Shepherdism	Mankind is permitted to utilise the earth's resources, including animals, in an environmentally <i>responsible</i> manner.
4. Wise-use	Mankind is to steward the commons (land, air and sea) for his own <i>benefit</i> .
5. Dominionism	Mankind has a God-given right to wield <i>dominion</i> over the environment and to utilise its resources in accordance with his superior status in creation.
* Social Justice, Environmental Justice and Eco-Justice approaches are excluded.	

By emphasising creation’s “slavery to corruption” (Rom. 8.21), premillennialists reject the anthropocentric notion that man is to save the planet’s natural resources for perpetuity and thus typically regard conservation initiatives as futile endeavours (2 Pet. 3:7). Even Vantassel, a proponent of ‘Shepherdism’,²³ notes that unlike believers who are sealed with the Holy Spirit as a deposit guaranteeing future salvation (Eph. 1:13f), the restoration of creation remains exclusively futuristic (2009, 85). Additionally, Fruchtenbaum notes that the Trumpet judgements described in Rev. 8:7, 8f, 10f, 12 show that between two-thirds and three-quarters of the earth’s surface is burned up by fire (Rev. 8:7), one-third of the earth’s salt water is destroyed and turns into blood, killing a third of sea creatures (v. 8f), one-third of fresh-water turns bitter and becomes undrinkable (v. 10f), and one-third of the earth’s light sources disappear (v. 12) (2003, 226-28). Unlike post- and amillennial evangelicals who lament the earth’s current degraded state and often neglect the force of apocalyptic passages of Scripture, premillennialists note that the language of conflagration in 2 Pet. 3:5-13 and Rev. 8:7-12 et al. is too strong to be equated with ‘renewal’ or ‘restoration’. They additionally draw attention to the fact that Gen. 9:11 does not teach that God will refrain from destroying the earth again, but rather He will not do so by the waters of a flood (Isa. 24:5f; 2 Pet. 3:10-12). As the only eschatological position to affirm a future destruction of the earth, premillennialism is widely regarded as harbouring the most hostile attitude towards conservation (see Guth et al. 1995, 368; Orr 2005, 291; Henderson 2005, 1688).

E. HERMENEUTICAL LITERALISM

Premillennialism differs from post- and amillennial eschatologies by embracing a plain-sense reading of Scripture, maintaining that eschatological depictions of mass environmental destruction will be precisely fulfilled in the manner described (2 Pet. 3:5-13; Rev. 8:7-12 et

23 What he defines as “a biblically grounded ethic for human wildlife relations” (Vantassel, 2009, *Contents*, 179).

al.). This hermeneutical literalism is commonly associated with absolute and full inerrantists,²⁴ many of whom subscribe to a premillennial or dispensational outlook. Absolute inerrantists maintain that a third of the sea will be turned into literal blood (Rev. 8:8), whereas full inerrantists insist that a third of the sea will give the appearance of blood (Erickson 2001, 248).²⁵ Though absolute and to a lesser extent full inerrantists are sometimes accused of embracing hyper-literalism, their interpretive approaches do in fact recognise Scripture's use of similes, metaphors, figures of speech and symbolic language (see Jn. 10:9; Isa. 62:8; 2 Sam. 22:9). Additionally, notwithstanding significant hermeneutical differences, absolute and full inerrantists both agree that a third of the sea will be destroyed by divine judgement. Accusations of environmental indifference are therefore levelled against premillennial evangelicals and inerrantists who hold to a future destruction of the earth during a tribulational period and who consequently regard attempts to initiate substantive healing in creation as futile. Performing bivariate and multivariate analyses on extensive survey data, Guth et al. (1995, 364, 377) discover that conservative eschatology (defined as "Biblical literalism, End Times thinking") and dispensational theology are consistently negatively correlated with evangelical support for environmental protection.

In contrast to the hermeneutical literalism of premillennialists and absolute inerrantists, post- and amillennialists are found to frequently decontextualise, interpret 'restoratively' or simply ignore apocalyptic passages of Scripture that depict mass environmental destruction. Eisegetical hermeneutics are employed by Montefiore (1997, 91) when he observes that the "brimstone and fire" falling upon Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24) is "probably the nearest equivalent" [of a biblical reference

24 This author does not consider 'limited inerrancy' to be a feasible evangelical position.

25 Fruchtenbaum (2003, 4) issues a helpful corrective to those who seek to negate or downplay the literal or plain sense meaning of Scripture by quoting D.L. Cooper's *Golden Rule of Interpretation*: "When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning, unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise."

to acid rain]; associates the prodigal son's profligate lifestyle (Lk. 15:11-32) with mankind's wasteful consumption of the earth's resources (*ibid.*, 112); compares Paul's analogy of the body (1 Cor. 12:14-26) with the earth's 'body' that comprises humans and non-humans (*ibid.*, 123-25); and likens the Laodicean church's apathy (Rev. 3:14-22) to evangelicals who are "lukewarm" over environmental issues (*ibid.*, 151-52). Similarly, Osborn (1993, 143) identifies the "faithful and sensible slave" of Matt. 24:45ff – traditionally regarded as a believer who diligently labours in the Lord's work until He returns – as one who cares for the "household" (v. 45) of God's creation.

This nascent eco-theology, usually the domain of non-evangelical scholarship, is developed by Bookless (2008) who attempts to ecologically redefine Bebbington's Quadrilateral (Bebbington, 2005). In so doing he argues that 'Biblicism' should be infused with environmental concerns; that 'Activism' should reflect mankind's ecological mission; that 'Conversionism' must acknowledge believers' obligation to confront environmental issues; and that 'Crucicentrism' must emphasise Christ's cosmic work of creation and ecological reconciliation and redemption (Bookless 2008, 39-46). Whilst elements of Bebbington's Quadrilateral might concern environmental themes, a wholesale redefinition of evangelical dogma is unjustified as the Bible appears to be 'less green' than Montefiore, Osborn and Bookless would appear to suggest (Horrell 2010, 6). Bookless' 'greening' of Evangelicalism's central dogma is, however, symptomatic of wider evangelical attempts to read the Bible as an ecological handbook rather than as the inspired account of God's dealings with humanity.

V. CONCLUSION

It is found that evangelical scholars are increasingly emphasising creation's intrinsic value, beauty and the pleasure God derives from His handiwork to construct a 'creation care' ethic. This represents a departure

from the founding principles of secular conservation that stressed practical and aesthetic concerns, and which facilitated the rational exploration of the environment. It is found that evangelical hermeneutical approaches to conservation are also bookended and influenced by what the exegete considers to be creation's original state [the Mineral Garden of Ezek. 28:11-19 or the Vegetable Garden of Gen. 1] and one's eschatology of redemption [transformative or destructive].

Additionally, attitudes towards conservation are influenced by one's understanding of the relationship between the Adamic and Edenic covenants. Those who favour a conjunctive reading of the two covenants often deemphasise the change that occurs between mankind and the environment, whereas those who favour a disjunctive reading acknowledge the environmental effects of the Fall and are more likely to harbour sceptical attitudes towards conservation ethics. In light of numerous passages of Scripture that depict eschatological outpourings of God's wrath upon the earth, and the tendency of post- and amillennial evangelical scholars to neglect, interpret in a transformative sense, or allegorise such passages, eschatological outlook and hermeneutical literalism are also found to strongly influence attitudes towards conservation.

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Saul, *Epilepsy* & Conversion

P.H. Brazier

KEYWORDS:

| Saul/Paul | *Epilepsy* | Revelation-Conversion |
| Neurology | Trinity | *Yeshua Ha Mashiach* | Human Frailty |

ABSTRACT

The nature of Saul's conversion event on the Damascus Road was cataclysmic and marked a profound change in the man and his beliefs, but also in the absolute and actual ontic nature of him as a human before God. In examining the conversion texts in Acts of the Apostles scholars have periodically raised the question, was Saul/Paul an *epileptic*? Initially we can examine the relevant biblical texts, we can then define, for the purposes of this essay, *epilepsy* and related neurological conditions. What has the academy decided on this question? Chief amongst our sources will be David Landsborough (medical doctor and bible scholar); also, what has a centuries old oral tradition decided? A fresh examination of the biblical text reveals details of other neurological conditions – Saul's blindness and his healing, for example. While other examples in Acts refer obliquely to a disabling illness in Saul/Paul, that might appear to be *epilepsy*, historical diagnoses are fraught with difficulties. However, a possible, particular, diagnosis of *Scintillating Scotoma* does point to a divine sway on Saul in his transition to Paul: not simply a punishing encounter with *El Shaddai* (God Almighty), but a gruelling conversion to redemption in Jesus Christ: *Yeshua Ha Mashiach*.

INTRODUCTION

“Saul, Saul,
why do you persecute me?”

“Who are you, Lord?”
Saul asked.

“I am Jesus,
whom you are persecuting.”

ACTS 9:4-5

The question of the Apostle Paul and *epilepsy* has been raised periodically but with no definite conclusion. Scientists claim to work from a disinterested academic perspective yet exclude the possibility that God might just exist and interact with *His* creation: scientists will commonly regard the story of Paul as a religious delusion because something is clearly wrong, malfunctioning, with his brain! However, Paul’s conversion is not so much a medical manifestation, an illness, to be diagnosed and treated, but an interaction with the one true living God: an encounter both on the mind – specifically the will and intellect – but very much on the actual brain, its circuitry and operation. Theologians and bible scholars seem afraid to countenance that Paul exhibits some of the symptoms of, for example, *temporal lobe epilepsy*, amongst other neurological conditions, for they fear this would, theoretically, invalidate Paul’s mission and achievements. In addition they are wedded to an *impartial* academic neutrality that asserts a perfectly balanced all-encompassing intellect, from a healthy brain: this is seen as the only means of identifying and assessing divinity and truth. If Saul’s brain was not “normal” could his perception and conclusions about the “gods,” or even God, be seen as invalid, before an academic elite? This is the distinction, to a degree, between the temple and the academy: between Greek philosophy and Hebraic revelation.

The aim of this paper is to reassess the claims and counter claims and offer actual medical evidence (in relation to the scriptural text) which *might* point to certain neurological conditions that may be considered congenital, innate, to Paul, but divinely authored and swayed, in the sense that the Holy Spirit pressed on his mind-brain to get through to the old Saul, and then proffered a cure through the hands of Ananias.

The credentials for this paper reflect qualifications in theology and biblical studies, but is there ground for neurology? Yes—I have lived with *epilepsy* for thirty-seven years. Hilary and I met in December 1982 when she was in hospital, post *status epilepticus* (continuous *seizures* for hours, days, usually unto death); we married just over 6 months later after she was discharged. According to the diagnosis by the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, Queen Square (University College London Hospital Trust) she has “refractory focal *epilepsy*, right hippocampal sclerosis with interictal left temporal abnormality, a history of *status epilepticus*, and chronic *migraine*.” The condition was originally diagnosed in 1976, with evidence of mild *seizures* when she was a child. Hilary, to date, has had 14 episodes of *status epilepticus* (1982–2020).

2. SAUL/PAUL: WHAT DOES HE ASSERT

We are talking about Saul, who from his Damascus Road experience became Paul. Therefore considering that the key passages from the Acts of the Apostles, and the key events in his life that effect such a diagnosis and conclusion occur prior to the event of his conversion and renaming, then we are correct at this point to refer to Saul.

Saul, was known as a Pharisee of Pharisees, he rigorously and intensely sought out and persecuted the followers of Jesus, the adherents of “the Way.”¹ The apostles and followers of Jesus, also converts, developed as a

1 Early Jewish Christians referred to themselves as “The Way” (ἡ ὁδός), probably

sect within Judaism in Roman-occupied Palestine: the thousands of first generation Christians were all Jews, either by birth or conversion. Paul notes, after his conversion, “You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.” (Gal 1:13–14) In the Epistle to the Philippians 3:4-6 he outlines his critically zealous involvement as a Pharisee: “... of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.” (Phil 3:4-6). This mission led him to be involved in the stoning of Stephen. Luke accounts for Saul’s zealous participation:

... and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died. And Saul approved of their killing him. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem ... But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.

Acts 7:58–8:3

3. THE SAULINE CONVERSION

So what did Paul – and Luke – write? There are three accounts of his conversion, penned by Paul in the Epistles. In the first epistle to the Church in Corinth Paul questions is he not free? And proves his credentials as an apostle: he had seen the Lord, his work and mission is validated because of his meeting with the Lord on the Damascus Road

coming from Isaiah 40:3, “...prepare the way of the Lord.” According to Acts 11:26, the term “Christian” (Χριστιανός) was first used in reference to Jesus’s disciples in the city of Antioch, meaning “followers of Christ,” by the non-Jewish inhabitants of Antioch. The earliest recorded use of the term “Christianity” (Χριστιανισμός) was by Ignatius of Antioch, in around 100AD.

(1 Cor 9:1). Addressing the Corinthians he asserts, “you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.” Paul also writes, how *Yeshua Ha Mashiach* (Jesus, the Anointed One, the “Christ”), died for our sins – as was set out in the Hebrew scriptures – buried, raised on the third day, again, in accordance with the scriptures and the entire Hebraic-Judaic witness, and how he appeared to Simon Peter, then to the twelve, including James, and to the many: “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me” (1 Cor 15:3–8).

In the opening chapter of The Epistle to the Galatians Paul refers obliquely to the foundational, grounding influence, of his conversion as a divine revelation: *Yeshua Ha Mashiach* appeared – cataclysmically – to Paul:

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.... But when God, who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being.

Gal 1:11-16

So what precisely was this revelation? What concerns us are the details in the three accounts penned by Luke in Acts. There are three overlapping accounts: Acts 9:1-19 (the primary account), Acts 22:6-16 and Acts 26:12-18 (recapitulatory and reflective). Saul, travelling from Jerusalem on the Damascus Road recounts his mission of persecution, he falls to the ground as a bright light flashes around him and a voice announces himself as YHWH, Lord, Jesus. He is blind. A crucial detail for us is in the healing. This we will examine along with the details of Saul’s conversion. Many Bible scholars take the combined accounts in the New Testament to point to a diagnosis of *epilepsy*: in all probability, *temporal*

lobe epilepsy. Specifically, the thorn in the flesh:

But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.

2 Cor 12:6–9

4. *POSTLAPSARIAN: ARE WE STILL NORMAL... OR ABNORMAL?*

God looked on creation and declared it was good. Not necessarily perfect, not divinely flawless, not impeccable, not unimpeachable, not unsullied or spotless: but *fit for purpose*, good – having the required qualities, of a high standard, valid. This is important; there is infinite potential in creation, subject to entropy, the limits of created matter. There are flaws in creation – creative flaws so we exist! In addition the *Fall*, the consequences of original sin, has led humanity to damage itself to a significant and irretrievable level: we are born mired in sin, corrupted, depraved and lost, but not irredeemable: *errare humanum est, perseverare autem diabolicum*² – to err is indeed human, to make mistakes, but to lose sight of these errors and to reinforce them with further fault is diabolical, it is, according to Seneca, of the devil. (We are not, however, *totally* depraved, we can still glimpse how we should be, but we cannot heal ourselves; only Christ can.) Various tribal groups in the West today will assert, in the promotion of their particular lifestyle, sexual practice, and

2 Attributed to Lucius Annaeus Seneca (Seneca the Younger, 4 BC – AD 65). See, *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* – collection of 124 letters dealing with moral issues written to Lucilius Junior. English translation: Margaret Graver & A.A. Long. *Letters on Ethics: To Lucilius*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, (2015)

gender identification, even Weltanschauung, that there is no such thing as normal. Exponents of traditional/orthodox Christians may balk at this, seek to counter with what God has given, what God has created, arguing for a God-given norm, a default position for humanity – and the Bible does bear witness to this – but ironically the idea that there is now no norm is actually correct: since the *Fall* the human has re-created itself as a bizarre, dissolute and corrupt creature, not made by God. Paul and Augustine would surely have concurred. And physical traits/conditions resulting from our arrogant rebellion can be passed on so that, for example, the condition of our brain is far from normal.³ So, we are sullied, changed, damaged – by our own wilfulness – a far from normal brain can be bequeathed to a new person in the womb. Was there a congenital flaw in Saul's brain that manifested itself on the Damascus road?—that allowed God in, so to speak?

5. TEMPORAL LOBE EPILEPSY

Temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE) is a chronic disorder of the nervous system characterized by recurrent, unprovoked focal *seizures* that originate in the temporal lobes (left & right sides) of the brain and last from a few seconds to 5-10 minutes; if longer this becomes a diagnosis of *status epilepticus* – continuous *seizures* for hours, even days, until the brain effectively destroys itself. *Temporal lobe epilepsy* affects the two temporal lobes and hippocampi (junction boxes, effectively, that channel sensory input to the temporal lobes). The temporal lobes analyse this sensory information by comparing with memories laid-down in the individual's memory, and thereby make sense of the world we live in. At its most basic *epilepsy* is a temporary physical breakdown in the wiring – the synaptic pathways – in the brain.

3 For example, see, P.H. Brazier, 'Towards an Understanding of the Ontological Conditions issuing from Original Sin', in *The Heythrop Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 5, September 2019, pp. 739-768.

Epilepsy is a neurological condition, of the brain, but affecting the spinal cord, indeed the entire central nervous system. The medical condition of *epilepsy* (repeatable *seizures* caused by what is considered to be abnormal brain activity) holds a unique place in relation to mind and soul, the supernatural and eternity: God and salvation. The ancient world considered *epilepsy* to be a sacred disease, though the Greek tradition from the time of Hippocrates of Kos, sought to isolate the brain-mind from eternity and from un-quantifiable spiritual influence.⁴ The idea that these *seizures* were caused by stress was a common argument by apparently enlightened medical professionals in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (including Sigmund Freud). These experts then attempted to project their analysis back on to historic figures. Such a conclusion, and retro-projection, is now considered flawed and wide-of-the-mark by neurologists.⁵ Anecdotes and speculation as to the cause of *epilepsy* in historical figures are considered unreliable: there is simply not enough actual evidence to determine the cause. While near impossible it may be, to pin down cause, convulsions and *seizure* patterns can be observed from written records, biographical accounts.

Epileptic seizures may be caused by an injury to the brain, or may be congenital. A diagnosis may issue from the culmination of very mild *seizures* during childhood – moments of frozen expression, absent mindedness, losing all sense of continuity and place just for a second – which often indicate an underlying latent *epileptic* condition before the onset of actual and observable *seizure* events. *Seizures* may be focal or generalized. Focal *seizures* are caused by a small area of scar tissue in

4 *On the Sacred Disease* a medical work attributed to Hippocrates of Kos was written circa. 400 B.C.

5 See, Theodor Reik, 'The Study on Dostoyevsky,' in *From Thirty Years with Freud* (New York: Farrar and Rhinehart, 1940), 158–76. Freud's analysis (that Dostoyevsky's *epilepsy* was not caused by a physical flaw in the brain, but was a pseudo-*epilepsy*, the symptoms being brought on by stress and guilt, also hysteria) is now considered speculative and inaccurate. See also, Nathan Rosen, 'Freud on Dostoyevsky's *Epilepsy*: A Reevaluation,' *Dostoyevsky Studies* 9 (1988) pp. 107–25. For a theological analysis of Dostoyevsky's *epilepsy* see, P.H. Brazier, *Dostoyevsky: A Theological Engagement* (Foreword, Murray Rae; Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, Wipf and Stock, 2016).

the brain; generalized *seizures* offer no focal point. *Seizures* cause minute damage in the brain, and therefore leave scarring. Such scarring then triggers further *seizures* of increasing intensity, because at its most basic *epilepsy* is simply a minute electrical malfunction, a repeatable glitch or flaw/fault, in the brain's wiring, in the synaptic pathways that provide the conditions for thought. From a reductionist perspective these electro-chemical events are taken as the sole manifestation of 'thought,' but the functioning synaptic pathways do not so much constitute our thoughts, as provide a vehicle for our thoughts. As the scarring increases, the number and intensity of the *seizures* increases.

i. Epilepsy ... and an Eschatological Crisis ?

Epilepsy may under certain circumstances be considered to be eschatological because the condition of *epilepsy* can foster dualistic, binary thinking, and as such has an inclination towards an eschatological way of seeing the world; in addition, there is a sense in many *epileptics* of the need for urgency in decision making, in dealing with a crisis, a sense that everything is coming to a head, that judgment is coming (these thoughts often precede a *seizure* of varying intensity). This may be considered a particular interpretation of eschatology when most people do not concern themselves with the crisis of life and the risk of eternal judgment. *Epilepsy* can lift people out of a worldly complacency, it is not an inconvenient illness that occasionally disables the individual. An *epileptic* brain operates differently from a so-called normal brain. *Epileptically* conditioned beliefs significantly alter the superficial religious background (characterized by a relatively trite theological anthropology). Why? *Epileptics* are often forced into the position of outsiders. People around an *epileptic* fear a *seizure*, not just because they do not know how to cope with it, but it un-nerves them – they fear losing their own mind, not being in control, and they fear the risk of death (*SUDEP*: sudden unexplained death from *epilepsy*). Outsiders, like lepers in the biblical world of Jesus, or the blind, the lame, the disabled, who are ostracized from the Jerusalem

temple cult and religion, these people either love Jesus, or loath him: the Gospel sees such matters in terms of light and dark, either-or, angels or demons, heaven or hell. Such is the case with *epileptics*, even if the condition is relatively well controlled. It may be speculated that this is why the marginalized, the afflicted, the suffering outcasts, saw Jesus and responded strongly: either one way or the other.

ii. Epilepsy ... and a Scientific World View?

The only way to look at Paul’s conversion, and whatever medical event we might read from it, is eschatological. A *krisis* builds, judgement occurs: death, or near-death, triggers change – the world still remains the same, but there has been a change in people, this is movement, either the movement towards salvation or, for some, a movement away from salvation into damnation. The ancient Greeks, and the Romans to a certain extent, understood this in a way that many Christians today fail to: what we do in the here-and-now echoes through eternity.

Let us briefly consider *epilepsy* and cause.

The standard reductionist (i.e., modern/scientific) approach to *epilepsy* – reflecting the closed-off world of Kantian philosophy – conceives of *epilepsy* as a brain disease, a malfunction in part of the grey matter/flesh inside the skull that is manifested by the synaptic pathways between brain cells. Any spiritual dimension is simply where the sensation in a person’s mind leading up to a *seizure* may, under certain circumstances, and according to the individual’s background, be given a “religious” gloss: thus is the reductionalist, nihilistic, deterministic, world view about *epilepsy* from the *impartial* scientists. Feelings of warmth, light, contentment, pleasure, heightened awareness, and so forth – these are considered by psychologists and neurologists to be “religious” (though without an accompanying definition and explanation of what being religious actually is, and with no reasoned attempt at a theological analysis). Thus, *epileptic seizures*, where there is consciousness of the pre-*seizure* or actual *seizure*

in the *epileptic*,⁶ are often considered spiritual, but this is no more than a comment upon the individual experts interpretation of the event. The psychologists and neurologists themselves do not make sense of the event theologically, but regard *epilepsy* as yet another brain activity, subjective and contained within a closed-off Kantian universe. They may indeed deny the reality of any spiritual – or supernatural – dimension to the world that transcends the psyche of human beings, but the best they can honestly summon would be agnosticism.⁷ But what can be deduced from the other side from the psychologists and neurologists?—from someone who is *epileptic*? Hilary, in response, writes:

It is essential to accept that the *seizure* is a physical, medically defined condition, yet I have come to believe, to know deep in the mind (the self as a 'temple' for the Holy Spirit's work) that God notices the event as it occurs, and is able to guide, enlighten during the *epileptic* activity, in a way that is indeed beyond human, earth-bound understanding. It can be simply in the sense of revelation establishing a way forward having the knowing that the decision is of myself – God guides, showing that which was already in myself, but until that moment was hidden. *Seizures* can strip the mind of the detritus that masks, even attempts to obliterate wisdom, giving an enlightenment for which God gave the key within the dynamics of the *seizure*. It could follow that the mind in these circumstances onto the soul.⁸

6 A *simple partial seizure* involves a degree of conventional consciousness by the *epileptic*; a *complex partial seizure* involves no *conventional consciousness*, but *altered consciousness*, as the individual will still walk, try to talk, bump into things, but have no more understanding of the world and its dangers around her/him that a ten-month old child just beginning to walk (a state of *complex partial seizure* can sometimes be similar to advanced dementia). The depth of a *complex partial seizure* may lead into a full-blown *seizure (tonic-clonic)* with total loss of consciousness and the risk of brain death.

7 See Coles, Alasdair. "*Temporal lobe epilepsy and Dostoyevsky seizures: Neuropathology and Spirituality.*" Published online, Royal College of Psychology, 2013: <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/Alasdair%20Coles%20Temporal%20lobe%20epilepsy%20and%20Dostoyevsky%20seizures.pdf>

8 Hilary Brazier. Unpublished notes, written May 26, 2020.

iii. Epilepsy ... and a Biblical World View?

Things are different with the Bible; the Bible being a repository of God’s revelation and the truth about the reality we occupy and live out our lives in. The biblical world is invisibly peopled by angels and demons: spirits that underpin and influence the actions and beliefs of people. To the bible authors, these spiritual beings were not to be considered abstract ideas; angels and demons were not to be seen as psychological projections, they were to be seen as real – as real as people are; invisible, perceived by their sway, their influence on humanity, but nonetheless an actuality. Has Western humanity generally, even some of the mainstream institutional churches, by-and-large lost this understanding of the eschatological reality, the influences of good or bad spirits on the human mind? The proposition that we may be influenced in our thinking, in our beliefs and actions, by angels and demons is no abstract idea; it is a concept we find in the Bible, specifically the New Testament (but also in other religions).

iv. Evil ... and the Demonic?

The apparent dualism between good and evil, angelic and demonic, between a closed-off reality, and a world porous to the eternal, this paradoxical duality may define the human condition, but it does not define God and *His* economy with creation. It is of paramount importance to note that in traditional Christian theology the devil is not a parallel “god,” equal to God, uncreated, co-existing from eternity. Rather, the devil, the arch-leader of demonic evil forces, is a creature, that is, created, an angel: often named Lucifer,⁹ Satan, later to be given as a common name

9 The name/term Lucifer, corresponding to the Greek name, Ἑωσφόρος, “dawn-bringer,” is associated with the planet Venus in its morning appearances, as such it was often applied to religious and mythological figures deemed to be associated with the planet. This was because of the particular movement – erratic, sporadic and intermittent – and appearance of Venus in the sky. By associating mythological figures with stars and planets the mythology surrounding such religious characters often involved a fall from the heavens to earth or the underworld, therefore Venus’s apparent *fall* or disappearance is associated with the fallen angel, who mutates we might say into the devil, Satan. A

for personified evil: the devil. He was good, in some ways the highest creation, from the brightness of angels, but he rebelled, set himself up as a “god,” and attempted to parallel God. Such a one could not coexist in heaven, in eternity. He fell. He was expelled (Rev 12:7–10).

Epilepsy may help to generate this “either-or” dualism but Scripture bears witness to a deeper understanding of the relationship between *seizures* and the world of angels and demons: an *epileptic seizure* (or for that matter cramp in the leg!) may be the result of an electro-chemical reaction in the brain or muscle, determined by our activities, and all that has led up to the person we are at a given moment in time; or, the apparent symptom of cramp, the *seizure*, may have been triggered by the influence of a spiritual being: invisible, but outside of our control (but like Satan in the Book of Job, not beyond God’s purview!). The confluence of the physically generated symptom and the sway exerted by a spiritual, non-corporeal presence, creating the *seizure* is something of a temporal and ontic paradox (and are not such paradoxes proven by the study of quantum mechanics? – a single quanta may simultaneously exist ... and not exist): these encounters with a spiritual presence may be good or bad: such are angels and demons – governed as they are by a moral reality. Such spiritual forces may press or exert sway unconsciously over our bodies, but angels and demons – real or psychological – often whisper into the conscious mind of an individual, suggesting, inviting them to indulge in beliefs and acts that will in time ensure their *Fall* and condemnation into an eternal hell. But what are the worst demonically inspired beliefs and acts? War, politics, lying, false witness, treason, depraved sexual behaviour hiding behind a corrupted narcissistic concept of love? Judas, Herod and Pilate stand out as amongst the worst in the gospels: this is the repetition of

similar term in the Hebrew Bible, (carried over into the AV edition of the English Bible) as “Lucifer,” is considered to be the beginning of the Christian tradition of applying the name Lucifer to Satan because of the *fall* from heaven. As such and as a name for the Devil, Lucifer is derived from the Hebrew word *hēylēl* (Isaiah 14:12). Modern reductionalist biblical studies take this etymology – the name for Venus, the planet – as an excuse for denying the existence of personified evil and the associated eschatological reality.

Lucifer's fall and humanity's depraved addiction to original sin, often imposed on others through the body politic!

v. Good and Evil ... and Epilepsy?

Epilepsy defines frailty. It lays open our vulnerability. If the mind can be subject to forces from outside of what we take to be perceivable reality then not only bad forces but also good forces could act upon the mind, and in turn upon the brain. And good forces, good spirits, could trigger an *epileptic seizure* in one who is prone to such attacks in the same way that more tangible triggers may cause an attack. If the brain, or part of the brain, has a weakness then something, even with good intention, may act as a trigger. This brings us to the trigger for the apparent *epileptic seizure* that struck Saul on the road to Damascus: a Spirit-enabled encounter with the risen and ascended Christ had a dramatic and cataclysmic effect on him (Acts 9:1-18). This reality of spiritual influence is more open, more noticeable, in *epileptics*. Ultimately it is a question: to whom do we belong: personified evil, or to God? Who are we exposed to? What influences us? Proximity and commitment to Christ, the incarnation of God, should alleviate such a danger: God protects *His* own. Genuine commitment to Christ will provide a pneumatological firewall, so to speak, against the wiles of the devil; but this spiritual protection is not available to those whose faith is false and disingenuous (Matt 7:21-23).

Spiritual protection, Grace, should protect individuals from the guiles and charms of the devil, the ever present invitation to *Fall*, to recapitulate on original sin, and from the subversive influence of demons. This is not favoritism; the potential is there for all humanity. It comes down to a question of faith and proximity: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matt 11:28-29.) A Christian may have *epileptic*

seizures and still be insulated by God's Holy Spirit from the demonic world. It comes down to the relationship between the individual and God: the promise of spiritual protection issues from Christ's resurrection.¹⁰

6. PAUL & EPILEPSY: THEORY & CONJECTURE

An ancient oral tradition in Ireland referred to *epilepsy* as *St Paul's disease*. The assumption was that Paul was *epileptic*, that this was common knowledge, and that the oral thread went back to St Patrick, to Rome, to the Patristic Church and so to the sub-apostolic period: "In old Ireland, *epilepsy* was known as 'Saint Paul's disease.' The name points to the centuries-old assumption that the apostle suffered from *epilepsy*."¹¹

In 2003 the BBC (British Broadcasting Company, the National TV broadcaster) fielded a documentary on the Apostle Paul.¹² Within this programme the writer's claimed that the apostle's conversion on the road to Damascus may have been caused by an *epileptic seizure* or a freak lightning bolt. Such theories challenge the belief that Paul's conversion was caused by divine intervention. The writers justify by quoting scientists who link religious experience with *epilepsy*. The assumption was that if his conversion was down to a neurological abnormality then this denied any encounter with God: Saul was deluded – according to the sceptics. There is for them no "god;" if there is a "god" then only a rational educated elite might have any perception or encounter ... therefore an educated

10 In Mark's Gospel, the boy who manifests *epileptic seizures* is in his right-mind, and morally sound before God after the *seizures*. An interesting question is, did this boy continue to have mild momentary *seizures*, or auras, after the exorcism at Jesus's hands; was there a residual *epileptic* condition no longer aggravated by demons, no longer life threatening, though at times of mild *seizure*, inconvenient?

11 *Deutsche Epilepsymuseum Kork* (Museum for *epilepsy* and the history of *epilepsy*: <http://www.epilepsiemuseum.de/alt/paulusen.html>. See also, P Vercelleto, "Saint Paul disease. Ectasia and ecstatic *seizures*?" *US National Library of Medicine & National Institute of Health*: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/7676119>

12 The documentary, broadcast on BBC1 on May 11, was presented by Jonathan Edwards, the athlete and Evangelical Christian.

liberal elite can rationalize God out of the picture: i.e., religious atheism? The writers of the documentary ignore the theory that the very weakness in the physical flesh that constituted Saul’s brain was a point of contact with God: *Elohim, El Shaddai, YWHW: Yeshua Ha Mashiach*? The idea that the apostle’s conversion on the road to Damascus may have been caused by an *epileptic seizure* is approaching the encounter the wrong way round. The correct approach would be to assert that an *epileptic seizure* (if indeed it was such) assisted God. It was through a conversation with the divine that forced a change of heart in Saul:

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied.

“Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

Acts 9:3-6

All fairly rational: Paul considered what was said to him, and converted. But this is not the words of Paul: “He fell to the ground...” is Luke the author and physician relaying what happened. What we have is a medical diagnosis of sorts.

Professor Vilayanur Ramachandran, neuroscientist has often postulated this idea, that patients who suffered *seizures* often had intense mystical experiences, that this did not rule out a divine role. “If God exists and he is interacting with us humans, he could have put an antenna in your brain to be sensitive to him or her ... Elaine Storkey, another leading Church of England theologian, told the programme: ‘An *epileptic* fit doesn’t turn someone’s life around. Something else was happening at a much deeper level.’”¹³

13 From a report and analysis of the documentary in *The Daily Telegraph*, April 19, 2003.

See: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1427916/St-Paul-converted-by-epileptic->

An even more bizarre theory, suggested by Dr John Derr, an American earthquake expert, is that Paul could have been struck by a bolt of electromagnetic energy, similar to ball lightning, released by an earthquake – but what earthquake, which no one else experienced in the group! Such scientists assert in the programme that such an event could have triggered what Paul would believe to be a mystical experience, as well as leaving him blind for several days.

7. LANDSBOROUGH... & MEDICAL OPINION

Doctor, neurologist and bible scholar David Landsborough published a summary of theoretical diagnoses related to Saul's encounter with the resurrected Jesus: evidence speculatively offered to suggest a neurological origin for Paul's ecstatic visions, the physical state at the time of his conversion and related ecstatic experiences, with conjecture as to a diagnosis of *temporal lobe epilepsy*.¹⁴

Landsborough opens his study with what he considers to be examples of neurological disease. These are too numerous to elucidate here, subject to argue that these are conjectures. He then considers the precise nature of what Paul recounts as episodes that might be considered *epileptic*. The only problem is that – except in the case of *partial seizures* – the patient has no knowledge of, or memory, of the *seizure*. Therefore we have a very slanted and incomplete description of the range of possible *seizures*. Often

fit-suggests-BBC.html

For Ramachandran's comments see, Vilayanur Ramachandran, *The Emerging Mind: The BBC Reith Lectures*, London: Profile Books, 2003, Chp 2 'Believing is Seeing,' pp. 27f.

See also, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reith_Lectures#2000s

See also: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/belief-and-the-brains-god-spot-1641022.html>; Tuesday 10 March 2009.

See also, Alison Motluk, "Touched by the Word of God," *New Scientist*, issue no. 2107, Nov 8, 1997:

<https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg15621071-000-touched-by-the-word-of-god/>.

14 David Landsborough, "St. Paul & *Temporal lobe epilepsy*," *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery, and Psychiatry*, Vol 50, 1987, pp. 659–664.

an *epileptic* cannot speak or write of attacks, however it is possible to be aware that an event has occurred post-*seizure*, but to be totally unaware of the *seizure* itself As Landsborough notes, “Nothing is known about Paul’s past health and family history.”¹⁵

It is clear from much that Landsborough quotes and discusses – “caught up in the third heaven,” “psychic auras,” “in and out of the body,” “ecstatic visions,” “buffeting,” “a thorn in the flesh” – that throughout his life Saul/Paul had some physical/mental condition (ailment) that set him apart from the people around him: exhibiting symptoms that can be experienced by people with *temporal lobe epilepsy*, but equally by people with no evidence of *temporal lobe epilepsy*, but symptoms related to the physical wiring of the brain. Though in Paul’s case it seems reasonable to cite some neurological origin, that is, his brain worked in minute ways that were different to the average or “normal” person. However, we err if we do not acknowledge that “A person growing up with *epilepsy* regards the events, the aberrations, so to speak, as ‘normal,’ an *epileptic* knows the condition to an extent and knows the love of the One Creator, the Father in heaven, who will impart revelations beyond the scope of the normal.”¹⁶

A diagnosis of *temporal lobe epilepsy* for Paul depends on his own, subjective, descriptions: as recorded in the epistles, though assessed, as we have noted, by Luke the physician. Given that this requires remembering the event, then are these *simple partial* as distinct from *complex partial seizures*? And there is generally sufficient evidence in the much read events to suggest a neurological disorder, in all probability, *temporal lobe epilepsy*. Landsborough analyses these events,¹⁷ which I accept, therefore there is no need to repeat them here.

This raises questions about Paul’s remembrances. These are not like you or me recalling a discussion with a friend later in the day, or trying to

15 Landsborough, “St Paul & *Temporal lobe epilepsy*,” p. 659.

16 Comments by Hilary, my wife, May 26, 2020.

17 Landsborough, “St Paul & *Temporal lobe epilepsy*,” p. 61.

piece together what happened in a car accident. No; it is likely that Saul had no immediate memory of what had happened on the Damascus road. But moments out of sequence would have returned after time had elapsed. Although in a *deep complex partial seizure* the individual does not appear to be consciously laying down memories from sensory information, however, post *seizure*, a sight or sound may just rekindle remembrance months later. For example Hilary, my wife, underwent an episode of *status epilepticus* in 1999. We were shopping. Hilary had disappeared into herself while we were at the supermarket checkout: a passive *complex partial seizure*. I managed to get her outside and onto a bus – hoping the *seizure* would pass and we could get home. However, after the bus had gone for one-and-a-half-miles, with the *seizure* deepening, Hilary went into a tonic clonic *seizure* (a classic shaking, falling, *seizure*), and collapsed into an episode of *status epilepticus* (continuous *seizures*) ... on the bus. This lasted for 2 hours: hospitalized for 4 days. A few weeks later when we repeated the trip, we left the supermarket, went to get onto the bus but Hilary shied away, she was racked by deep fear and would not get on the bus, she pointed to the wheel arch behind the entrance door: it had been hastily and roughly patched, un painted, from an accident and gave a unique identification signature to that particular vehicle. Then I realized: this was the very same bus we had got onto when she had been in a deep *complex partial seizure*, which had led into the *status epilepticus*! She recognized it; she now said so. I had recognized it also. I realized immediately the implication: during the deep *complex partial seizure* (precursor to the *status epilepticus* event) her brain had laid down the memory engram. But after the *seizure*, *a posteriori*, she had no access to the memories laid down during the *seizure* (like failing to remember a dream after waking). But the coincidence of this vehicle being the very same bus (it was the same route, the No. 57) we had been on during the *seizure*, had triggered a comparison and an identification.

How much of Saul/Paul's remembrances issue – *post ictal* – from *complex partial seizures*? – in particular the conversion experience:

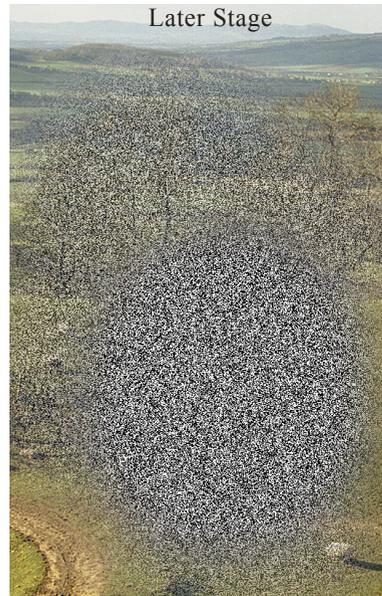
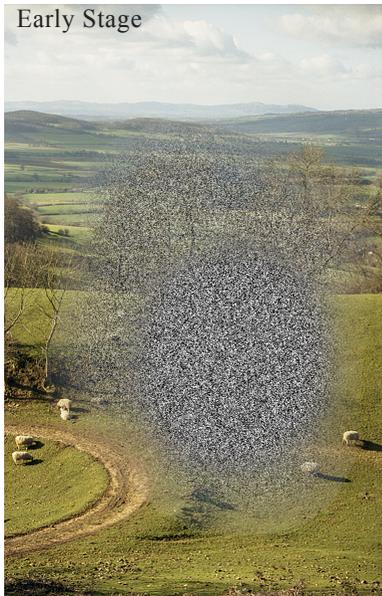
recalled months, years, later? And how much recall was engendered, drawn out, of Paul, at the hands of Luke the physician.

Landsborough analyses the evidence in Acts, evidence written by Luke the physician either paraphrasing Paul, or presenting diagnosis in narrative: this is not a series of conclusions issuing from seemingly impartial medical examinations, but it is important to remember that Luke was a physician. He would have observed in the course of his work *seizures*, neurological conditions, and sought to identify, define a prognosis and attempt a cure. Landsborough considers length of attacks, what medical history we can deduce, *inter-ictal* states (evidence of personality disorder between *seizures*) and – crucially – Paul’s reflection on his conversion event. Within this analysis Landsborough effectively dismisses the regaining of Paul’s sight as being of any significance: “The expression something like scales fell from his eyes is probably a metaphor describing a rapid return of vision.” Landsborough assumes these “scales” – ὡς λεπίδες – happen for a brief period, less than a minute, as he regained his sight, rather than being a characteristic of his three days of effective blindness.

Landsborough examines the speculative conclusions of neurologists, psychologists as to Paul’s religiosity and the question of post-ictal blindness (light-out blindness, an empty black field of vision), and other theories but in the end draws an open conclusion.

8. SCINTILLATING SCOTOMA

A pertinent detail in the account of Saul on the road to Damascus has effectively been overlooked. Yes we may cautiously assert that a Spirit-enabled encounter with the risen and ascended Christ had a dramatic and cataclysmic effect on him (Acts 9:1–18). However, his symptoms are reminiscent of an *epileptic seizure* (phasing between *simple partial* and *complex partial*, between *consciousness* and *altered consciousness* – in



A “photoshoped” picture/graphic showing the effect of *Scintillating Scotoma* and its progress and potential permanency. The scaling pattern will appear to be vibrating with the tiny “scales” moving, like white noise on a TV with no transmission. What is happening is neurological, it is in the cerebral cortex (at the back of the brain, which processes visual input) not in the actual eyes.

one of the temporal lobes), both in the attack on the road and in the details given at the point of his healing at the hands of Ananias: Saul/Paul’s temporary blindness (an extended period of *postictal status*?) indicates the possibility of a *seizure* in the rear of the cerebral cortex (the outer layer of the brain), which processes information from the eyes before sending it to the temporal lobes for interpretation, recognition, and so forth. This period of *postictal status* appears to have generated *Scintillating Scotoma*, or conversely *retinal migraine* (the two conditions are similar but not the same), though both are often referred to by sufferers as *migraine aura* or *migraine lights*, and can occur – rarely – in both eyes simultaneously. This is a visual effect that precedes or sometimes follows on from a

migraine, or accompanies a *migraine*.¹⁸ Pertinently, it is sometimes part of a *postictal state* (i.e., post *seizure*). The person will be normal, conscious, and looking say at a house, but then a twinkling noise pattern (like white noise on a television screen that has no signal) will start, sometimes in the centre of the eye(s), or to one side, and grow to encompass the visual field and thereby effectively blind the person, though there may be some peripheral vision. This may be seemingly monochrome, or with some identifiable colour.¹⁹ The attack may last minutes, or up to an hour; in rare occurrences it may last for several days, and in extremely rare instances for years. After an episode of *status epilepticus*, Hilary, my wife, had this condition in the lower right-hand corner of her visual field (no more than around 3–4 percent of the visual field), in the right eye, continuously for six years! It then simply disappeared. If it had been in the centre of her visual field (like Saul?), appearing to encompass both eyes, then she would have been, in practical terms, effectively blind.

What does the account tell us in the Acts of the Apostles? The key passage is when Ananias, several days after the conversion/*seizure* (on the road to Damascus) visits:

So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored.²⁰

Acts 9:17–18b

18 See, for a brief and succinct definition and description, Wikipedia: *Scintillating Scotoma*: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scintillating_scotoma and *Retinal Migraine*: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Retinal_migraine

19 Google “*migraine aura*,” or “*Scintillating Scotoma*,” selecting images, to see the variety and type; these are “photo-shopped” images made by people who suffer from this condition, and are therefore comparable by analogy.

20 Ἀπῆλθεν δὲ Ἀνανίας καὶ εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν καὶ ἐπιθεὶς ἐπ’ αὐτὸν τὰς χεῖρας εἶπεν Σαοὺλ ἀδελφέ ὁ Κύριος ἀπέσταλκέν με, Ἰησοῦς, ὁ ὄφθεις σοι ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ ἣ ἤρχου ὅπως ἀναβλέψῃς καὶ πληρῶθῃς Πνεύματος Ἁγίου. Καὶ εὐθέως ἀπέπεσαν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν ὡς λεπίδες ἀνέβλεψεν τε καὶ ἀναστὰς ἐβαπτίσθη. Acts 9:17–18b, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 346.

The key here is the phrase, “something like scales (ὡς λεπιδες).”²¹ Sufferers of *Scintillating Scotoma* or *retinal migraine* have attempted to visualize in photographs or drawings the appearance of these *migraine auras*. The pictures produced often look like fine tiny, animated, shimmering, scales that obscure what is being looked at. Saul came face-to-face with the resurrected Christ and survived the encounter, but not unscathed. According to the Hebrew Bible (Exod 33:20; cf. Gen 32:30; 33:23; Judg 6:22; Isa 6:5), Saul should have died: clearly pain, disability, blindness here, is God’s mercy!

Landsborough as we noted assumes that the scales happened as he regained sight. I would cautiously assert than the scales had been in his sight, so to speak, for three days from the point of his conversion. In the case of the apostle Paul, the aura, the visual “scales,” appeared to encompass both eyes, however, what was happening was not in the eye or the optic nerve, but neurological. The “scales,” the “flakes,” the visual white noise, was in effect, in the cerebral cortex (the back of the brain), the brain’s visual processor, for three days, obscuring all his vision like an eclipse. This we may cautiously assert was perhaps *postictal status* (i.e., a continuous state – after the *seizure* – of *Scintillating Scotoma* or *Retinal Migraine*); he could have remained like this for the rest of his life. But God sent Ananias to heal him not simply out of sympathy but because God had a purpose – a mission – for him, for which he would need his sight.

This attack, one *seizure*, was at a cataclysmic moment in his life, a point of crisis. This *Scintillating Scotoma* or *Retinal Migraine* – in the *plural cortices* (cerebral cortex) –if it was such, may be considered to be an unfortunate side-effect issuing from his encounter with Jesus, which had triggered the *seizure*, phasing between *simple partial* and *complex partial*: in the temporal lobe(s). Such a one-off *seizure* was triggered by an encounter with the Holy Spirit on the road to Damascus; the healing

21 ὡς λεπιδες (*hōs lepidēs* Acts 9:18): Greek: *lepidēs*, “scales,” “flakes,” from *lepis*, or *lepra*, scalliness (hence leprosy): a literal translation (Nestle-Aland), “And immediately fell from eyes, his, as it were, scales.”

came at the hands of, and from, Ananias in Damascus, who was a channel, or conduit, for the Holy Spirit.

We may compartmentalize symptoms into classifiable conditions/diseases, but these are human structures imposed on the brain and the mind. When sinful humanity meets the divine, then something has to give, deep inside the immense complexity of our brains,²² with the ramifications that the mind is both independent of, yet intimately intertwined with the brain. If an *epileptic* is touched in such a way by the Holy Spirit then the frailty of a brain prone to *epileptic seizures* may result in an attack. A priest-monk of the Community of the Resurrection in Mirfield, Yorkshire, once commented to Hilary that perhaps God could do more through her with the *epilepsy* than *He* could without it! Hilary wrote about the perplexing question of self: “I still find it strange even now to hear from another what has occurred in *epileptic* activity and have no memory of it whatever; particularly if my behaviour in this state has been bizarre, childlike, or not recognizing self, those around me, or the place, however familiar. It can be terrifying with hindsight.” And again in another letter, “. . . I can’t remember anything. It is akin to living with two selves, the first being God’s gift initially without the *epilepsy*. The second self, that is possibly God’s gift too, with the *epilepsy*, which is totally unpredictable—disturbances from mild to severe can occur without warning, or cancel memory—the first I know of their occurrence is when told, or finding myself in an unknown place which I eventually recognize as say . . . our house.” This element of two gifts, a dual self, can sound disturbing to some but it may be that this is true of all of us, that there are two selves in all of us (Jung spoke often about the shadow self). It is just that in Hilary’s case the *epilepsy* throws this into sharp focus.

A pertinent question a Jesuit priest put to me once was, did the boy in Mark’s Gospel (Mark 9:14-29) continue to have mild *seizures* after Jesus had cast out the demon? For example, mild *petit mal*, *aura*, strange

22 It is widely acknowledged by neurologists and scientists that a single human brain is the most complex object/entity in the known universe.

moments, but of little or no consequence? The demon had clearly worsened the boy's condition, and Jesus, in exorcising may have given *partial* or complete healing to the brain as well as casting out the demon. Grace protects, but we continue in the *Fall (simil iustus et peccator)*, if through sin we move too far away from the Lord's grace then we become more subject to the vagaries and vicissitudes of this reality; however, there is also a general debilitation in the aging process which will mean various parts of our bodies will ultimately fail – including our brains.²³ Why did Jesus not necessarily proffer a complete healing? A complete healing would have caused a catastrophic change of character/personality. A complete physical healing/cauterizing/scar removal would have changed the person the boy's father knew and loved, and the boy would not have known himself. It is well known that a serious head injury can alter a personality completely. There is no ἀποκατάστασις, no reconstitution, restitution or restoration, no return to the original or “primordial” condition: not this side of eternity. In addition it is now known by neurosurgeons that the removal (operation) of the scarred brain tissue will generate fresh scarring and therefore new *seizures*. What Jesus gave, we may speculate, was eschatological protection from the evil that toyed with the boy's condition.

9. CONCLUSION

David Landsborough was perhaps too sure simply to dismiss Paul's recovery of sight (the “scales” dropping from his eyes) as “a metaphor describing a rapid return of vision.”²⁴ The “scales” as such were not a side effect lasting no more than half a minute as he regained his sight, no, it is reasonable to suppose that they were the form and type of his

23 Octogenarian stroke victims are now routinely prescribed anti-convulsants not because they have been diagnosed as *epileptic* but because the medicines may (1) limit the damage to the area of brain where the stroke happened but also (2) to limit any miss-firing of neurons and synaptic pathways in the stroke-damaged area that could manifest in a *seizure*.

24 Landsborough, pp. 661-62

three-day blindness: the scales (ὡς λεπιδες) did not dissolve and recede as he regained his sight, but “fell away” (ἀπέπεσαν), having obscured his vision for three days. In all probability this was a recovery, a healing at the hands of Ananias, of an enduring episode of the condition, which had rendered him effectively blind. Is *Scintillating Scotoma* a form of *epilepsy*? Some neurologists will assert it is, others not, others that it relates to non-*epileptic seizures*. Whatever. But it is neurological and it impairs the functionality of the visual cortex, and as such it is as disabling as a *seizure*. But it is “good” (Gen 1:31) because as a flaw in Saul’s brain it serves the purposes of God: *Elohim, El Shaddai* – Saul’s Hebraic tradition! Given that there appears to be no record of it causing permanent blindness it may be compared to an *epileptic seizure* (indeed many *epileptics* experience this condition). The other examples in the Acts of the Apostles of a disabling illness in Saul/Paul certainly appear to be *epileptic*, but historical diagnoses are fraught with difficulties, and may simply be unprovable: wrong. A diagnosis of *Scintillating Scotoma* can only be conjecture, but it does move the debate away from a hard-and-fast dualistic either-or which has characterised the question of *epilepsy* as part of the Paul’s health limitation in relation to his conversion encounter.

David Landsborough’s aim in his article on the issue of the Paul and *epilepsy* was to show how, “Evidence is offered to suggest a neurological origin for Paul’s ecstatic visions.” However, this raises 3 questions:

1) Was Paul deluded by some neurological malfunction in his brain because, according to scientists, God cannot exist?

or

2) Was God – *Elohim, El Shaddai, YWHW: Yeshua, Mashiach* – the origin and cause of Paul’s conversion, a side effect a side-effect of the “meeting” being neurological?

or

3) Was the neurological event experienced by Saul on the Damascus road, congenital, part of Paul’s brain, and was an integral part of God’s sway?

The Trinitarian Spirit of God *pressed* on the physicality of Paul's brain-mind, the stress of this encounter triggered a neurological condition which was out-of-the-ordinary, beyond the predictable, and therefore may be considered to be miraculous.

The precise nature of Saul/Paul's brain was crucial to God getting through, we might say. The consequences of this neurological event were good (i.e. fit for purpose). Saul was not converted by an *epileptic seizure*, but the evidence points to certain neurological characteristics (i.e. *seizure* related) being *crucial* and *precise* in the event of his conversion: the *detail* and *providence* is too much to dismiss, the *precision* is, we might assert, *awesome* – too much and he would have been blinded and perhaps mentally disabled for life, brain-damaged irretrievably, or dead; too little and he would have dismissed the event and carried on in his persecution of Christians, the change would have been insufficient.

Why *epilepsy*? Why a breadth of apparently disabling neurological conditions across his life? Because there was immense and intense, value, eschatologically, in them: Saul, then Paul, experienced these conditions, which then came to a head with his conversion encounter, these neurological events were crucial to the person and missionary he became, and for that matter, for salvation history. The Damascus Road *seizure*/neurological event forced Saul into a life-changing situation, demonstrated by his name-change. He became an outsider: ostracized by the fledgling Jewish-Christian community, feared by them; hunted down by his Pharisaic community and by the Sanhedrin as a traitor. What he experienced was a near-death event: God's judgement. *Epilepsy* is both a medical and mystical tradition.²⁵ The years spent away from Jerusalem and Damascus following his conversion were essential

25 Where mystery is an "incomprehensible certainty" not an "interesting uncertainty," wrote Gerald Manley Hopkins in a letter to his friend Robert Bridges. See Catherine Phillips (ed.), *Gerard Manley Hopkins, Selected Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 169-70, 194

for reflection, healing and recovery, before being called to his mission! *Epilepsy* can sometimes be devastating, at other times enlightening. Therefore the Damascus Road *seizure* was crucial and central to this crisis in his life, but also for the rest of humanity: the encounter on the Damascus road was a neurological response to a meeting with God's salvation, the anointed Hebrew saviour, the resurrected *Yeshua Ha Mashiach*.

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The Classical Islamic Model of Revelation: A Critique

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KEYWORDS:

| Divine Revelation | Inspiration | Scripture |
| Infallibility | Qur'an | Islamic Classical Position |

ABSTRACT:

The classical Islamic position of divine revelation considers the Qur'an inerrant because Allah dictated his speech, word for word, to prophet Mohammad through angel Jibril. Mohammad's followers, in their turn, memorized the spoken Qur'an until the caliph 'Uthman decided to compile the written Qur'an and send it to the other Islamic regions. The first part of the paper shall explain the classical position of divine revelation by following Noor Adin 'Atir's model of revelation. It shall also study the historical situation of the divine inspiration during and after the life of Mohammad. The second part of the paper shall focus on the weaknesses of the classical position of divine revelation and conclude that the classical position does not guarantee the inerrancy of the Qur'an..

INTRODUCTION

Islamic revelation in Arabic language is called *wahy*. Muslims believe that Allah revealed the Qur'an to Mohammad through his angel Jibril (Gabriel). Allah dictated to his prophet the exact words of the Qur'an. "The content of the Qur'an is wholly divine," says Shabbir Akhtar, "it constitutes formulations of exclusively divine beliefs about man, the Creator, and the created order. The Qur'an's Arabic segments 'descend' on one particular individual, an Arab called Muhammad ibn 'Abdullah, but he has no role to play in the production of the Qur'anic materials."¹ This position is called the dictation theory model of revelation, which most Sunni scholars around the world follow.

Different Islamic denominations might differ in their views and positions on the *wahy*, however, this paper shall focus on the Islamic Sunni classical position, represented by the Syrian scholar Noor Ad-Din 'Atir, who is a follower and a teacher of the dictation theory model.² 'Atir is also a professor of *Tafsir* (exegesis) and *Hadith* (The accumulated commands and sayings of prophet Mohammad) in the universities of Damascus and Aleppo in Syria. In addition to authoring numerous Arabic language publications, he directs the Science of Qur'an and Sunnah (Islamic laws) department in Damascus University.³ The aim of this paper is to examine the logical outcomes of 'Atir's dictation theory model, and provide a critique of it.

NOOR AD-DIN 'ATIR'S TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC MODEL OF REVELATION

1 Shabbir Akhtar, "An Islamic Model of Revelation," *Islamic and Christian-Muslim Relation*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1991, 96.

2 It is pronounced as Etir.

3 Noor Ad-Din 'Atir, "Biography," *Shamela Library*, access date July 9, 2019, retrieved from <https://shamela.ws/index.php/author/1637>.

‘Atir follows the traditional Islamic model of revelation. He believes that the Qur’an is the supernatural revelation of Allah that was dictated to prophet Mohammad, and is written in the Qur’an/*mushaf*.⁴ While ‘Atir discusses the several modes or ways of revelation that Allah used to reveal his message to Mohammad, which in his opinion, leads to the infallibility of the Qur’an, he equates between revelation, inspiration, and transmission. ‘Atir’s states that the Qur’an is “Allah’s speech that descended on prophet Mohammad—peace be upon him—the written words in *Masahif* [the plural of *mushaf*, and it means the written word of Allah], transmitted frequently, worshiped by recitation, and it is supernatural in nature, even with one Surah [Qur’anic chapter].”⁵ ‘Atir considers every word of the Qur’an (inspired, transmitted, and written, as we have it today) a supernatural revelation of Allah that was dictated to prophet Mohammad and written in the Qur’an/*mushaf*.

Modes of Revelation

According to ‘Atir, Allah used several modes of revelation to declare his message to Mohammad: 1) Mohammad received the revelation through visions while he was sleeping. 2) The angel came to him and put on his heart a spirit of fear, without being seen.⁶ 3) The angel appeared in an image of man speaking with Mohammad. 4) The angel came in a royal appearance and revealed Allah’s words to him. 5) The revelation came like ringing bells sounds. 6) Angel Jibril appeared in his royal image and

4 An important note should be mentioned here, which is the case of Allah’s previous revelations to his prophets, especially in the Old Testament and New Testament. ‘Atir mentions that none of those previous revelations should be called Qur’an. It is only the ones that Mohammad received.

5 Noor Ad-Din ‘Atir, *‘Oloom Al-Qur’an Al-Karim* (Damascus, Syria: Al-Sabah Publishing, 1993), 11. The original Arabic renders this way (emphasis added):

“كلام القرآن هو كلام الله المنزل على النبي محمد صلى الله عليه وسلم المكتوب في المصاحف، المنقول بالتواتر، المتعبد بتلاوته، المعجز ولو بسورة منه.”

6 Musnad Shihab mentions this mode of revelation in vol. 2, 185. He says, “The Holy spirit breathed the spirit of fear in me: no spirit would die until it completes its livelihood ...”

revealed to Mohammad what Allah asked him to reveal.⁷ These different modes do not include any human intervention, which, in ‘Atir’s opinion, guarantee the authenticity of the *wahy*.

The method of *wahy* is called *tanzil*, which is an expressional method for something “came down,” “descended,” and “sent down.” Arab Muslim scholars use it to refer to the method of the Qur’anic revelation. Allah descended the verses of the Qur’an from heaven to Mohammad through the intermediary of Jibril.

The Islamic *wahy* was intermittent on a period of twenty-three years. ‘Atir argues that the Qur’an descended in *Laylat al-Qadr* (the night of decree) and in the months of Ramadan, Shawal, Thi-Qi’da, Thi-Hija, Mahram, and Rabi’ (Hijri calendar).⁸ Muslim scholars, however, are not in agreement whether the Qur’an was revealed as a whole or in parts because Mohammad recalls several different occasions when the Qur’an was revealed to him. He mentions that the Qur’an was descended in *Laylat al-Qadr*, (Surah 97:1; 44:3; 25:32) and in the Month of Ramadan (Surah 2:185), in Makkah and in Medina.⁹ ‘Atir takes the position that the Qur’an was revealed gradually, which is consistent with many verses of the Qur’an. He believes that the revelation came down gradually to Mohammad on a duration of twenty-three years.

The best example that can support the intermittent *wahy* position is the background story of the battle of *Badr*. Mohammad had a long history of enmity with his tribe. He chose to conduct his first incursion against his own people, the tribe of Quraysh, after he claimed to receive *wahy* from Allah. His followers were supplicating with him for a while to fight the tribe of Quraysh, but his answer was, “Be steadfast, for I have not been commanded to fight.”¹⁰ However, the command of Allah was given later

7 ‘Atir, *Oloom Al-Qur’an Al-Karim*, 17-18.

8 Ibid., 25. Al-Qadr night means the grand night when Allah decrees every matter of ordainment.

9 Unless otherwise noted, all qur’anic passages referenced are in Translation of the Meaning of the *Noble Qur’an in English Language* (Madinah, KSA: King Fahed Complex, 1984).

10 Al-Wahidi, *Asbab Al-Nuzul*, Mokrane Guezzou, trans., accessed December 7, 2019,

on in Surah 22:39, when he became a strong warrior and had numerous companions. This example supports the intermittent *wahy* position that 'Atir follows.

'Atir believes that there were three different descensions of the verses of the Qur'an: the first one is when the Qur'an descended to *Al-Lawh Al-Mahfouz* (the Book of Decrees/the Preserved Tablet) (Surah 57:22; 85:22). *Al-Lawh Al-Mahfouz* is a tablet that God had saved in the highest heaven, where everything that has happened and will happen is kept forever. The second descension was when the Qur'an descended as a whole to *Beit Al-Iza* (the House of Glory). Little information is known about *Beit Al-Iza* because it is not mentioned in the Qur'an. As Rateb Al-Nabulsi explains in his encyclopedia, *Beit Al-Iza* is a heavenly place that is equivalent to *Al-Ka'ba* (the black stone in Makkah).¹¹ It is the holy place where angel Jibril dwells. Finally, the third descension happened when the verses of the Qur'an came down to the heart/mind of Mohammad. While the Qur'an was descended as a whole to *Al-Lawh Al-Mahfouz* and to Jibril in *Beith Al-Iza*, it partially and gradually came down to Mohammad.¹²

Qur'anic Inspiration

'Atir believes that the Qur'an is the compilation of the speech and the words of Allah. Angel Jibril dictated the exact words and their meanings directly to Mohammad without anyone tampering them (Surah 10:37; 27:6; 11:1). The book is not inspired or influenced by Allah, and it is not written under the guidance or the influence of his spirit. Rather, it is Allah's direct speech.¹³ As 'Atir explains, Qur'anic inspiration means "Allah's revelation to whom he had chosen from his servants, in a mysterious and

retrieved from: <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=86&tSoraNo=22&tAyahNo=39&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>

11 Mohammad Rateb Al-Nabulsi, "Miscellaneous," *Al-Nabulsi Encyclopedia*, 1995, access date July 10, 2019, <http://nabulsi.com/web/article/6387/>

12 'Atir, *'Oloom Al-Qur'an Al-Karim*, 26.

13 Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Inter religious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford, Oneworld, 1998), 53.

quick way.”¹⁴ In other words, the prophet of Islam passively received the sacred text and pass it verbatim to his scribe for recording. Thus, the Qur’an is not co-authored in any way. As Akhtar states, “The scripture simply passes through ‘the Muhammadan mind’ much as a grain of com will pass undigested through the body of a bird.”¹⁵ Mohammad is a passive transmitter of the divine will, an instrument through which Allah’s literary endeavors in Arabic to reach the human world.¹⁶ Thus, Mohammad was obligated to give all the credit to God.

Like many Muslim scholars, ‘Atir equates between Allah’s revelation and Qur’anic inspiration for several reasons: 1) Mohammad did not write the Qur’an himself; he received the sacred text and repeats its verbatim to his scribes. 2) There is no point of separating Allah’s revelation from his inspiration because the written words are the exact revealed words. Islamic orthodoxy considers it blasphemous to attribute the Qur’anic authorship to Mohammad, even as a kind of literary convention because he was just a receiver and a transmitter. That is to say, while Allah was the author of the divine text, Jibril was the first recipient, and Mohammad was the sole transmitter to his people. As Akhtar states, “God’s message on Muhammad’s lips in God’s Arabic in God’s own book: that is the Qur’an in Muslim devotion and memory.”¹⁷

The Inerrancy of the Qur’an

The dictation theory model leads most Muslim scholars to believe that the Qur’an is fully an inerrant book. James White explains that “most Muslims believe the Arabic Qur’an reflects the ‘Mother of the Book,’ the heavenly copy, of which the earthly version is a perfectly accurate rendition.”¹⁸ The inerrancy of the Qur’an is related to the theological,

“الوحي هو اعلام الله تعالى لمن اصطفاه من عباده بطريقة خفية سرية” arabic renders this way:

15 Akhtar, “An Islamic Model of Revelation,” 96.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 James White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know about the Qur’an*, (Grand Rapids:

ethical, historical, geographical, and economical, and scientific subjects of its data. Its verbal inerrancy implies that Allah's truth inheres in every words of the Qur'an, and not merely in the concepts and thoughts of Mohammad. Since the divine verbal revelation is anchored upon the entire content of the Qur'an, the inerrancy means that the Qur'an is error free.

Classic Muslims and 'Atir both deny that Qur'anic inerrancy are limited to spiritual or religious themes. On the contrary, they believe that every word in the Qur'an abides historically, geographically, scientifically, and theologically because every word is the word of Allah's himself. Allah gave it directly to Mohammad through angel Jibril, and no word was changed or tampered with during the process of the Qur'an's reception and transmission. Mohammad faithfully provided a carbon copy of what has been dictated to him in Arabic language, without any addition or alteration (Surah 36:69; 39:28).

'Atir believes that Mohammad had an extra ordinary memory, which enabled him to perfectly memorize and precisely recite every word that was dictated to him. Upon his analysis of the *Hadith* books,¹⁹ 'Atir states that "the prophet was one of the greatest people who memorized the Qur'an, he used to recite this Qur'an by heart. He was never tired, especially at night, he would read while praying several long Surahs."²⁰ In accordance to *Sahih Bukhari*, he states that "Gabriel [Jibril] used to meet him [prophet Mohammad] every night during Ramadan to revise

Bethany House Publishers, 2013), 53.

19 The most authoritative books are *Sahih Muslim* and *Sahih Bukhari*. They are the second major official books in Islamic literature after the Qur'an, according to the Sunni sect of Islam. Any Hadith (collective talks based on Prophet Mohammad's words and acts) is treated as authentic and authoritative as the Qur'an.

20 Atir, 'Oloom Al-Qur'an Al-Karim, 161. The Arabic translation renders this way:

“كان النبي اعظم العالم حفظا للقران، وكان يتلو هذا القران عن ظهر قلب لايفتر لاسيما في الليل، حتى انه يقرأ في الركعة الواحدة العدد من السور الطول.”

the Qur'an with him."²¹ 'Atir does not discuss the details of the nature of these meetings, but this information is available in the books of *Sira* (the biography of Mohammad), which 'Atir frequently references in his book. According to Muhammad Moher Ali, prophet Mohammad and his companions "had the immediate need to do so [memorize the Qur'an] because they had to recite the passages in the prayer which was made incumbent on them from the very beginning of Islam."²² Ali adds that "Arabs were specially gifted with the skill of memorization," and it was during Mohammad's life-time that he arranged the passages of the Qur'an into Surahs and sections in their present form.²³ This all happened according to the divine guidance that was received through Jibril to insure the accuracy of the Qur'an.

The Infallibility of the Copies of Qur'anic Scripture

The doctrine of the infallibility of the prophets plays a major role in assuring the infallibility of the original and the copies of the Qur'anic text. In other words, the main streams of Muslim Sunni scholars believe that Mohammad was infallible, and, therefore, he could not have committed a mistake in memorizing and transmitting the Qur'an. While this topic is more relevant to the subject of the Qur'an's transmission, it is also important to the topic of revelation, especially that Muslims do not differentiate between transmission and revelation, but they integrate the two doctrines. To Muslims, Allah did not reveal his words to Mohammad directly, nor through his own spirit, but through his angel Jibril. That is to say that the angel is a reliable medium to transmit the sacred text without running into the risk of changing it. In the same manner, Mohammad's transmission of the words of Jibril to the Muslims are reliable, especially that Mohammad was infallible (like all prophets) and Allah did not count

21 *Sahih Bukhari*, Hadith no. 3554, access date July 10, 2019, retrieved from: <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/61>

22 Muhammad Moher Ali, *Sirat Al-Nabi and the Orientalists*, vol. 1A (Riyad, Saudi Arabi: King Fahed Complex, 1997), 4.

23 *Ibid.*

any sin against him. However, the Islamic explanation of the authenticity of the Qur'an's transmission has several weaknesses because it requires, not only the infallibility of Mohammad, but also the infallibility of his human subsequent transmitters. If the suggestion that Mohammad did not make any mistake in his transmission because of his infallibility is true, then the infallibility of the posterior memorizers, copyists, and divine message carriers is not guaranteed. The rest of this section shall seek to shed more light on the Islamic history of the Qur'an's transmission and what happened after the death of Mohammad to show the weakness of this position.

While many *ṣahbis* (Mohammad's companions) memorized the Qur'an during the days of Mohammad, few of them started writing the recited texts. Mohammad named four men that Muslims should learn the Qur'an from: "Ibn Mas'ud, Salim, the ally of Abu Hudhaifa, Ubayy b. Ka'b, Mu'adh b. Jabal."²⁴ 'Atir believes that the reliance on "memorization in the hearts and the chests of men, rather than transmitting the Qur'an and save it in *Masahif* and books, is a greater characteristic that Allah gave to this nation [Arabic nation]."²⁵ In other words, 'Atir is convinced that memorization is an effective and efficient way to save all the verses of the Qur'an.

As stated earlier, the writing process of the Qur'an started during Mohammad's days and continued until the third *caliph* (Mohammad's successor), 'Uthman. After the death of Mohammad, there were several attempts to accumulate the Qur'an. 'Atir quotes the story from *Sahih Bukhari* when 'Umar bin Al-Khatab (the second *caliph*) was with Abu Bakr (the first *caliph*) and asked Zaid bin Thabit to collect the Qur'an. He

24 *Sahih Bukhari*, Hadith no. 4999. *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith no. 2464. Access date July 10, 2019, retrieved from <https://sunnah.com/muslim/44/168>

25 'Atir, *Oloom Al-Qur'an Al-Karim*, 166. The original Arabic renders as:

«الاعتماد في نقل القرآن على حفظ القلوب والصدور لا على حفظ المصاحف والكتب أشرف خصيصة من الله تعالى لهذه الأمة»

accepted their offer and started to collect

palm stalks, thin white stones and also from the men who knew it by heart, till I found the last Verse of Surat at-Tauba (Repentance) [Surah 9] with Abi Khuzaima Al-Ansari, and I did not find it with anybody other than him... Then the complete manuscripts (copy) of the Qur'an remained with Abu Bakr till he died, then with 'Umar till the end of his life, and then with Hafsa, the daughter of 'Umar.²⁶

Even though the process of collecting the Qur'an started early in the Islamic history, this *Hadith* shows that the Qur'an was not widely spread, but it was separated in bits and pieces among several people. While this was the condition in Medina, the situation was not better in lands far from Medina. "Several Companions had each compiled a personal *mushaf*," says Munir Shaikh, "and were using them to study and memorize the Qur'an and to teach others. Often, the sequence of chapters in these compilations was not the same as the order determined by Muhammad for oral recitation."²⁷ If a person starts at the beginning of the current *mushaf* and read on to the end, he or she will be jumping back and forth between different periods of Mohammad's life. Thus, obtaining a meaningful background without any extra help is next to impossible. So, imagine the confusion that these people had during these days.

The Islamic story about the Qur'an's compilation, according to *Sahih Bukhari*, which 'Atir fully accepts, began because of the different readings that started to circulate among Muslims, and because some verses in Iraq and Syria were differing from the ones that were in Arabia. While the people of Al-Sham (Syria) and Iraq waged a war against Armenia and Azerbaijan, they found differences among their recitations of the Qur'an. In order to prevent this problem, the army leader, Hudhaifa, asked 'Uthman (third *caliph*), "O chief of the Believers! Save this nation

26 *Sahih Bukhari*, Hadith no. 4986, access date July 10, 2019, retrieved from <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/66/8>

27 Munir A. Shaikh, "One Qur'an," *Calliope: Cricket Media*, vol. 14, issue 4 (2003), accessed December 23, 2019, https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/ps/i.do?p=ITOF&u=vic_liberty&id=GALE%7CA112538859&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon

before they differ about the Book (Qur'an) as Jews and the Christians did before."²⁸ 'Uthman asked Hafsa (the daughter of 'Umar) to send him the manuscripts of the Qur'an that she had. Then 'Uthman ordered four people to re-write the Qur'an. These people are: Zaid bin Thabit, 'Abdullah bin Az-Zubair, Sa'id bin Al-'As and 'AbdurRahman bin Al-Harith bin Hisham. 'Uthman asked the three Qurayshi men (from the tribe of *Quraysh*, the tribe of prophet Mohammad), "If you differ with Zaid bin Thabit on any point of the Qur'an, then write it in the language of *Quraysh*, as the Qur'an was revealed in their language."²⁹

What is interesting is that none of these men were from the ones that prophet Mohammad named earlier. 'Uthman gave them direct instruction to write the manuscript of the Qur'an in the form of a book and to make several copies. Furthermore, the 'Uthmanic method seems to have several weaknesses: 1) The 'Uthmanic method does not include the four men that prophet Mohammad named. 2) It does not include 'aisha's *mushaf* (the late wife of the prophet), who had her copy of the Qur'an.³⁰ 3) Zaid bin Thabit was an *Ansari* (faithful follower of Mohammad) and not from *Quraysh*. He did not know the language of *Quraysh*, yet he was trusted with the most verses of the Qur'an. 4) Zaid bin Thabit did not have the whole parts of the Qur'an. For while he was copying the Qur'an, he missed *Aya* (verse) from Surah thirty-three and found it later on.³¹ The difficulty with the infallibility of the copies of the Qur'an lies with the idea of 'Uthman trusting someone who does not know the language of *Quraysh* nor has all the Qur'anic verses to participate in the process of compiling and writing the Qur'an. He also did not use other resources that were available to him, such as 'aisha's *mushaf*. The previous analysis shows that the compilation

28 *Sahih Bukhari*, Hadith no. 4987, access date July 11, 2019, retrieved from <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/66/9>

29 *Ibid.*, Hadith no. 3506, access date July 15, 2019, retrieved from <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/61/16>

30 *Ibid.*, Hadith no. 4994, access date July 15, 2019, retrieved from <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/66/15>

31 *Ibid.*, Hadith no. 4784, access date July 15, 2019, retrieved from <https://sunnah.com/urn/181190>

of the Qur'an was not as smooth as Muslims claim. By the testimony of the Islamic literature, the Qur'an's earliest compilation had a rough start and the claim that the companions of Mohammad memorized it in their breasts is not a strong argument.

As stated earlier, Islamic dictation theorists claim that they have strong reasons to believe in the accuracy of the Qur'an. They believe that the Islamic spoken revelation that was dictated by Allah to Mohammad (through Jibril) does not leave any room for people to think that the Qur'anic words might have been altered or twisted. Also, the early Islamic composition of the Qur'an, which started during the days of Mohammad and continued until 'Uthman's days, assures the written inspiration of the Qur'an because the Qur'anic copy that Muslims read today is the 'Uthmanic one. However, this view has a weakness. Muslim scholars who follow 'Atir's traditional Islamic model of revelation do not recognize that after the process of collecting and copying the Qur'an ended, 'Uthman sent to every Muslim province one copy, and "ordered that all the other Qur'anic materials, whether written in fragmentary manuscripts or whole copies, to be burned."³² In 'Atir's opinion, what 'Uthman did, was very essential to save the Qur'an from corruption. However, other scholars, such as Keith Small, views that "Uthman's action, while providing one text, destroyed access to more original versions of the Qur'an, both the official versions of the companions, and the loose body of material from within the lifetime of Muhammad."³³ This is to say that what 'Uthman did was an evidence that the Qur'an was not unified, if not already corrupted.

THE WEAKNESSES OF THE DICTATION THEORY MODEL

The dictation theory model for the Quran should be rejected because it

32 *Sahih Bukhari*. Hadith no. 4986, access date July 10, 2019, retrieved from <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/66/8>

33 Keith E. Small, *Holy Books Have a History: Textual Histories of the New Testament & the Qur'an*, (Monument, CO: Snowfall Press, 2009), 25.

does not solve the accuracy of the Qur'anic copies as Muslim scholars claim. The next sections shall explain these points in more detail.

Dictation Theory Distorts the Doctrine of Tawḥīd

As noted previously, the dictation model eliminates any human role in the genesis of the Qur'an. On the contrary, it reduces Mohammad's role to a mere transmitter and elevates his authority to an equal divine authority. This elevation stems from transcendent authorization which is inherent in the dictation theory model."³⁴ Muslims around the world have high view of Mohammad. They respect him remarkably because they believe he is the last prophet and the only one who received the Qur'an. While Mohammad claims to be a mere messenger (Surah 18:110), he taught with great authority, as if the words were his own personal teachings. In fact, what he taught in the Qur'an and the Hadiths are integrated with Allah's commands to the degree that they become inseparably amalgamated. For instance, Muslims equate between Allah and Mohammad when they pray. They mention his name every time they mention the name of Allah during prayer. They say "Allah is the Greatest, Allah is the Greatest; I testify that there is no god but Allah, I testify that there is no god but Allah; I testify that Mohammad is the Messenger of Allah, I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, and it should be again repeated."³⁵ The Imam who calls people to pray has to state these words five times a day and people should repeat the exact words after him. While prayer should be directed only to Allah, repeating and equating between the name of Allah and Mohammad equal number of times during the day indicate that Mohammad has high if not equal authority with Allah. The Islamic view about Mohammad's authority among his own people contradicts the idea that Mohammad was a mere transmitter, and exceeds the level of his mere humanity.

34 Carl F. H. Henry, *God Revelation and Authority: God who Speaks and Shows* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976), (4:27).

35 *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith no. 379, access date July 13, 2019, retrieved from <https://sunnah.com/muslim/4/6>.

Non-traditional Muslims may answer this objection by explaining that the repetition is just a metaphor to remind people to believe in Mohammad and the Qur'an. However, classical Muslims, which are the majority, do not believe that Mohammad is a metaphor, but he is a real historical person who lived in Makkah and Medina, and called people of the Arabic peninsula to believe in Allah and in him as his prophet. It is true that Mohammad did not ascribe divinity to himself; however, by asking Muslims to call upon his name at least five times a day elevates his nature to the level of the divine because this addition connotes that no prayer will be answered unless Mohammad is mentioned, and no Muslim will enter heaven unless he or she believes in Mohammad in addition to Allah.

Additionally, the Qur'an mentions numerous times that Muslims should obey "Allah and his prophet" (Surah 24:48, 51-52, 62; 33:22; 29, 36; 58:4...etc). Those who obey Allah and his prophet will enter heaven (Surah 48:17), their sins will be forgiven (Surah 49:14), and those who do not obey them will be burned forever in hell (Surah 72:23). Despite the fact that Mohammad is a mere man, his authority indicates that salvation is gained through both: Allah and himself. However, this idea is inconsistent with the doctrine of *Tawhid* (absolute onenes), the core of Islamic religion, because it elevates the status of Mohammad from a mere man to the divine. It makes Mohammad a partner with Allah in salvation, and not a mere transmitter of his revelation as the Qur'an claims. Elevating the status of Mohammad makes believing in his authority a requirement for people to get to heaven. In other words, the Islamic dictation theory model makes believing and obeying Allah, and doing good deeds not enough for obtaining eternal salvation. Adding Mohammad to the believing system is a requirement. Therefore, the Islamic view that perceives Mohammad as a mere messenger of Allah seems to be contradictory to the position that Muslims hold about the authority of Mohammad.

Dictation Theory Leads to Fideism

According to Carl F. H. Henry, the dictation theory model makes the writers “unhistorical phantoms whom the divine Spirit controls like mechanical robots.”³⁶ Henry’s point applies to the Islamic dictation theory model because of the lack of proof to the divine *wahy*. The only source of *wahy* that Muslims have is the person of Mohammad and his claim of seeing Jibril. There is no other people, events, or miracles that can support his claim. Therefore, this model requires a fideistic belief in the person of Mohammad that cannot be evidentially proven. According to the Qur’an, Mohammad did not perform any miracle to prove that he is a prophet of Allah, and when people demanded a proof, he suggested that the Qur’an is the proof because no one can come with a book like it (Surah 52:34; 17:88; 2:23). This circular reasoning forced Mohammad to invent an ambiguous person by the name of Dihyah Al-Kalbi to give people the impression that he is truly seeing Jibril, who looks like Dihyah.³⁷ This invention is necessary to gain the trust of the people; however, it requires a fideistic belief in anonymities instead of evidences or testified miracles.

Dictation Theory Comprises Language Difficulties

The Islamic dictation theory model presents limitation regarding Arabic language. Mohammad states that the Qur’an was descended in Arabic clear tongue (Surah 26:195), as if the language of Allah is Arabic only. This claim creates a problem to non-Arabic speaking Muslims because they either pray and recite the Qur’an without understanding it, or they have to learn Arabic first in order to pray and read without being passive. The English translation of the Qur’an is just a translation; it is not the actual inspired words of Allah. In *Ulum Al Qur’an: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur’an*, Abu Ammar Yasir Qadhi addresses the orthodox

36 Henry, *God Revelation and Authority*, (4:135).

37 Dihya al-Kalbi is an ambiguous person, and not much information written about him or about his conversion to Islam. *Sahih Bukhari*, Hadith no. 3634, access date July 16, 2019, retrieved from <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/61/137>. *Sunan an-Nasa’i*, Hadith no. 4991, accessed May 11, 2020, <https://sunnah.com/nasai/47/7>.

classical view by explaining that “the Qur’an is the Arabic speech (kalam) of Allah, which he revealed to Muhammad in wording and meaning, and which has been preserved in the *mushafs*, and has reached us by mutawaatir [unchallengeable] transmissions, and is a challenge to mankind to produce something similar to it.”³⁸ Although the majority of Muslims rely on different translations, they would still believe that the Qur’anic text is untranslatable. “While Arabic can be translated into any other language, the Qur’an’s essence as Allah’s very words is tied to the Arabic tongue.”³⁹ Describing the Qur’an as a challenge to mankind is problematic because it makes Allah unapproachable, especially to those who do not know Arabic language. When Allah speaks a language that is different from the person’s spoken tongue, he makes communication very difficult, if not impossible. This approach makes Allah passive in his relationship with his own people because he is not making any effort to reach the people at their own level, but he is waiting for them to make all the travails to approach him. Supposedly, Allah created all tongues and languages, it would be much easier and practical for him to communicate using the person’s spoken/written language than expect every non-Arab Muslim to learn a foreign language in order to communicate with him.

Christian scholar, Henry, denies the dictation theory model because of its language quandary. He states, “G. Vaeotius and V. Polanus were patently mistaken in their extreme notion that divine inspiration must have extended even to the vowel points because of Christ’s declaration that not a jot or tittle would pass away until all is fulfilled (Matt 5:17-19).”⁴⁰ Muslims believe the same thing regarding the Qur’an when they claim that the copies that we have today are not corrupted, and they are as similar as the earliest available copies. They ignore the fact that the earliest copies did not include the vowel pointings—like the earliest Hebrew and Greek manuscript. However, reading Arabic without the pointing system

38 Abu Ammaar Yasir Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur’an* (Birmingham, UK: Al-Hidaayah, 2003), 25.

39 White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know about the Qur’an*, 55.

40 Henry, *God Revelation and Authority*, (4:139).

is much harder than Hebrew or Greek, if not impossible. Most Muslims believe that the current Qur'an is similar to the 'Uthmanic copy, not knowing or ignoring the different readings that the Arabic Qur'an holds.⁴¹ *Sahih Bukhari* as well as *Sahih Muslim* recount a *Hadith* by Mohammad telling his followers that there are seven different readings of the Qur'an, and people can read the way that is easy for them.⁴² Nevertheless, this is another reason to believe that dictation theory does not strengthen the authenticity of the Qur'an. Actually, it works against it.

Studies of the earlier Qur'anic manuscripts, such as San'a (OI-20.4) and Marcel II at the national Library of Russian in St. Petersburg, show that Henry's view about the dictation theory model is correct because early available Islamic manuscripts do not match 100% with the 'Uthmanic *mushaf* that we have today. This is a great problem for Islamic dictation theorists who believe that the Qur'an that Mohammad received is not being altered, corrupted, or tampered with. If the dictation theory is accurate, and none of the previous transmissions, whether spoken or written, were altered, then the earliest available copies of the Qur'an should reflect this claim. However, closer study to the differences among the earliest available Islamic manuscript show that there are variants in the texts, and, consequently, the dictation model proposes a weakness to the Islamic revelation model in general. Two of the earliest available Qur'anic manuscripts illustrate the discrepancies between them and *mushaf* 'Uthman. Because of the limited space in this paper, I will give few examples of these differences. The Qur'anic manuscripts have diacritical variants leading to different meanings. Surah 14:41, for instance, has a meaning variation. Manuscript Sana'a 01-29.1 includes the word تقوم (when you reckon), but the standard reading is يقوم (when

41 Saqib Hakak, Amirrudin Kamsin, Omar Tayan, Mohd. Yamani Idna Idris, Abdullah Gani, And Saber Zerdoumi, "Preserving Content Integrity Of Digital Holy Quran: Survey And Open Challenges," IEEE Journal, vol.5, 2017, 7305.

42 Sahih Bukhari, Hadith no. 2419, accessed December 23, 2019, retrieved from <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/44/9>. See also Sahih Muslim, Hadith no. 818 a, accessed December 23, 2019, retrieved from <https://sunnah.com/muslim/6/327>.

it or he reckoned).⁴³ Moreover, Daniel Alan Brubaker documents several insertions of the word الله Allah in Surah 9:78 in Sana'a manuscript, in Surah 33:11 in NLR Marcel, and in Surah 33:24 in NLR Marcel II, 8r.⁴⁴

Brubaker includes several pictures in his book to document the erasure that he finds in the early manuscripts that he examined. For instance, he inspected the manuscript Marcel II, in the National Library of Russia, on folio 30v. He says, “these pages are written in the script style C.Ia, and this is probably an early 8th century manuscript. I’ve noted 26 corrections in this manuscript. The correction in this case is a simple erasure; nothing has been written to replace what was erased.”⁴⁵ He explains further that there is a missing or erased space in the middle of verse 30:9. The verse ends in the middle of the line with the word عقبة (the fate). The erased space follows this word, and it is obvious to the reader. Then the verse resumes in the next line with the word الذين (those). After this correction, the verse matches the ‘Uthmanic *mushaf*.⁴⁶ Brubaker’s concludes that “what was erased cannot at this time be discerned, but the length and continuity of the erasure indicates a likely single word of 4-6 letters, all linked.”⁴⁷ Brubaker suggests several possibilities to what could that erasure be. He states, “the first would be an expression of proportion such as *Kullu min*, ‘all of,’ or *kathiranmin*, ‘most of,’ to render ‘what was the fate of all those who preceded them,’ or ‘what was the fate of most of those who preceded them,’ or ‘what was the fate of most of those who preceded them,’ respectively.” Another possibility would be a noun such as, *al-yahud* (the Jews) or *al-nas* (the people).⁴⁸ If Brubaker analysis is true, then textual criticism creates a deeper problem for the dictation theory model. For if Allah has dictated every word to Mohammad, then these erasures and additions to the early manuscripts require serious explanations from

43 Small, *Holy Books Have a History*, 41.

44 Daniel Alan Brubaker, *Corrections in Early Qur’an Manuscripts: Twenty Examples* (Lovettsville: Think and Tell Press, 2019), 36.

45 *Ibid.*, 45.

46 *Ibid.*

47 *Ibid.*

48 *Ibid.*

Islamic scholars. If Allah dictated every word to Mohammad and all those who memorized the Qur'an were perfectly faithful to his words, then why and how did the changes occurred?

CONCLUSION

'Atir's Classical view of Islamic divine revelation considers the Qur'an the compilation of the speech and the words of Allah, who transmitted word for word to his prophet Mohammad. The previous analysis presents several weaknesses to the Islamic dictation theory model of divine revelation that are related to the authority of Mohammad, language, fideism, and the infallibility of the current copies of the Qur'an. The authority of Mohammad threatens the doctrine of *tawhīd*, language difficulty leaves non-Arabic speaking Muslims with no option but to learn Arabic in order to communicate with Allah, fideism is inevitable because Muslims have to rely on the claim that "the Qur'an was perfectly preserved in the chests of Mohammad's followers," while early Islamic history shows different readings with the current Qur'an. The difficulties of the dictation theory model are fundamental because if the *wahy* of the Qur'an is not accurate, then the Qur'an is not the words of Allah and the authority and the prophecy of Mohammad is compromised.

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C.S. Lewis
as Christian Political Philosopher:
The Politics of Skepticism and Liberty

Robert Schwarzwald

KEYWORDS:

| C.S. Lewis | Politics | Government |
| Tory | Conservative | Human Nature | Liberty ||

ABSTRACT:

C.S. Lewis's political views are sufficiently inferential that those seeking to captivate him for a given ideology or partisan allegiance tend to "proof text" their way to claiming him. A more sober and thorough understanding of Lewis's public and private writings indicate a "mere conservatism" informed by skepticism of statist intervention and a belief that fallen man is also a noble being deserving of liberty and equal treatment by the law. In all his political musings, Lewis's Christian faith animates his interest in public and political life and defines his beliefs about the end of history.

INTRODUCTION

A few days before his death in 1963, C.S. Lewis wrote to Mrs. Frank Jones, an American admirer, that politics is “a subject in which I cannot take any interest.”¹ Those who knew him best, including his brother and one of his stepsons, affirmed not only his disinterest but even his contempt for political action.²

So it is with some hesitation that I begin an article on C.S. Lewis by disagreeing with my subject.

To the point, his claim that he found politics uninteresting is unconvincing. On the contrary, Lewis thought a good deal about public life, politics, and how those responsible for the public good should behave.

The historian A.J.P. Taylor wrote that at Oxford’s Magdalene College, “Lewis helped in the history school by teaching political theory ... His lectures covered Rousseau and Aristotle, *et al.* He loved doing this.” Lewis was a firm opponent of what he called “Bolshevism” and, write Lewis scholars Justin Dyer and Micah Watson, “even as a literary scholar Lewis continued to teach his students Western political thought beginning with Plato.”³

Dyer and Watson go on to note that “We know from Lewis’s personal letters, his education and teaching, and his published works that he was both very interested in and knowledgeable about politics and political thought.” Lewis, they rightly argue, “had much to say about the foundations of a just political order.”⁴

This paper will argue that Lewis was a “mere conservative,” one whose view of public life was informed by several essential theological convictions wedded with a close and sometimes rather steely-eyed

1 Quoted in Tim Scheiderer, “Lewis and Politics,” August 23, 2018, in <https://www.cslewis.com/lewis-and-politics>

2 See Dyer, Justin and Micah Watson, *C.S. Lewis on Politics and the Natural Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 5-7

3 Justin Dyer and Micah Watson, “The Old Western Man: C.S. Lewis on Politics and Morality.” *Modern Age* 59:4 (Fall 2017), 28.

4 Dyer and Watson, “Old Western Man,” 28.

set of observations about how a flourishing society functions. It will consider how Lewis's personal correspondence differed from his public pronouncements, the nature of his "mere conservatism," his rejection of socialism, and the three foundational theological understandings that composed the lens through which he viewed politics.

Understanding Lewis's view of politics is important because he remains a figure of profound influence among Western Christians, perhaps most avidly by younger believers. Eager to read things that are both intellectually challenging and elegantly, sometimes playfully written, thoughtful younger Christ-followers can be ready prey for those who would use Lewis to advance a left-leaning or center-left point of view. He, like all the rest of us, needs to be taken as he is, not as ideologues of any stripe wish to contort him.

A CRITICAL DISTINCTION

First, the key to understanding Lewis's beliefs about public life is to recognize the sharp line he drew between his public commentary and his private opinions. He had strong views about politics, the state, and public justice. But in his public writings and lectures he did not give much heed to the political issues of the moment. One would be hard-pressed to find anything Lewis wrote for publication or any lectures he gave about Clement Atlee's defeat of Winston Churchill or Anthony Eden and the Suez Crisis. As Lawrence Reed notes, "Lewis's commentary on political and economic matters is comparatively slim—mostly a few paragraphs scattered here and there, not in a single volume."⁵

Yet in his private correspondence, it's clear that Lewis read the news of his day with keen interest. In the same letter to Mrs. Jones in which he professed disinterest in politics, he criticizes the Labour government

5 Lawrence Reed, "C.S. Lewis Saw Government as a Poor Substitute for God," Foundation for Economic Education, December 19, 2018, <https://fee.org/articles/cs-lewis-saw-government-as-a-poor-substitute-forgod/>

pointedly. In other personal letters, Lewis discusses “elections, unions, communist advances in China and Hungary, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and other political topics of the day.”⁶ That’s a rather broad swath of political discourse.

This is not to say Lewis especially enjoyed reading about or commenting on, let alone participating in the politics of his time. “Why should quiet ruminants like you and I have been born in such a ghastly age?” he wrote his brother in 1940. “How I loathe great issues. How I wish they were all adjourned *sine di* ... Could one start a Stagnation Party - which at General Elections would boast that during its term of office no event of the least importance had taken place?”⁷

In addition, in his published writings, Lewis commented on the *moral* implications of public issues that related directly to Christian ethics and the natural law. For example, he spoke about such things as the state’s role in punishing crime, private ownership of property, euthanasia and experimentation on animals for research purposes.

In other words, he was occupied in his public ministry with issues of moral importance, not extemporaneous political interest. So, human dignity and eternal value were the chief occupations in his commentary about political and social concerns. As John G. West, Jr. writes,

When Lewis talked about these matters, however, it was not in the way most politicians do. He was wholly unconcerned with what political scientists today like to call “public policy”—that conglomeration of compromise, convention, and self-interest that forms the staple of much of our own political diet. If you expect to find a prescription for solving air pollution or advice on how to win an election, don’t bother reading Lewis. He has nothing to tell you.

6 Scheiderer, “Lewis and Politics”

7 C.S. Lewis to W.H. Lewis, 22 March 1940, quoted in John Wain, “C.S. Lewis,” *The American Scholar*, vol. 50, no. 1 (Winter 1981), 75-76. Cf. Lewis’s 1940 letter to his brother: “The world, as it is now becoming and has partly become, is simply too much for people of the old square-rigged type like you and me. ... I don’t understand its economics, or its politics, or any dam’ thing about it (quoted in Dyer and Watson, *C.S. Lewis on Politics and the Natural Law* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016], 5

His concern was not policy but principle; political problems of the day were interesting to him only insofar as they involved matters that endured.⁸

WAS LEWIS A “RED” OR A CARD-CARRYING CONSERVATIVE?

Due to his prominence and influence, some on the Left are eager to claim Lewis as their own. This might seem odd to those who have read much Lewis, what with his view of unredeemed human nature as a moral tragedy and profound skepticism of political maneuverings. Yet in our ultra-politicized era, it should be unsurprising that, given the enduring popularity of Lewis’s writings, his mantle would be sought by ideologues and partisans of all stripes.

To answer the question: Was Lewis, in fact, a closet man of the Left? Would he, were he with us today, wear a Che Guevara tee shirt beneath his tweed jacket? A Canadian professor named Mervyn Nicholson argues that Lewis was what he calls a “Red Tory,” a conservative “in the old sense ... Lewis believed in community and mutual obligation, in tradition, in democracy and tolerance.”⁹ While “Red Toryism,” by one definition, “combines economic egalitarianism with social conservatism, calling for an end to the monopolisation of society and the private sphere by the state and the market,”¹⁰ Nicholson believes the term implies a

8 John G. West, Jr., “Finding the Permanent in the Political: C. S. Lewis as a Political Thinker,” July 15, 1995.
<http://www.independent.org/news/article.asp?id=1566>

9 Mervyn Nicholson, “C.S. Lewis was a Red,” June 29, 2018, www.counterpunch.org

10 Blond, Phillip. *Red Tory: How Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010). Definition is from publisher’s book abstract. As an opposite political force, there is “Blue Labour,” a movement within the British Labour Party whose advocates say its “goal is a democratic self-governing society built upon the participation of its citizens in the exercise of power and its accountability. Our politics is a challenge to the liberal consensus of the capitalist order, but it does not belong to the revolutionary left.” “About Blue Labour,” <https://www.bluelabour.org/about-us>

much less sanguine approach to private enterprise. Indeed, Nicholson claims, “everything (Lewis) says about capitalism is negative ... He was anything but a cheerleader for capitalism. His references to capitalism ... are critical, often hostile. He did not believe that Christianity was the same as capitalism. He did not believe that Christianity had anything to do with material success ... He had zero sympathy with right-wing ideology ... Lewis was simply not right-wing ... Lewis’s political and economic views were hardly right-wing. Far from being a reactionary social conservative, Lewis had strong radical impulses.”¹¹

Dr. Nicholson should re-read Lewis. Lewis was a staunch advocate of private property and was most dubious of public intervention into the private sphere. What becomes clear in his public and, most especially, private writings is that Lewis was a conservative in a more traditional sense. An advocate of privacy and private property, order and limited government, Lewis advocated not a “Red Toryism” but a more Burkean understanding of the role of personal virtue, natural law, and a modest-sized state. He was not a champion of the Conservative Party but, as stated earlier, was a “mere conservative,” one who viewed with an intuitive wariness grandiose promises and millennial aspirations. There was nothing “Red” about a man who said, “I doubt if I am a Tory. I am much more nearly a political skeptic.”¹²

LEWIS AND SOCIALISM

Lewis regarded socialism as a massive failure economically and a danger to the liberty of the people. As Robert C. Stroud writes, Lewis “was correct about the propensity of socialism to undermine order and dislevel systems of proven success.”¹³ For example, in 1954, after the

11 Nicholson, *ibid*

12 Lewis to J.B. Priestly, 1962, quoted in Dyer and Watson, *loc cit*, 6-7

13 Robert C. Stroud, “C.S. Lewis Versus Socialism,” in *MereInkling.Net*, August 9, 2016. <https://mereinkling.net/2016/08/09/c-s-lewis-versus-socialism/>

Conservatives were again in power, Lewis had an exchange of letters with an American admirer named Vera Gebbart. As the U.K. had retained its rationing system long after the conclusion of the Second World War, Mrs. Gebbart and her husband had from time to time sent food packages to Lewis and his brother Warnie. Here is what Lewis wrote her about the glories of the life under the British Labour Party:

I'm afraid it would be sheer dishonesty to pretend that we now have any kitchen needs; this (Conservative) government has done a magnificent job in getting us on our feet again, and a few weeks back, we solemnly burnt our Ration Books. Everything is now "off ration," and though at first of course, prices went up with a rush, they are now dropping. But cheer up, if our friends the Socialists get back into power, you will be able to exercise your unfailing kindness once more by supplying us, not with little luxuries, but with the necessities of life!¹⁴

So, Nicholson's reduction of Lewis to being a resentful carper, a nonconservative conservative with a bias against the Right, is a caricature. Lewis was not anti-capitalist. He was against the *abuses* of capitalism, which was consistent with his general leeringness of concentrations of power. And this theme – the danger of political power – runs throughout Lewis's novels and his commentary, publicly and privately, as will be discussed further below.

LEWIS THE "MERE CONSERVATIVE" NON-PARTISAN

However, even as Lewis disdained the radicalism of the Left, he was very careful about not being "captured" by the Right. In 1951, after six years in yet another of his political wildernesses, Winston Churchill returned to Britain's premiership. Shortly thereafter, he wrote C.S. Lewis and offered him the title, "Commander of the British Empire," or CBE. The CBE is a mid-range honor, often employed by politicians to recognize people who

14 Ibid

have demonstrated excellence in their field of endeavor. Yet as with any honor given by politicians, the CBE can also be a way of associating with a popular or esteemed person to the politician's advantage.

Lewis did not want to be identified with any political movement or party for fear this would diminish his public ministry. Once a public figure is "owned" by a party or a politician, a substantial part of the public will write him or her off.

So, in response to Churchill's offer, Lewis wrote Churchill's secretary that although he appreciated the offer, "There are always knaves who say, and fools who believe, that my religious writings are all covert anti-Leftist propaganda, and my appearance in the Honours List would of course strengthen their hands. It is therefore better that I should not appear there."¹⁵

So, then, what of Lewis's conservatism? Lewis scholar Philip Vander Elst writes that Lewis was a "political and cultural conservative in the widest and deepest sense of the word." Lewis's Cambridge colleague George Watson confirmed this, writing in the early 1990s that Lewis "believed in democracy and private enterprise for the most grudging of all reasons: though they are much less than good, every other system is worse."¹⁶

Evidently Lewis's anti-statist leanings were sufficiently known, at least among some of Britain's political and religious elites, that the Bishop of Chichester, George Bell, proposed that Lewis write a book about the threat of communism. He suggested this to Francis Ralph Hay Murray, director of the Foreign Office Information Research Department, as Murray believed that "the Church leadership was not up to the demands being placed on Christianity by the Cold War." He had "a nasty suspicion that

15 W.H. Lewis, ed. *Letters of C.S. Lewis* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), "To the Prime Minister's Secretary," 3 December 1951, 530

16 Philip Vander Elst, "C.S. Lewis: Political and Cultural Conservative," *Crisis*, November 1, 1994.
<https://www.crisismagazine.com/1994/c-s-lewis-political-and-cultural-conservative>;
George Watson, "The Art of Disagreement: C.S. Lewis," *The Hudson Review*, vol. 48, no. 2 (Summer, 1995), 234.

the leaders of our Christian thought indeed do not know their dialectical materialism well enough” to “formulate, and to formulate clearly and in terms widely comprehensible, the real opposition of the Christian belief to communism.”¹⁷ Nothing ever came of this idea, but that Lewis would be considered seriously for the task speaks to the latter’s reputation as an opponent of Marxism.

LEWIS’S THEOLOGY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON HIS POLITICAL VISION

There are three spheres of theology about which Lewis was emphatic in his various comments about politics: His understanding of human nature and its importance to the way we view human government, his consequent antipathy toward utopian schemes and concentrations of political power, and his confidence in God’s triumph in history.

Human Nature

Lewis’s understanding of politics was closely informed by his biblically-rooted beliefs about the joint fallenness and dignity of all people.

In an article written for Britain’s *Spectator* magazine in 1943, Lewis wrote, “I am a democrat because I believe in the Fall of Man ... I don’t deserve a share in governing a hen-roost, much less a nation. Nor do most people who believe advertisements, and think in catch-words and spread rumors. The real reason for democracy is just the reverse. Mankind is so fallen that no man can be trusted with unchecked power over his fellows. Aristotle said that some people were only fit to be slaves. I do not contradict him. But I reject slavery because I see no men fit to be

17 Diane Kirby, “Christian Faith, Communist Faith: Some aspects of the Relationship between the Foreign Office Information Research Department and the Church of England Council on Foreign Relations, 1950-1953” *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 13, no. 1, 230-231

masters.”¹⁸

This is a recurrent theme in Lewis’s writings. “Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms,” he wrote several years later in *Mere Christianity*.¹⁹

It was for this reason, writes Benjamin Hutchison, that “the man who gave us Narnia also mounted firm opposition to the progressive-leftist ideals that swept swiftly across the world stage in his time. Lewis’s resistance to European progressivism was, first and foremost, a reflection on the reality of man’s nature, and the failings of progressivism to account accurately for man’s fallen state. He rejected progressivism’s assumption of man’s inherent goodness, of the state as an idol. Lewis succinctly described progressivism as ‘state worship,’ predicated on the assumption of man’s inevitable rise to god-hood.”²⁰ Or, as Dyer and Watson write, Lewis disdained “the self-defeating modern attempt to conquer human nature.”²¹

As Lewis wrote in his landmark address, *The Weight of Glory*, he believed “fallen men to be so wicked that not one of them can be trusted with any irresponsible power over his fellows. That I believe to be the true ground of democracy.” In sum, as Reed writes, Lewis “embraced minimal government because he had no illusions about the essentially corrupt nature of man and the inevitable magnification of corruption when it’s mixed with political power.”²²

Yet Lewis’s belief in human depravity was complemented by his affirmation of human dignity. “You come of the Lord Adam and the Lady Eve,” Aslan says to the Pevensie children in *Prince Caspian*. “And that,” he says, “is both honour enough to erect the head of the poorest beggar,

18 “Equality,” *The Spectator*, vol. CLXXI (27 August 1943), p. 192. Reprinted in *Present Concerns: Journalistic Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperOne, 1986).

19 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 56.

20 Benjamin Hutchison, “C. S. Lewis: Critic of Progressivism,” *The Imaginative Conservative* <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2018/04/c-s-lewis-progressivism-benjamin-hutchison.html>

21 Dyer and Watson, loc cit, 63

22 Reed, “C.S. Lewis Saw Government.”

and shame enough to bow the shoulders of the greatest emperor in earth. Be content.”

This is a clear allusion to Genesis 1 and 3, where we learn that our eternal value derives from our image-bearing of God and our fall into sin separates us from Him. As Lewis said in *The Weight of Glory*, “The dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare ... There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.”

Lewis’s belief in man as an image-bearer of his Creator animated his belief that that equality “applies to man as a political and economic animal.”²³ This equality meant that no one deserved to be treated as a slave or a serf or a cog.²⁴

Indeed, as he wrote in *Mere Christianity*, “If individuals live only seventy years, then a state, or a nation, or a civilisation, which may last for a thousand years, is more important than an individual. But if Christianity is true, then the individual is not only more important but incomparably more important, for he is everlasting and the life of a state or a civilisation, compared with his, is only a moment.”²³ This puts not only human value but politics itself in a proper context.

Human dignity also included the rights of independence and personal freedom. Lewis believed firmly in a vision of life in which personal liberty was essential.

In a state that is functioning well, ordinary citizens will be sufficiently virtuous so as not to need or want intrusive governmental supervision. This means a society in which freedom, order, and relative prosperity are the norm. As Lewis describes it in *Mere Christianity*: “The State exists simply to promote and to protect the ordinary happiness of human beings in this life. A husband and wife chatting over a fire, a couple of friends

23 “Democratic Education,” 34, in *Present Concerns*.

24 Lewis writes sardonically of Plato, “Mr. Joyce and D.H. Lawrence would have fared ill in the Republic.” “Christianity and Culture,” *Theology*, 40:237, March 1940, 169.

having a game of darts in a pub, a man reading a book in his own room or digging in his own garden—that is what the State is there for. And unless they are helping to increase and prolong and protect such moments, all the laws, parliaments, armies, courts, police, economics, etc., are simply a waste of time.”²⁵

In sum, then, it was Lewis’s deep understanding of human sinfulness and his concurrent awe at man’s divinely-given dignity that caused him to look askance at government.

The Purpose of Government and Skepticism of Power

Since he believed man is made in God’s image but is also fatally flawed, Lewis argued that any concentration of unchecked power was dangerous.

He included theocracy in this understanding. As Lewis wrote in 1958, “I detest theocracy. For every Government consists of mere men and is, strictly viewed, a makeshift; if it adds to its commands, ‘Thus saith the Lord,’ it lies and lies dangerously.”²⁶

Put another way, Lewis reposed great faith in God, but was duly wary of those who claim to speak on His behalf concerning issues about which they have no biblical authority or personal expertise. More simply, there is no single Christian perspective on highway improvements or tax rates.

This does not mean that Lewis was not impassioned by the moral component of critical issues. But he drew a distinction between the many issues that demand prudential good judgment and that relative handful whose obvious moral content – for example, euthanasia or the genocide of the Jewish people – about which Scriptural teaching offers definite and undeniable instruction.

25 *Mere Christianity*, 95. Cf. Reprinted in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 316.

26 “Willing Slaves of the Welfare State: Is Progress Possible?” *The Observer*, July 13, 1958, reprinted in *God in the Dock*, 315. He had written something very similar 17 years earlier in his “Meditation on the Third Commandment” (*The Guardian*, January 10, 1941): “On those who add ‘Thus said the Lord’ to their merely human utterances descends the doom of a conscience which seems clear and clearer the more it is loaded with sin.” Reprinted in *God in the Dock*, 198.

Having rejected both statism and theocracy, Lewis argued that the foundation of a good political order was found in the natural law. “The very idea of freedom presupposes some objective moral law which overarches rulers and ruled alike,” he wrote in 1943. “Subjectivism about values is eternally incompatible with democracy. We and our rulers are of one kind so long as we are subject to one law. But if there is no law of Nature, the ethos of any society is the creation of its rulers, educators, and conditioners; and every creator stands above and outside his own creation.”²⁷

This is what led Lewis to affirm that natural law was the bedrock of good governance. “God, as we know from Scripture (Rom. 2:15), has written the law of just and reasonable behaviour in the human heart,” he wrote in the late 1950s. “(Government’s) business is to enforce something that is already there, something given in the divine reason or in the existing custom. ... If it tries to be original, to produce new wrongs and rights in independence of the archetype, it becomes unjust and forfeits its claim to obedience.”²⁸

This parallels almost exactly the assertion made in the second paragraph of America’s Declaration of Independence: That it is a “self-evident” truth that “all men are created equal,” are “endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights,” and that it is the purpose of government to “secure these rights.”

In his 1958 article, “Willing Slaves of the Welfare State: Is Progress Possible?” Lewis cautioned against “an increasingly planned society” and a “mother knows best” state. In that essay, Lewis asserts:

The modern State exists not to protect our rights but to do us good or make us good— anyway, to do something to us or to make us something ... There is nothing left of which we can say to them,

27 “The Poison of Subjectivism,” *Religion in Life* (XII: Summer 1943), reprinted in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 81.

28 *History of Sixteenth-Century English Literature, Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957),

46-50. Quoted in <https://fpb.livejournal.com/621701.html>

“Mind your own business.” Our whole lives are their business.²⁹

What Lewis in another place called “the growing exaltation of the collective and the growing indifference to persons”³⁰ was an increasing occupation with Lewis from the mid-1940s until his death. Indeed, his opposition to radical and utopian change moved him to write, “I am opposed to all very drastic and sudden changes of society (in whatever direction) because they never in fact take place except by a particular technique. That technique involves the seizure of power by a small, highly disciplined group of people.”³¹

The proclivity of government to expand and even seize power is augmented, even animated, by governmental indifference to individual persons, in Lewis’s view. This found expression in the supposed compassion of the smothering welfare state. “Lewis regarded earthly socialism not as a remedy for the sins of capitalism’, writes Steve Gillen, but ‘as a far more dangerous alternative that vitiates individual responsibility by creating the illusion of Christian charity.”³² Coercive charity – government seizure of one person’s money to give to another in the name of economic justice – has no place in Lewis’s moral framework.

Lewis gave voice to this not just in his commentaries but in his fiction. As Lily Glasner writes of *The Chronicles of Narnia*:

In a century characterized by a dismissal of solid values (moral and lingual) and shadowed by two World Wars, Lewis has recruited his knowledge of medieval thought and his force of imagination in order to reestablish a political message in the tradition of medieval writers such as Alan of Lille and Thomas Aquinas, in which the religious and the political realms are intimately tied. This political

29 “Willing Slaves of the Welfare State: Is Progress Possible?” reprinted in *God in the Dock*, 314

30 Lewis, “A Reply to Professor Haldane,” in *On Stories: And Other Essays on Literature* (Eugene: Harvest Books, 2002), 78

31 “A Reply to Professor Haldane,” in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (New York: Harcourt, 1994), 82.

32 Steven Gillen, “C.S. Lewis and the Meaning of Freedom,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* (12:2), Fall 2009, 262

message promotes the leading of a life endowed with faith, courage, and goodness, towards that which it identifies as the ultimate end of human life: salvation³³

Similarly, in his novel *That Hideous Strength* (in which, writes James Como, Lewis exposes “the particular ‘genius’ of (the 20th) century, a totalitarian death wish,”³⁴), Lewis shows deep concern with authoritarian politics which, by definition, exclude religiously informed virtue. The organization he called “NICE” – the National Institute of Co-ordinated Experiments – is the central case in point. NICE was, Lewis said, “the first-fruits of that constructive fusion between the state and the laboratory on which so many people base their hopes of a better world.”³⁵

NICE represented the logical consequence of the state’s abandonment of unique human value. Toward the end of his life, Lewis wrote, “Classical political theory, with its Stoical, Christian, and juristic key-conceptions (natural law, the value of the individual, the rights of man), has died.”³⁶

Given his view of human fallenness and the persistent lesson of history that human pretensions of creating God’s Kingdom without God inevitably collapse, is it any wonder that Lewis would ask, “Have we discovered some new reason why, this time, power should not corrupt as it has done before?”

A final element of Lewis’s concern with state power had to do with the intellectual arrogance of whatever generation happened to be or be gaining in power. Lewis called this tendency “chronological snobbery.” In his memoir *Surprised by Joy*, he described it as the ‘uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited’.³⁷

33 Lily Glasner, “But What Does It All Mean?” Religious Reality as a Political Call in the Chronicles of Narnia” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 25, no. 1 (90) (2014), 69

34 James Como, “Mere Lewis,” *The Wilson Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 2 (Spring, 1994), 116

35 *That Hideous Strength* (New York: Scribner Classics, 1996), 21

36 Lewis, “Willing Slaves of the Welfare State: Is Progress Possible?”

37 *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1966) 207-8

Similarly, when a person gains a new insight, he sometimes believes he is the first person to whom it has occurred. His intellectual self-infatuation leads to unctuous pronouncements and airy condescension. Then he reads Plato or First Samuel or *The Aeneid* and realizes that maybe someone else had recognized what he had thought was his unique insight earlier. Lewis would agree that we must dash this conceit to the ground.

Parenthesis: A Modest Dispute

There is much more to say, including Lewis's reliance on John Locke and John Stuart Mill for some of what I have just described.³⁸ However, there is one component of Lewis's beliefs about the danger of state power and the purpose of government itself that I must dispute.

The apparent libertarian bent of some of Lewis's writings is most apparent to, of course, libertarians (just as his supposed quasi-statism is to Dr. Nicholson). In one sense, Lewis's libertarian fans are correct: As noted earlier, he was horrified by government's intrusions in private life. "Of all tyrannies a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It may be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies," he wrote in 1949.³⁹

This theme permeates Lewis's ongoing critique of the state. In one of his final essays, 1962's "Sex in Literature," Lewis writes that he regards "perversion, fornication, and adultery" as "evils, but (the) law should be concerned with none of them except adultery," as adultery is a violation of a legal covenant.⁴⁰

It is here I qualify my enthusiasm for Lewis's political vision. This libertarian view of harm – if something does not immediately affect me,

38 Dyer and Watson (loc cit, 103) note specifically that "Both Locke and Lewis believed that the end of government was the protection of individuals and their property, broadly understood. Bot claimed that God is the ultimate source or property, and as such, God is the ontological source of genuine morality."

39 "The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment," *God in the Dock* 292.

40 "Sex in Literature," *The Sunday Telegraph*, September 30, 1962, reprinted in *Present Concerns: Journalistic Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperOne, 1986).

it should be allowed⁴¹ – is too limited in its scope. Same-sex marriage does not harm individual, traditional marriages. However, it harms the institution of marriage and the development of children. These things are quantifiable.⁴²

Thus, personal preference should always and only be allowed insofar as it does not unweave the strong fabric of a healthy society. To take another example, alcoholism is not a victimless crime, a matter of transaction between the local liquor dealer and his customer. It destroys families. It reduces productivity at work. Its treatment escalates medical costs. And so on. This is why we have and need laws against such excesses of personal volition as substance abuse and prostitution.

So, with Lewis, we must celebrate personal liberty. But such celebration must be qualified by the recognition that without personal moral and social self-government, without virtuous character, liberty eventually descends into license. And as license becomes widespread, the call for order becomes so potent that the desire for ordered liberty surrenders to the blandishments of those who promise security and stability. Thus, the fascism of which Lewis so often and eloquently warned would darken our culture with ever greater intensity.

God's Triumph in History

With all of Lewis's prophetic warnings against the excesses of collectivism, statism, and progressive authoritarianism, he maintained a benign sense of hope concerning man's future. This is the third critical aspect of Lewis's understanding of politics: All of human history, including our political endeavors, are being drawn to a conclusion controlled by a divine Sovereign. "As a Christian I take it for granted that human history

41 For Lewis's debt to Mill with respect to his understanding of the nature of harm, see Mill's comments on liberty and privacy in *On Liberty* (London: John W. Parker and Sons, 1859), 26-27.

42 Pat Fagan, "Sociologists Mislead Supreme Court, Put Politics Ahead of Science on Same-Sex Parenting," April 23, 2015, <https://www.frc.org/op-eds/sociologists-mislead-supreme-court-put-politics-ahead-of-science-on-same-sex-parenting>

will someday end; and I am offering Omniscience no advice as to the best date for that consummation” “he wrote a few years before his death.”⁴³

It is in that context that Lewis warned rather extensively about the danger of historicism. He defined historicism as “the belief that men can, by the use of their natural power, discover an inner meaning in the historical process.”⁴⁴ This is significant, in that historicism is intrinsic in the faith of modern progressivism. For example, both Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama referred to the “arc of history” and to the “right” and “wrong” sides of history.⁴⁵

Historicism argues that there is some unknown and unseen force guiding human life to ever better conclusions. The God of the Bible has no place in this conception, but it is nonetheless a deeply religious understanding of human history. As the social historian Herbert Schlossberg has written, “There is no way to escape determinism in the idea of inevitable progress.”⁴⁶ Historicism simply denies there a particular being doing the determining. It is predestination without a Predestiner.

This framework of understanding is, as C.S. Lewis recognized following his conversion, pagan.⁴⁷ It is the secular heresy of that progress – however that amorphous term is defined – will win out as if progress itself is a deity. It is a pathetic and unsubstantiated faith in human achievement

43 “Willing Slaves of the Welfare State: Is Progress Possible?,” *Ibid*, 312

44 “Historicism,” *Christian Reflections*, in *The Collected Works of C.S. Lewis* (New York: Inspirational Press, 1996), 243

45 George W. Bush, Second Inaugural Address, <https://www.bartleby.com/124/pres67.html>; David A. Graham, “The Wrong Side of ‘the Right Side of History,’” *The Atlantic* (December 21, 2015) <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/obama-right-side-of-history/420462/>

46 Schlossberg, Herbert. *Idols for Destruction: The Conflict of Christian Faith and American Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 19

47 Lewis wrote in *Surprised by Joy* that God, his pursuer, had “dislodged” him, a frantic, darting “fox,” from a “Hegelian wood” and compelled him to “(run) in the open.” In other words, Lewis exchanged Hegel’s belief that history is “an intelligible process moving towards a specific condition—the realization of human freedom,” an article ultimately of blind faith, for the Christian teaching that a sovereign God is moving history toward a conclusion determined by and for Him. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 275; Little, Daniel, “Philosophy of History,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/history>

without man's Author and history's Completer. Lewis said of historicism that it is "the belief that the scanty and haphazard selection of facts we know about History contains an almost mystical revelation of reality ... it is wholly incompatible with Christianity, for it denies both creation and the Fall."⁴⁸

But Lewis did believe in a God Who was sovereign over all history, over all the political strivings of man. He had faith in One Who would draw together the seemingly infinite number of its threads and, in the twinkling of an eye, weave a tapestry so glorious that we would look upon His eternally devised plan in wonder. Thus, Christians must raise their eyes to a greater kingdom than any earth can provide, a permanent and universal realm ruled in peace and justice by the One True King.

Lewis made no pretense of prediction. He expressed no conviction as to whether we are in the final days. His hope rested not in a projected date but in the God Who controls all dates. As Lewis wrote in his essay, "The World's Last Night," "We do not know the play. We do not even know whether we are in Act I or Act V. We do not know who are the major and who the minor characters. The Author knows."⁴⁹ Because He knew that Author, Lewis could write in *The Last Battle*:

And as he spoke, Aslan no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them ... for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read; which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before.

Lewis saw a time when a new book would open, one whose pages are endless because they are the records of eternity. With all Christians, he

48 "Modern Man and His Categories of Thought," in *Present Concerns: Journalistic Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperOne, 1986), 77

49 *The World's Last Night* (New York: Harper One, 2017), 99ff

awaited Chapter One with eager anticipation.

CONCLUSION

The “enduring value” of Lewis’s musings on “politics and natural law is not that he offered easy solutions to complex political questions,” write Dyer and Watson. Instead, Lewis “defended a compelling account of reality that could make sense of and account for the existence of reason, the freedom of the individual, and a kind of political rule that is not tyranny.”⁵⁰

This framework becomes evident by combing-through Lewis’s copious writings, which contain much about politics and man’s experience of civic life. His beliefs about political man are unsystematized. But they are emphatic, even if embedded incidentally his many books, articles, and letters, and also clear and consistent and grounded in faith in a grand divine plan. A plan involving the creation and fall of man, redemption in Jesus Christ, and culmination in the triumph of the Triune God. As Lewis reminds us, politics is a temporal means to an impermanent end. Instead, he writes, “The glory of God and, as our only means to glorifying Him, the salvation of human souls, is the real business of life.”⁵¹

50 *C.S. Lewis on Politics and Natural Law*, 137

51 “Christianity and Culture,” 167-168



Social Service and the *Imago Dei*: a Contemporary Analysis and Application of an Ancient Christian Doctrine

Geoffrey Butler

KEYWORDS:

| Image | Social | Human |
| Civil Rights | Bioethics | Poverty |

ABSTRACT:

Despite all the diversity in the Christian tradition over exactly how the image of God ought to be defined, there has existed a broad consensus throughout the church's history that human beings are indeed divine image-bearers, as per the clear teaching of Scripture in the opening chapter of Genesis and elsewhere. Given the impact this doctrine has exerted on past generations of Christians in their social and cultural engagement—such as the abolitionist and civil rights movements, for example—this paper makes the case that contemporary Christians, particularly in the increasingly post-Christian West, would be well served to recover this ancient doctrine as a catalyst for biblically informed cultural engagement in the modern era. It will argue that this doctrine is well positioned to inform such matters as bioethics and poverty, and that even in a rapidly secularizing culture, it is a doctrine that allows the Christian church to offer a unique perspective on social and cultural issues grounded in the inherent dignity of every human being..

INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the *Imago Dei*—the image of God—holds profound implications for a theology of social service, arguably as much as any other doctrine of the Christian faith. The declaration of Gen. 1:27—“God created mankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (NIV)—is one of the clearest statements in all of Scripture concerning the inherent dignity of every human being. Given the vital nature of this doctrine and its implications for how human beings interact with one another, it is well worth considering how the doctrine of the image of God is significant for constructing a theology of social service.

While one might be tempted to think that recognizing all of humanity as made in the image of God would inevitably lead to an ethic of respect and goodwill toward all such image bearers, this has unfortunately not been the case throughout much of church history. This presents the contemporary church with the opportunity to correct this inconsistency and follow in the footsteps of those who have attempted to do so beforehand. This paper will make the case that, as much as any other doctrine of the Christian faith, the *Imago Dei* serves as an extraordinary catalyst for Christian engagement with such spheres as bioethics, poverty alleviation, and civil rights, and that the contemporary western church would be greatly enriched by rediscovering and reemphasizing all the historic Christian tradition has had to say on the matter in order to properly engage their post-Christian culture on this matter.

IMAGO DEI: VOICES FROM CHURCH HISTORY

In considering how the image of God may hold implications for a theology of social service, the first question is how believers ought to understand the image in the first place. As Allison and Grudem note, while believers throughout history have failed to come to a consensus concerning the

precise meaning of the image of God, there has nevertheless been unanimity in asserting that human beings are indeed divine image-bearers.¹ Even among the Church Fathers, this doctrine was defined in a variety of ways. Irenaeus, for example, asserted that the image of God in all human persons consisted of a soul and body, the ability to rationalize, and the to make choices consistent with one's nature.² Though believers and unbelievers alike possessed God's image, Irenaeus proposed that while the former possessed a body, soul, and spirit, the latter possessed only the first two. Only the regenerate received the fullness of what it meant to be truly human. It is important to note that he did not in any way disparage the body by giving the soul and spirit a place in his definition of the *Imago Dei*, but rather appealed to the New Testament in declaring the body to be the temple of God, his very handiwork.³ Tertullian of Carthage differed from Irenaeus in claiming all of humanity, lost and redeemed, were composed of two essential elements: the material and the immaterial, drawing no distinction between the soul and spirit.⁴ These two elements were inseparable from conception and stood in direct contrast to the widespread false teaching of his contemporaries such as Lactantius who declared the soul alone to bear the image of God and the body to be tainted by evil. Thirdly, Origin concurred with Irenaeus concerning the essential nature of humanity having three parts, while holding the view that such a

1 Gregg R. Allison and Wayne A. Grudem. *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine: A Companion to Wayne Grudem's Systematic Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 2011), 320.

2 See Irenaeus, *Irenaeus on the Christian Faith: A Condensation of Against Heresies*, ed. James R. Payton (Cambridge, U.K.: James Clarke, 2012), 160.

3 Ibid. As to this distinction between the divine image and likeness, he declares that "The flesh which has been molded is not a complete human being in itself, but only part of one; neither is the soul itself, considered alone, the human being: it is part of one. Neither is the spirit a complete human being, for it is called the spirit, and not a human being. It is the commingling and union of all these which constitutes a complete human being.... Those alone are "complete" (i.e., "perfect") who have the Spirit of God remaining in them and have preserved their souls and bodies blameless, holding fast faith in God and dealing righteously with their neighbours."

4 See Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul* (Boston, MA: Wyatt North Publishing, 2019), eBook, Ch. 10. In this work he explicitly rejects the distinction between soul and spirit made by those such as Irenaeus—labelling it "artificial" and even heretical—and appeals to the Greek philosopher Plato to support his position.

soul was fallen due to rebellion against God in a prior universe.⁵ Differing in a somewhat bizarre fashion from his contemporaries, he surmised that one's behaviour in this prior universe could help explain the presence of suffering in the individual's life. Nevertheless, he did not go so far as to say that the body itself was evil, but simply capable of it. Finally, Augustine, writing in the fifth century, articulated a doctrine of the *Imago Dei* grounded in the Trinitarian nature of God himself.⁶ Essentially good before the Fall, the image fell through the transgression of Adam and Eve, only to be fully restored by redemption through Christ. Though body and soul/spirit are both an integral part of the image, its core is found in one's capacity to reason.⁷ While writing extensively on the topic, Augustine never came to a clear conclusion on the dichotomy-trichotomy debate as Irenaeus and Tertullian before him.⁸ While diversity appears the norm even in the early church concerning the precise meaning of the *Imago Dei*, it must be noted that all four of these church fathers were quick to assert that the image did not reside solely in the spiritual realm, nor was the body inherently evil or incapable of bearing that image.

In the Reformation era, John Calvin proposed that the image of God is primarily spiritual, as "the proper seat of the image is in the soul".⁹ This line of thinking falls squarely within the tradition not only of the church fathers but of medieval theologians; Thomas Aquinas had proposed

5 Origen, *First Principles*, 4.11 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*. Alexander Roberts *et al.*, eds. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885), 4:359.

6 See Augustine, *The Trinity* 14.14:4, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Maria Boulding, 2nd ed., *The Works of Saint Augustine* 1/5 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012). Here, he argues at length how the soul is the location of the *Imago Dei*, asserting that "but that image of the Creator, that has been implanted immortally in its own immortality, must be found in the soul of man, that is, in the reasonable or intellectual soul."

7 David T. Williams, "He is the Image and Glory of God, but Woman...' (1 Cor 11:7): 'Unveiling' the Understanding of the *Imago Dei*: General." *Scriptura: International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa* 108, no. 1 (2011): 315. See also the above reference to Augustine's work on the Trinity in which he expounds how the capacity for reason is essential to the image.

8 *Ibid.*

9 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.15, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960).

a similar definition several centuries earlier.¹⁰ In Calvin's thought, this image refers to the reasoning capacity and intellect that separates human beings from animals, and that prior to Adam's fall this image kept his passions in subjection to his reason. While he does not deny that the human body was touched by such an image—claiming that every part of Adam was touched by this “glory”—it is clear that, for Calvin, the image remains primarily rational. Moreover, he asserts that the presence of the image of God in the human is the greatest evidence that the soul is eternal. This argument may be one of Calvin's most notable contributions to the conversation, as he argues that, just as God himself is timeless and eternal, it follows that the human being, to which he imparts his image, must also be eternal upon receiving that divine likeness.¹¹

A contemporary collection of voices addressing this matter may be found in the 2013 volume, *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation*, edited by Richard Averbeck. While its contributors spend the bulk of their time discussing the merits of theistic evolution versus direct creationism versus other theories of creation, the meaning of the *Imago Dei* is granted a notable degree of attention as well. Averbeck's own view appears closest to the functional view, as he points to God's commands to imitate his behaviour, including keeping the Sabbath, during his discussion of the image of God.¹² He also makes note of the fact that the Hebrew of Gen. 1:26-27 describes an entirely new creation distinct from the rest of God's world, and implies that this image imparted to humanity involved stewardship over creation. Tremper Longman, while not explicitly advocating for a particular view, observes that image must not imply anything sexual, as both male and female are said to bear it equally.¹³ This is a radical departure from the gods of the Ancient Near

10 Williams, “He is the Image,” 315.

11 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15

12 Richard Averbeck, “A Literary Day, Inter-Textual, and Contextual Reading of Genesis 1-2,” in Richard Averbeck, ed., *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), Kindle Edition, Ch.1.

13 Tremper Longman, “What Genesis 1-2 Teaches (and What It Doesn't),” in *Reading Genesis 1-2*, Ch. 4.

East in that, while their gods were thought to be sexual in nature, the God of the Bible is clearly not. Sexuality, in the Hebrew Scriptures, is a characteristic of the created being, but not the creator himself.¹⁴ Still another position is suggested by J. Daryl Charles in the foreword to the volume,¹⁵ where he suggests that the image of God consists of the human's rational ability to observe and study God's creation, and thus to understand the design and intended end of his world. One issue that all authors agree on, however, is that the image given to humanity before the Fall was not in any way marred by sin; this defect came only after the Fall, in which the image was marred, but not removed.

Yet, one of the contributions that, from a contemporary perspective, might prove most consequential is that of Australian theologian Michael Bird, who expounds on several historic conceptions of the image of God in his 2013 work, *Evangelical Theology*. The first two that he details are the substantive view, which sees God's image as a quality/characteristic integral to humanity that is like God, and the relational view, which points to the "human capacity for relationships" as the defining indicator of the *Imago Dei*.¹⁶ He points the Reformers Luther and Calvin as supporters of the former while pointing to Emil Brunner and Karl Barth as examples of the latter's proponents. He further explains the functional view, which sees the image in the human's dominion over the rest of creation; on this understanding, the image is not an inherent quality, but a role God assigns to humanity. Finally, the view that Bird himself espouses, the royal view, posits that the image of God as described in Genesis must be understood against the backdrop of the ancient Near East. This position seems to avoid many of the pitfalls of the other traditional views, and the way in which it depicts the human person positions Bird's view to make a unique contribution to a theology of social service. In the context of the Ancient Near East, it was common for a society to view its particular ruler as

14 Ibid.

15 J. Daryl Charles, "Foreword," in *Reading Genesis 1-2*, Ch. 1.

16 Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), Kindle Edition, Ch. 7.

a representation, or an image, of one of its Gods.¹⁷ Egyptian pharaohs, for example, were considered an incarnation of Ra, the sun god. Thus, Bird suggests, when the author of Genesis describes human beings as the image of God, this suggests that all of humanity shares in this royalty, and therefore as his representatives all men and women are to participate in ruling over, and caring for, God's creation. "God has set humanity," he claims, "in his creation as walking billboards of his own might and authority. Humans reflect the reign and goodness of God when they justly rule over the created order. The reign of humanity, at its best, is an advertisement for the sovereignty of God over the cosmos."¹⁸ In this view, all of humanity shares in God's reign. Bird advances his case even further by noting that monarchs in the ancient world would often place images of themselves all over the land which they ruled in order to reinforce to all its inhabitants, in a tangible, visible way, who was in charge in that territory. He proposes that, in creating humanity in his image and commanding them to fill the earth and multiply, God was acting as a ruler in the ancient Near East would, striving to fill his kingdom—his earth—with countless images of himself as an expression of his reign.¹⁹ Thus, bearing the image of God not only endows human beings with an immense amount of dignity and authority but also an incredible responsibility—to represent God's nature and likeness. Thus, Jesus can rightly be called the "image of God" because, through his sinless human life, he alone perfectly reflected God's nature. Bird concludes by charging that the *Imago Dei* thus endows humanity with the responsibility to steward creation, defend the oppressed, and protect fellow human lives. John Walton, expressing a similar position, notes that this view of humanity contrasts starkly with the widespread Near Eastern belief that the human relationship to the gods was merely that of a slave; the Genesis account, on the other hand, depicts male and female as participating in the reign of God as royalty

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

themselves.²⁰

In briefly assessing church history, despite the fact Christians have proposed various definitions throughout two millennia, most include some mention of a rational as well as a physical component of God’s image. But perhaps one of the most important issues that must be remembered, no matter one’s definition, is that orthodox Christians have always rejected the view that the body is inherently evil.²¹ The body, and the physical realm on the whole, is not to be treated as irrelevant as the gnostic worldview would assert. The *Imago Dei* clearly has relevance to this present world, with serious implications for how we interact with God, his creation, and one another—especially when one considers Michael Bird’s rather convincing case that the image implies every human shares in God’s reign and is to act in such a way that his nature and character are represented through us. In light of this, the question of how the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* ought to inform a theology of social service may now be addressed.

SOCIAL SERVICES AND THE *IMAGO DEI*: A CONNECTION TO RECOVER?

A frequent criticism of the Christian church is that, throughout history, it has been guilty of overemphasizing orthodoxy—right belief—to the devaluing of orthopraxy—right action. Certainly, there is a case to be made that this is because many in the church have been concerned with being theologically correct even on the minutest details without giving enough thought to how such positions ought to be lived out. It is indeed a sobering thought, particularly for the evangelical who cherishes the

20 John H. Walton, “Reading Genesis 1 As Ancient Cosmology,” in *Reading Genesis 1-2*, Ch. 5.

21 Allison and Grudem. *Historical Theology*, 320. “Apart from a very few exceptions,” they note, “the church has always affirmed the reality of the human body, though it has also wrestled with views that disparage the body and treat it as being inherently evil. Also, the church has affirmed the reality of the human soul or the human spirit, though the specific identity of these elements has been a matter of debate.” While such statements may sound obvious to the contemporary reader, the vast theological diversity of the patristic era makes the broad consensus on this point worth highlighting.

doctrine of *Sola Fide*, that the question Jesus asks of those who come before him at the judgement of Matthew 25 concerns not what they believed, but what they did during their lives. In his commentary on Matthew's gospel, Stanley Hauerwas notes that:

It is significant that the righteous have not known that when they ministered, provided hospitality, and visited that they did all of this to Jesus. They have done what God would have us to do and so doing have ministered to Christ himself. All people, whether they are Christians or not, know all they need to know to care for "the least of these." The difference between followers of Jesus and those who do not know Jesus is that those who have seen Jesus no longer have any excuse to avoid "the least of these."²²

Thus, given this clear emphasis Christ himself places on orthopraxy, it seems rather striking how often doctrinal precision has commanded more attention from his professed followers than compassionate service.

On the other hand, part of the problem may have been that many individuals who have advocated for a robust theology of social service have not relied strongly enough on certain core doctrines of the faith—such as the *Imago Dei*—to make their case. If this is true, the problem is not that there has been too much emphasis on the importance of theology, but an insufficient understanding of biblical theology. It is indeed striking that in William Booth's landmark manifesto *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, one searches in vain for any more than a brief mention of the image of God in humanity, and then only in passing.²³ Though Booth was not a scholar and thus his writings should not be taken as an academic tome, the fact that the founder of the Salvation Army—a denomination famous for its service to those on the margins, and which has quite possibly accomplished more in the area of social services than any other

22 Stanley Hauerwas. *Matthew. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Brazos Press, 2006), 380.

23 William Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out*. (London, UK: The Salvation Army, 1890), 24.

Christian denomination—makes little of the *Imago Dei* in his theology of social service is indeed surprising. It also ought to make the church ask what untapped potential may lie in linking this doctrine to a theology of social service. How forceful would the church's conviction to develop a serious theology of social service be if it was to heed afresh Booth's plea for the church to care for the starving children, the women caught in sex trafficking, and the inhabitants of city slums on one hand while considering Michael Bird's reminder that each of these aforementioned groups of individuals were created by God to testify to his nature and character on the other hand?²⁴ If, as image-bearers of God, human beings bear the responsibility of acting as God's representatives to the rest of his creation, demonstrating to it what he is like, what does it say when some image-bearers abuse, oppress, and marginalize other image-bearers while countless other supposed co-regents sit idly by and tolerate such inexcusable behaviour?

By the grace of God, there have been notable exceptions to this problem, leaving a deep and lasting legacy throughout the churches history that it would do well to recover. One example within relatively recent church history can be found among self-styled "Radical Christians" during the nineteenth-century United States.²⁵ Such groups were instrumental in the fight against slavery, in large part due to their conviction, which they worked tirelessly to promote, that social reform required identifying with the oppressed rather than merely sympathizing with them.²⁶ At the core of their movement was a form of Christianity that viewed the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* as essential to this reform; African American antislavery activist Maria Stewart, for example, frequently called on her community to recognize their inherent dignity as image-bearers.²⁷ For such Christian

24 *Ibid.*, 8-9.

25 Dan McKanan, *Identifying the Image of God: Radical Christians and Nonviolent Power in the Antebellum United States. Religion in America Series*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002.

26 *Ibid.*, 4.

27 *Ibid.*, 49.

abolitionists, the core of their movement rested on the notion that slavery was not the natural condition of such individuals but a blatant violation of their identity. As social reformer and land speculator Gerrit Smith observed, the only form of Christianity that could achieve such an end was one which recognized "man's capacity for resembling his God".²⁸ In their view, the principles of their movement were, in fact, impressed on the consciences of every human, and thus needed simply to be awakened rather than taught. Such social reform did not just stem from Christianity in general but from this specific Christian doctrine.

Yet, the abolition of slavery was hardly the only nineteenth-century social reform advocated for by Christians who emphasized the image of God in every individual; opposition to alcohol abuse, corporal punishment, the subordination of women, and violence in general during this period were all the end result of Christian communities taking seriously the notion that their marginalized neighbours deserved just treatment as image-bearers of God.²⁹ The social reforms that came during that time period, as a result, demonstrate why the doctrine of the *Imago Dei*, and its necessary implications, are so vital to a Christian theology of social service. It also ought to remind the twenty-first-century church why it must not rely solely on right belief or right practice but to allow the former to inform the latter so that the body of Christ will attain its full potential.

THE *IMAGO DEI* AND CIVIL RIGHTS

In light of the success of nineteenth-century social reformers, particularly the abolitionist movement, it is perhaps unsurprising that many individuals active in the civil rights movement of the twentieth century also leaned heavily on the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* to make their case for justice

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 4.

in the public square. Here there is perhaps no better example than that of Martin Luther King Jr.³⁰ In his 2009 volume, *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Image of God*, Richard Willis documents that King’s conviction that all of humanity bore the image of God “served as the basis of his civil rights appeal”.³¹ In doing so, he drew not only on Scripture but the civil rights activists of the prior century. Because the *Imago Dei* was not a privilege granted by the state, King saw that the state, therefore, had no right to deprive any human being of their inherent dignity, which ought to be expressed through legislation mandating equal civil rights. Far from rebelling against the providence of God, the oppressed were right to insist on equality, King contended, as such rights were granted by God.³² King’s position was shaped in no small part by his mentor Samuel Dewitt Proctor, the former vice-president of Virginia Union University whom King invited to deliver a lecture series while pastoring Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The grandson of a former slave, Proctor pointed to the Scriptures to note that the oppressed African American community in the United States possessed the same *Imago Dei*, the same reasoning capacities and, therefore, the same inherent dignity even as the English monarch.³³ Proctor’s theology of the image of God clearly shaped his theology of social reform, as he once asserted that the local church should be “a social service agency as well as a vital religious center”.³⁴ Proctor, King, and their contemporaries in the fight for civil equality evidently viewed saw a clear connection between the Christian doctrine of the *Imago Dei* and the church’s call to social service.

Given this heritage, where may Christians focus their social service efforts today to protect and advance human rights? One example may be refugee relief efforts, which have come into the spotlight dramatically

30 Richard W. Willis, *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Image of God*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

31 *Ibid.*, 54.

32 *Ibid.*

33 *Ibid.*, 42-43.

34 *Ibid.*

following the disastrous civil war in Syria. While there is no shortage of political opinions among western Christians concerning how their governments ought to handle this situation, it seems an understanding that every refugee bears the image of God and is thus designed to participate in God's reign over creation should evoke the utmost compassion for their plight. Indeed, it ought to make believers grieve when their fellow image-bearers, who are intended to exercise dominion over the rest of creation, find themselves homeless, widowed, or orphaned by the violent actions of other image-bearers. The notion that the *Imago Dei* residing in both male and female may serve as a powerful motivator to serve women, who particularly have suffered as a result of this conflict due to sexual violence and exploitation. Once again, the egalitarian nature of the *Imago Dei* as expounded in Genesis reminds the Christian church that women, just as well as men, are designed to reflect the nature of God to the rest of creation. While a minority of voices throughout the church's history—with Augustine likely the most prominent—have proposed that women do not bear the image of God independently of their husbands,³⁵ a consistent reading of Gen. 1:27 requires the recognition of their identity as co-regents with God just as much as men.

Fortunately, some segments of the church have already pointed to the *Imago Dei* as a crucial doctrine in the development of a theology of social service. A small group discussion guide released by World Vision in 2016 to aid Christian leaders in addressing the refugee crisis reminds its readers that “God’s heart is broken by oppression and poverty—and as beings made in His image, our hearts should break too. But it is not enough to be broken hearted. To offer hope, we must enter into people’s suffering. Concern that does not lead to compassionate action changes nothing.”³⁶ This piece of pastoral advice reminds us that, while Christians may differ on exactly how and where refugee relief ought to take place, keeping in mind that each one reflects the *Imago Dei* would help the church keep

35 Williams, “He is the Image,” 323.

36 “Stand Alongside Syrian Refugees,” July 17, 2016. <https://www.christchurch.us/attachments/RefugeeSmallGroupGuide71716.pdf>, 5, accessed May 15, 2019.

in mind just how precious such a task is to the God who created such individuals.

THE *IMAGO DEI*, MEDICAL CARE, AND BIOETHICS

The field of healthcare, and by extension the area of bioethics, is one area where the image of God has the potential to play an pivotal role in Christian social service. As previously mentioned, Salvation Army founder William Booth did not lean too heavily on the concept of the *Imago Dei* in his writings concerning social service. However, he did invoke the concept while noting that the fatherly nature of God required that his image-bearers tend to the needs of the broken.³⁷ It was not enough to simply tend to one's physical needs, he proposed, apart from the empowerment of God; true concern for those in need must be grounded in the belief that all humans, as God's image-bearers, possess a level of inherent dignity. Perhaps, in light of this view, it is not difficult to see why Booth saw health care, particularly the prevention of diseases and addictions, as one area of social service where Christians ought to be involved. On one occasion, Booth went so far as to claim had even if he became a physician, he would not have accomplished more than the Salvation Army already had through its ministry of disease prevention, advocacy for abstinence from alcohol, and providing "tender nursing, happiness, and love not only to prevent disease, but go far in the majority of cases to effecting its cure".³⁸

In addressing how the church ought to engage in this field today, multiple questions arise that would not have posed a problem for Booth's nineteenth century Salvation Army. First of all, many industrialized nations now boast a state-run healthcare system; thus, for Christians to engage in this area of social service in nations such as Canada or Britain,

37 Booth, *In Darkest England*, 24.

38 William Booth, "Salvation for Both Worlds," *All The World*, (January 1889), 4.

doing so will often mean participating in the context of a more secular environment rather than an explicitly Christian context. Moreover, the conviction that all human beings, even the unborn, bear the *Imago Dei* has profound implications for how Christians view matters such as abortion and stem cell research, issues that demand more debate in the public square now than they would have several generations ago.³⁹ Yet, these challenges should not act as a barrier to believers engaging with such public institutions; after all, though working within them may bring them face to face with complex ethical dilemmas, should it not be an opportunity for improving such a system from the inside? If followers of Christ will not advocate for the dignity of fellow image-bearers in such contexts, then certainly the chances of anyone else doing so are slim, to say the least.

The conviction that all people bear the image of God from conception, as advocated in Christian thought as far back as the Church Fathers, has led the majority of confessing Christians in the modern age to oppose abortion, eugenics, euthanasia, and other actions which would entail the destruction of that image. Sharon M. Leon notes that during the Nazi regime in Germany, while numerous Catholic bishops, unfortunately, capitulated to the racist policies of the Third Reich that included eugenic sterilization and euthanasia, mainstream Catholic theologians in the country insisted such policies violated the rights of the individual.⁴⁰ Indeed, their legacy stands as one of the few prophetic witnesses of their era to which the contemporary church may look for inspiration. While the modern West is nowhere near the brutal Nazi regime in terms of its

39 See Calum MacKellar, *The Image of God, Personhood and the Embryo* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2017). This is not to say that contemporary believers constitute the first few generations to grapple with this issue; for an overview of how abortion was addressed in the first four centuries of the church's existence, see Michael J. Gorman *Abortion & the Early Church: Christian, Jewish & Pagan Attitudes in the Greco-Roman World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982). What has changed, however, is the extent to which the practice has become much more socially accepted in Western society, placing the debate over woman's right to choose versus an unborn child's right to life at the heart of the conservative-liberal political divide.

40 Sharon M. Leon, *Image of God: The Catholic Struggle with Eugenics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 103-4.

debasement of certain minority groups, the question of how believers ought to behave in a society quite tolerant of abortion and euthanasia is inevitably tied to the *Imago Dei*, and will affect how Christians engage the field of medicine. The bioethical implications of believing humanity to be created in the image of God are expressed concisely by Mark Cherry, who asserts that the recognition of this image demands that Christian healthcare recognize that the whole person—physical and spiritual—is to be treated with dignity.⁴¹ Physical care must not be neglected in favour of spiritual care or vice-versa, nor can a Christian view of the *Imago Dei* be sidelined in the name of pragmatism as a secular view of the human being may allow for.

Perhaps, in light of these contemporary debates that often leave Christians feeling as though they are out of line with their society on such issues, the church is uniquely positioned for the task of social services to such groups whose needs are not largely recognized by the wider population. Could the church emerge, in the era of western post-Christendom, as one of the few remaining communities where the unborn, the terminally ill, and the elderly are regarded as having as much inherent value as the perfectly healthy adult? As Cherry notes in his discussion of Christian bioethics, it is not uncommon in the field of secular bioethics to encourage a type of eugenics in regards to mentally or physically disabled children, as parents are encouraged to avoid expending significant energy, financial resources, and public goods by bringing such individuals into the world.⁴² Surely the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* demands better than this, and indicates that there is a golden opportunity in the realm of social service to advocate on behalf of, and care for, such persons who often have limited ability to do either on their own behalf.

While the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* inevitably makes the task of social service fraught with challenges due to the complex bioethical and, thus, political considerations involved, the doctrine may also help

41 Mark J. Cherry “Created in the Image of God: Bioethical Implications of the *Imago Dei*.” *Christian Bioethics* 23, no. 3 (2017): 219.

42 Cherry, “Created in the Image,” 223.

Christians maintain a proper perspective on why the task of medical care is so important to the Lord. Given that this area of social service involves caring for the being made in his image, there is a strong case to be made that those who participate in such services represent the nature of God by caring for the well-being of his image-bearers just as he himself does.⁴³

THE *IMAGO DEI* AND POVERTY

A third area where the doctrine of the image of God could prove helpful in the development of a theology of social service relates to Christian concern for the impoverished in society. In the gospels, one of Jesus' most widely known pronouncements is that his kingdom would be good news for the poor;⁴⁴ tragically, the church's presentation of the gospel has all too often omitted this dimension of the gospel in favour of a message that is wholly oriented around the afterlife—and thus being of little benefit to the poor while on earth. In his volume *Ministry in the Image of*

43 See Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, Ch. 7. "In sum," he argues, "the *Imago Dei* is a function, a royal vocation for humanity to reflect the reign of God in their stewardship over creation. They pursue the royal task by protecting human life (Gen. 9:5), resisting ideologies of power where brutal monarchs try to monopolize the image for themselves (Matt. 20:25-28), and caring for the earth and the animal world (Gen. 1:28)". Thus, this responsibility to steward creation properly includes caring for one's fellow image-bearers, not only holding human life as worthy of utmost protection but also combatting the oppression of one image-bearer by another.

44 See, for example, Luke 4:18, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free" (NIV). There is certainly a sense in which this text refers to the poor in spirit; as Origen proposes, "The 'poor' stand for the Gentiles, for they are indeed poor. They possess nothing at all: neither God, nor the law, nor the prophets, nor justice and the rest of the virtues" (Arthur A. Just, *Luke. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament, 3* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 80). However, it is a serious mistake to view this proclamation in a strictly spiritual light. Chester notes that "time and time again Luke speaks of a reversal at the end of time, and he speaks of it in social and political categories" (See Tim Chester, *Good News to the Poor: Social Involvement and the Gospel* (North American Edition, 2013) Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 91). For this reason, the coming Kingdom of God, 'is especially good news for those who do not experience this life as one of blessing'".

God: The Trinitarian Shape of Christian Service, Stephen A. Seamands highlights the proclamation of Christ that his gospel would hold particular relevance for the marginalized. He speaks of bringing this good news to the poor and liberty to the oppressed, shortly after his baptism in which Luke records him being filled with the Holy Spirit.⁴⁵ This reinforces the concept that, as followers of Christ who are empowered by that same Spirit, service to fellow image-bearers is an absolute necessity. He also points to the Trinitarian nature of God as vital for grasping the nature of the *Imago Dei*; if the triune God himself is a community, embodying not only mutual submission but also equality, love, and joy, it follows that his image-bearers ought to live as a community embodying those very same attributes—including in its treatment of the poor.⁴⁶

Bird's royal view of the *Imago Dei* is instrumental here, once again, due to its assertion that all human beings—not just the strong and powerful—bear the image of God and thus are tasked with reflecting his nature.⁴⁷ This speaks powerfully to the issue of poverty in two ways; first of all, it informs believers that even the desperately poor have the potential—indeed, the responsibility—to share in God's reign and thus must be treated with the utmost dignity. Secondly, it serves as a reminder that when one image-bearer neglects the needs of another, humanity has failed to accurately reflect to the rest of creation the nature of its character—and thus failed in its ultimate responsibility. Further expounding on this concept is Tim Chester in his work, *Good News to the Poor: Social Involvement and the Gospel*, in which he charges that “the gospel is good news to the poor because the reign of God is a reign of justice and peace in which the last will be first and the first will be last”.⁴⁸ In other words, unlike the kingdoms of the world, the kingdom of God is a reign in which even the lowliest will occupy a place of dignity and honour—a higher

45 Stephen A. Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God: The Trinitarian Shape of Christian Service* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 29.

46 *Ibid.*, 35.

47 Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, Ch. 7.

48 Chester, *Good News to the Poor*, 91.

one, in fact, than that of individuals considered to be “first” in an earthly sense.

While Christians are unlikely to have trouble convincing their peers of other faiths or indeed, no faith at all—of the conviction that service to the poor is a moral endeavour, for the follower of Christ this action should be done not only out of a sense of pity for the poor but also a conviction that their condition is not a natural one. For the Christian who recognizes the impoverished individual as a co-regent in God’s kingdom, the alleviation of poverty is not just a temporary relief but a restoration of that person’s dignity as a bearer of the *Imago Dei*. This realization gives poverty relief an immeasurably deeper meaning than the secular view. Surely William Booth is correct in his assertion that salvation in the full biblical sense involves deliverance from earthly suffering as well as misery in the afterlife, rightly noting their similarities and their common root—human separation from God.⁴⁹ Consider once again the view of the image proposed by Irenaeus, who suggested that only the regenerate individual possessed the *Imago Dei* in all its pre-fall fullness: body, soul, and spirit.⁵⁰ Undoubtedly, there are glaring weaknesses to this position; few would want to argue that the larger portion of humanity does not fully bear the image of God. Yet, this view does point to a truth that is clear in Scripture; salvation includes the redemption of the whole person, soul and body, and thus Booth’s position that caring for both the material and spiritual needs of the poor must be clearly consistent with their status as bearers of the image of God.

However, coming back to Booth’s assertion that earthly social ills such as poverty and eternal misery have the same root, it appears that if this is the case the Christian worldview offers not just one more way to care for the poor but the only way to truly care for the impoverished individual’s soul and body. Only a view of social service that flows out of the *Imago Dei*, which sees God’s image in both the material and

49 Booth, “Salvation for Both Worlds,” 2.

50 Irenaeus, *Irenaeus on the Christian*, 160.

immaterial aspects of the human being, can account for such a position. For the twenty-first century church, poverty relief may be undertaken through a variety of means; even the Scriptures themselves are not crystal clear on how Christians ought to tend to the poor, hence the fact that the church contains both staunch libertarians who would prefer to accomplish this through private charity as well as avowed socialists who advocate for the redistribution of wealth at the state level.⁵¹ Thus, the extent to which the church cooperates with the government on this matter may depend on the particular congregation/denomination, the size of the church, or its political leanings. To be sure, even the nation in question will often be a major factor in how this is accomplished. Some believers may insist that coordinating with explicitly Christian organizations such as Compassion International or Samaritan's Purse in targeting poverty rather than relying on legal reform and government aid. Perhaps the most important question to answer is not precisely how Christians should carry out this task, but why—and the answer to the latter lies in the recognition of the *Imago Dei* in the poor.

CONCLUSION

All things considered, there is a strong case to be made that the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* may hold much deeper significance for a theology of social service than the church has given it credit for in the past. Whether the specific area is combatting poverty, reimagining healthcare and bioethics, or advocating for the rights of the marginalized, recognizing each human being as designed to partner with God in his reign over the

51 On this point, see Timothy Keller, "How Do Christians Fit Into the Two-Party System? They Don't," September 29, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/29/opinion/sunday/christians-politics-belief.html>. He notes that "most political positions are not matters of biblical command but of practical wisdom. This does not mean that the church can never speak on social, economic and political realities, because the Bible often does. . . . However, there are many possible ways to help the poor. Should we shrink government and let private capital markets allocate resources, or should we expand the government and give the state more of the power to redistribute wealth? . . . The Bible does not give exact answers to these questions for every time, place and culture".

universe puts the task of social service in an entirely new light from a theological perspective. Going forward, the church would do well to recapture the passion of iconic leaders such as Booth and King while infusing their justice-oriented spirituality with a fresh reimagining of the ancient doctrine of the *Imago Dei*. It is indeed difficult to imagine such a course of action holding anything but positive results for the body of Christ and its mission of reaching the world with the good news.

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Ἐν Χριστῷ Out of Context: The Zen-ification of the Son of God

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KEYWORDS:

| Zen-Christian | Theology of Religions |
| Jesus | Biblical Theology | Gospel | Buddhism |

ABSTRACT:

Zen-Christianity is a pluralistic theological movement that is gaining greater acceptance in the global evangelical community. Members of this movement claim to have achieved a theological bilingualism in which both distinct theological/philosophical systems are held in concert without conflict or distortion of one by the other. This article argues that far from achieving theological harmony, Zen-Christian theology severely distorts numerous tenants of orthodox Christian faith including the person and work of Jesus Christ. In demonstration of this, this article examines the Zen-Christian theology of Jesus as presented by Ruben Habito, a prominent theologian of the Zen-Christian movement. From an exegetical and biblical-theological perspective this article demonstrates that in order to fit Jesus into his Zen-Christian theological program, Habito must divorce Jesus from his theological, linguistic, and historical context. This article concludes that because it distorts the deity, teachings, and nature of Jesus Christ, Zen-Christianity, as presented by Habito, should be completely rejected by the evangelical community..

I. IN PURSUIT OF A ZEN-CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

In the current marketplace of theological trends pride of place is given to interreligious dialogue of a collaborative nature. The most prominent fruit of this collaboration is an emerging legion of theological amalgams and their adherents; those claiming multiple religious belongings. Those who claim multiple religious belongings seek to hold in concert two distinct theological systems without the subjugation of one system to the other. In other words “multiple belongsers”¹ seek to operate from a place of “religious bilingualism” in that their life experience might be interpreted by either religious system while each system is not directly analogous to the other. (Homrighausen 2015, 64–66) A popular current incarnation of this religious bilingualism which has made inroads into the global evangelical community is that of being a Zen-Christian; an adherent of the Christian faith who either has attained or is seeking Zen enlightenment. Writers such as Ruben Habito and Robert Kennedy (2020) have popularized the Zen-Christian identity as being a natural outpouring of the quest to follow Jesus. In his book *Living Zen, Loving God*, an exemplar text of the Zen-Christian movement, Ruben Habito embarks on a semi-autobiographical set of essays in which he proposes a synergy between Christianity and Zen. Habito, a former Jesuit Priest and current Zen master describes his own personal experience of Zen enlightenment. Habito presents the benefits for understanding Jesus (2004, 16–17) that he believes arise from the joint practice of Christianity and Zen and attempts to argue for theological compatibility (2004, 6–7) between the two theological systems. The goal of the book, in Habito’s words, is to answer the question, “How am I to understand and articulate the Zen experience in the light of my own Christian faith?”(2004, XVII)

1 Term invoked by Braak for those who seek to maintain two distinct theological identities simultaneously. (Braak 2017, 434).

***A. Habito's Stated Goal:
To Combine Without Mixing***

In the preface to the text, John P. Keenan, a colleague of Ruben Habito and a fellow Catholic-Zen theologian, makes the claim that what is truly unique about Habito's approach to combining Zen and Christianity into a mutually beneficial amalgam is that he is able to present the compatibility between Christianity and Zen-Buddhist worldviews without "mixing" the two traditions in any way. This claim seems to indicate that, in the views of both Keenan and Habito, the book draws on the biblical text and Christian theological tradition without forcing either to fit its thesis. Keenan states, "So here, Zen remains Zen and Christian faith remains Christian faith. Neither is watered down. Neither is confused or bent out of shape. Rather each interweaves and dwells within the other."(2004, XI–XII)

***B. Weighing the Claims of Habito
Keenan, et al***

In this article I will take Ruben Habito's theological articulation of Zen-Christian theology as a prototypical presentation of the movement.² By critiquing this single work of Zen-Christian theology, I seek to offer an short examination and rebuttable of the theological underpinnings on the movement. My aim is to critically examine, as presented by Ruben Habito, Zen-Christian theological claims as they pertain to the person and teachings of Jesus Christ. I will argue that, far from keeping them undiluted, Ruben Habito habitually bends the teachings of Jesus to fit his theological arguments and supplants them with his own Zen-Buddhist

² As Zen-Christianity is a grass roots movement there is no official coherent articulation of Zen-Christian theology. There is also a lack of coherence in the writings of individual Zen-Christian theologians as their works at times appear contradictory. As such my strategy has been to select a single work from a single author with which to interact. Thus, I hope in critiquing this single work to provide a general critique of popular claims of the theological movement.

worldview. I will argue that far from showing compatibility between the teachings of Jesus and the teaching of the Zen masters, Habito's theology remakes Jesus into a first-century Jewish Zen master and teacher of modern Buddhist panentheistic theology.

I will contend that in Habito's theological program the apostle Paul fares little better than Jesus, finding his Christology submitted to unwarranted cutting and pasting to fit Habito's theological aims. My thesis is that Habito, in an attempt to meld Zen-Buddhism with Christianity, has divorced both Jesus and Paul from literary context and read into them Buddhist philosophical and theological ideas foreign to their culture, contexts, and use of language. I will argue that Habito misrepresents the words of Jesus and Paul not only philosophically but also linguistically.³

Following a short overview of Habito's theology, I will discuss a number of ways in which I believe that Habito has misrepresented both the mission and worldview of Jesus and has taken a Pauline theological concepts out of context for his own purposes. Since Habito's book is theological in nature, my arguments will extend beyond exegesis to biblical, systematic, and historical theology. Where my critique is theological, I seek to represent as fairly as possible normative historical Christian theology. Where it is exegetical, I will operate from a historical-grammatical approach to exegesis, seeking to understand the words of Jesus and Paul as clearly as possible in context. I will demonstrate that Habito's appeals to scripture and orthodox Christian theology divorces them from context and reshapes them into a form more convenient with the Zen-Christian agenda.

3 As shown below, at times we see Habito edit sentences, change tenses, and make unwarranted translation choices in an attempt to squeeze the words of both Jesus and Paul into a previously prepared Zen-shaped mold.

II. HABITO'S BUDDHIST- CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL PROGRAM

In his first essay entitled, “Seeing Into One’s Nature: A Christian Experience of Zen” Habito describes his own experience of achieving Zen enlightenment and his attempts to fit the Zen experience into his Christian faith. Through dialectic reasoning, he struggles to connect many theological concepts in Zen-Buddhist philosophy with concepts in Christian theology. In the process he makes four very significant connections: (1) that the status of all sentient beings⁴ is ἐν Χριστῷ⁵ based on Jesus’ creation of them *ex nihilo* (2004, 6–7); (2) that Jesus’ teaching on repentance (μετανοιέω) is analogous to an encouragement to achieve Zen-like enlightenment; (3) that Jesus’s purpose in undergoing crucifixion was solely to demonstrate solidarity with all sentient beings who endure suffering and to teach others to do the same; (4) and that the Gospel as preached by Jesus is that all sentient beings are part of God in the “Realm of Heaven”⁶ and that through enlightenment and Buddhist moral philosophy one can reconcile with God through embracing God within oneself and others. (2004, 57)

A. The Personhood of God and Nature of the Trinity

God figures into Habito’s theology as both flat and impersonal. God in many ways is coterminous with love and should not be seen as the source of love or the object of loving but instead the action itself. (2004, XVII) The

4 Zen-Buddhism teaches that all sentient creatures equally possess the Buddha-nature and as such exist as part of God.

5 Habito describes this as having the “Christ Nature” equating it with the Buddha-nature and drawing on Paul’s statements in Eph 1:4 “For he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world that we may be holy and unblemished in his sight in love.”(NET) as proof.

6 As discussed below, Habito insists on translating the phrase βασιλείαν θεοῦ as ‘Kingdom of God’ or βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν as ‘kingdom of heaven(s)’ and attempts to redirect its meaning away from any sense of lordship, imbuing the term with entirely new meaning.

Spirit of God as well is depersonalized; the Spirit is merely the presence of God that was released through the crucifixion. (2004, 37) Because both God and the Holy Spirit become depersonalized positive forces, Jesus is the only member of the Godhead who truly achieves personal status in Habito's theology.⁷ However, Jesus only achieves personhood in an impoverished way. He is honored as a moral teacher who encouraged all to love one another and who worked tirelessly to help the suffering. However, because of Habito's underlying panentheistic worldview, Jesus is no more divine than any who hold the Buddha-nature as part of God.⁸ It is in his treatment of Jesus that Habito seems most unable to reconcile the two competing worldviews he is attempting to meld. While common core Buddhist theology states that Christ himself could not have held any more of God than any being who is aware of its own existence, Habito's Christian heritage seems to keep him from stating this outright. For him to invoke the name Christian at all, Habito seems compelled to describe Christ as unique to a degree.⁹ So here we see a compromise, Christ wins out as unique in some way to the rest of the beings who are part of God. He is unique as the one who, through his death, burial, and resurrection showed a way for all those who are part of God to commune with the God who already indwells them. (2004, 8–9) According to Habito, the way Jesus showed the way to commune with God was through solidarity with suffering by choosing an inglorious and painful death.

7 Jesus, in Habito's arguments, is clearly human, but in true Buddhist dialectical style also seems to be an impersonal force at times. It seems that both Christians and Buddhist have trouble wrapping their head around the concept of the incarnation of God.

8 The Buddha-nature is a complex concept difficult to translate into Western philosophical thinking. Essentially it involves possessing both sentience and the potentiality for spiritual progress. It is not limited to humanity but is shared by all humans, self-aware portions of the animal kingdom as well as certain natural phenomenon such as mountains and waterfalls. For a detail historical treatment see: (King 1989, 154–56)

9 It is in dealing with Jesus that Habito most clearly is seen to conflict with his dual identity. While Habito desires to retain a Christian identity, in his proposal Jesus simply does not fit well into Buddhism. So, we find Jesus' words retranslated and edited. While Jesus was undoubtedly a teacher of morality, one becomes keenly aware the Gospel writer's record numerous statements by Jesus very inconvenient to Habito's position. For example, Jesus' self-descriptions are problematic for Habito's views. I will explore this more below.

B. Jesus the Bodhisattva

The uniqueness of Jesus in Habito's view is that he is the ultimate example of a human in tune with the divine. As such, Habito tends to take passages or verses from the Gospels that refer in context specifically to Jesus in his messianic role or divine/human nature and apply them generally to all sentient beings. This tendency is seen in Habito's use of Mark 1:11. In context it is a pronouncement of divine favor and commission upon Jesus, (Collins 2007) but Habito applies it generally to all sentient beings, in proof that, far from being separate from God, they are unfallen and inherently acceptable to the divine. He says,

In short, we need only be humble enough to accept the fact that we are accepted, just as we are, no matter what, by that cosmic love that permeates through the universe...Jesus heard these words as he received baptism from John the Baptist at the river Jordan: "you are my beloved, in whom I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). (2004, 60)

C. Habito's Theism: Pantheism vs. Panentheism

Claiming that his view of God fits neatly in the Christian doctrine of omnipresence, Habito rejects the claim that he is advocating pantheism. (2004, 56) This is rightly so for if he claimed pantheism, he would claim that God is coextensive with the universe. Instead what Habito advocates, though it is unclear whether he himself would admit to it, is a form of panentheism,¹⁰ the belief that reality comprises a portion of God. So, though God transcends creation, all creation is in some way part of God. Panentheism is ultimately incompatible with the Christian doctrine of God.¹¹ Habito's panentheism leads him to see the indwelling of the Holy

10 Panentheism would state that "all reality is part of the being of God". *Bowker 1997*, s.v. pantheism, panentheism.

11 Specific areas of conflict between Christian theology and panentheism are the

Spirit as analogous with the Zen notion of possessing the “God nature”.¹² Because Habito theologically links the doctrine of omnipresence with Buddhist pantheism, statements by both Jesus and Paul have been reinterpreted in this light. Where Christian theology would see Jesus’ statements in John 14:15-20¹³ as indicating that the Holy Spirit will be given to believers, Habito interprets them to mean that all sentient being will be revealed as being part of God’s being, having a portion of his Spirit. Where Habito would claim the indwelling spirit is synonymous with God’s omnipresence, the indwelling of the Spirit is, according to orthodox Christian theology, distinct from God’s omnipresence.¹⁴

distinctness of God from creation, the immutability of God, the impassability of God, and strict anti-supernaturalism. The God of pantheism shifts with reality and introduces a God of changing nature in which God grows and shrinks, changing with creation. Pantheism also deifies creation making no separation between creation and creator. See: (Geisler 1999, 576–80.)

12 It should be noted that the concept of pantheism was known in the Roman world in the first century having been theorized by Plato. (Geisler 1999, s.v. pantheism) However, the burden of proof rests on those who would show a philosophical and theological relationship between Plato and the message of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. Jewish concepts of God so extremely separated God from the created world that in the intertestamental period a belief developed that the Law must have been given by angels (Davidson 1992, 120–1.) to Moses and not by the hand of YHWH because of this transcendence of God. If Intertestamental Judaism erred from the Christian perspective, it was not towards pantheism but in seeing God as too inseparably transcendent.

13 “If you love me, you will obey my commandments. Then I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept, because it does not see him or know him. But you know him, because he resides with you and will be in you. I will not abandon you as orphans, I will come to you. In a little while the world will not see me any longer, but you will see me; because I live, you will live too. You will know at that time that I am in my Father and you are in me and I am in you.” John 15:15-20 (NET)

14 Historically, the exact nature of God’s omnipresence has been a debate in Christian theology. See discussion in (Gasser 2019, 57). However, what has been asserted historically is that the theological concepts of omnipresence and the indwelling of the Spirit are distinct. The spirit’s indwelling being unique to the believer. See Lombard’s excellent articulation (Lombard 1971, sec. I, d. 37, c. 1, n. 2)

***D. Sin, Suffering,
and What is Wrong with this World***

While sin is largely absent in Habito's theological program, suffering stands foundational. Habito states,

We must make clear at the outset that Zen as such is non-theistic, that is not at all concerned with the notion of God or with the question of God's existence or nonexistence. Rather its central concern, as in Buddhism in general, is the resolution of the fundamental problem of human existence, characterized in this tradition as *dukkha* (dissatisfactoriness). (2004, 104)

This *dukkha* of which Ruben Habito speaks is the notion of suffering. (Bowker 1997, s.v. *dukkha*) In Habito's theological program, suffering is part of the world by design and is not related to a moral failing on the part of humanity. Rather, suffering is the result of ignorance on the part of those who possess the Buddha-nature; ignorance that they and all other sentient beings innately exist fully indwelt by God.¹⁵ So, repentance for Habito is the achievement of enlightenment, a realization of the reality of the Buddha-nature that frees one from suffering. The world exists as a paradise in which all suffering merely results from ignorance. Habito supports this assertion with a revised translation of Jesus' words to the thief on the cross in Luke 23:43, "It is on the Cross itself that Jesus tells the Good Thief beside him, 'Truly today you are¹⁶ with me in Paradise'

15 (2004, 62) Habito seems to demonstrate an awareness that this argument is theologically difficult for Christianity to swallow and attempts to obscure the issue by claiming that the doctrine of omnipresence makes Christianity panentheistic itself. (2004, 56) But I would contend that claiming Christianity is panentheistic fails to consider different degrees of the presence of God that Christianity claims. For example, Christian theology would state that the believer is indwelt by God in a way a frog is not, though God is omnipresent. Buddhism and Habito, in contrast, would see God as indwelling a frog to the same degree as a person who follows Christ. This is panentheistic and outside the bounds of Christian theology.

16 The translation of the verb ἔσῃ (a future middle tense form of εἶμι 'to be') in this verse as the English present tense is truly bizarre. In his revision of Jesus' statement Habito changes the statement to say "Truly today you are with me in paradise" in support of his claim that the earth exists in an uncorrupted state. (2004, 9) . This amendment to Jesus' words seems to indicate either an ignorance of or complete disregard for the

(Luke 23:43)”. (2004, 9)

In the end the redemption of humanity is really freedom from the ignorance that results in suffering. This freedom from ignorance, according to Habito, leads one to accept the world as it is and value the portion of God within each individual equally without judgement. (2004, 19–21) While Habito seems to strongly believe that moral wrongdoing does exist,¹⁷ the solution to the moral evils in the world is not found in the removal of a fallen state. It is found in enlightenment, through realization that all is part of God. So, repentance for Habito is a turning from ignorance to a Zen worldview through enlightenment. For Habito this atonement is found in meditation.

E. Habito on the Purpose of the Crucifixion

For Habito the primary purpose of the crucifixion was to demonstrate to all those who possess the Buddha-nature that the true way to be free of suffering and achieve union with God is through demonstrating compassion for and solidarity with the suffering of the world.¹⁸ Of the purpose of the crucifixion Habito states,

So to experience being “one in Christ” with all beings involves not only a oneness in eating and drinking and laughing and crying with all sentient beings, but also a concrete experience of solidarity with the sufferings of living beings in this historical existence. This is the solidarity that Jesus himself assumed with the sufferings of all humanity on the Cross. (2004, 9)

underlying Greek text.

17 For instance, his discussion of the evils that come out of having a focus on oneself. See: (2004, 28–31)

18 Habito’s views on the purpose of the crucifixion along with other points of his theological program are Socinian in nature. This covert Socinianism is at odds with the Catholic Christian identity he claims. Many of these doctrines were condemned by Innocent III in the *Profession of Faith* he composed rejecting the Socinian heresies. (Pope 1912, s.v. Socinianism) As the *Profession of Faith* is official church doctrine in the Catholic church these views put him further at odds with his Catholic self-identification.

Thus, solidarity with suffering and not atonement for sin is the purpose of the cross in Habito's theology. While Christ's ignoble death ultimately did serve as an example to his followers of obedience and ultimate love,¹⁹ Jesus himself states in Mark 10:45 that his own intention was to give his life as a ransom, a phrase that mirrors statements in Isaiah 53:10-12 about the servant who will bear sin on behalf of others (Collins 2007, 500.).

III. JESUS ACCORDING TO RUBEN HABITO

A. The Mission of Jesus

1. Habito on the Mission of the Jesus

It is in dealing with Jesus that Habito's attempt at a Zen-Christian amalgam is the most threadbare. Through bending the text, Habito presents Jesus as a teacher whose moral perspective fits cleanly in Zen-Buddhist ideals. At several points Habito, attempting to proof-text his arguments, modifies the wording and meaning of statements in the Gospels made by Jesus. Where tense is inconvenient for his thesis, Habito as seen above in Luke 23:43 simply changes the tense in translation.

Transmogrified by Habito's editorial adjustments, Jesus emerges as an itinerant moral philosopher whose time is spent chiefly relieving the suffering of the poor and whose life was voluntarily offered up in crucifixion to show his followers moral resolve and solidarity in suffering. (2004, 8–9) But this selectively edited Jesus is difficult to support from the text. While Jesus does spend considerable time with the poor in the Gospel accounts, he also spends a considerable amount of time with the rich.²⁰ He provides healing for all regardless of their socio-economic

19 Such we can establish from Christ's statement about his intended purposes leading up to the crucifixion. As seen in John 15:13 where he ties the theme of sacrifice on behalf of others to that of love for others.

20 For example, time spent with Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10); Nicodemus (John 3:1-21);

position in society.²¹ In addition, even a cursory reading of the Gospels leads one to believe that, in context, the message of Jesus was largely one of moral repentance and the legal ramifications of wrongdoing and the violation of divine moral standards.²²

2. My Critique on Habito's Portrayal of the Mission of Jesus

As stated above, for Habito, Jesus performed three key functions: he created all things, he educated people to the current reality of God fully indwelling all sentient creatures, and he himself possessed the Buddha-nature to demonstrate solidarity with those who are suffering by himself suffering in the crucifixion.

While I would agree with Habito that morality as an outworking of love was a core component of the teaching of Jesus, the Gospel writers continually highlight that the bases of this call to righteous was presented by Jesus as a necessary response to the kingship of God and his moral standards as revealed to Israel in the Mosaic Law and the teaching of the prophets.²³ This is in contrast to Habito who presents Buddhist morality as the philosophical and theological basis of Jesus' message of the Kingdom. In Jesus' teaching, the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven seem to be used somewhat interchangeably to refer to the reality of God's rule over the nation of Israel and the world at large. (*Bowker 1997*, s.v. Kingdom of God). Specifically, the Kingdom of Heaven/God, drawing on the Jewish tradition, speaks not to the presence of God in created beings, but rather the sovereignty of God over creation (Green et al. 2013, 473). Only by cutting out soundbites, and bending the text to his

Joseph of Arimathea (Luke 23:50); Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (John 11).

21 For example, the healing of a centurion's servant (Luke 7:1-10); a nobleman's daughter (Matt 9:18-26), and a royal official's son (John 4:43-54).

22 (*Bowker 1997*, s.v. Jesus) This does not discount Jesus' teaching of love of other, which is the content of moral repentance. Jesus himself summed up his teaching in terms of loving God and loving other. (Mark 12:30-31)

23 Perhaps the clearest example of this is Matthew 22:36-40 with Jesus' declaration that his teaching on love for God and others, the greatest and second greatest commandment being drawn directly from the Law and the teachings of the prophets.

will is Habito able to arrive at a Jesus whose message has nothing to do with moral repentance and coming eschatological judgement.²⁴

B. The Kingdom of God/Realm of Heaven

As stated above, Habito presents the idea that, when Jesus refers to the Kingdom of God/Heaven, he is indicating the presence of God in all those holding the Buddha-nature. (2004, 12–19) Thus, according to Habito, the Gospel, as preached by Jesus and later Paul, is an invitation to find God in self and others,

“This [The Gospel] is an invitation to the enter the Realm of Heaven (cultivate an awareness of the portion of God’s being within you and others). ‘The Realm of God is at hand. Open your hearts to receive the Good News!’ Mark (1:15). What is the Good News? Just that: The Realm of God is at hand! It is in our very midst!(2004, 57)

Habito bases much of his discussion of Jesus on the presupposition that Jesus’ teaching on the Kingdom is synonymous with Buddhist panentheism. In response to his definition of the Gospel preached by Jesus and his concept of the Kingdom, I contend that Habito’s translations of Jesus’ words and their assigned referents misrepresent the words and context of Jesus’ use of the phrases βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν and βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ. For Habito, there is no concept in Jesus’ theology of a kingdom with a ruling king. Rather Jesus invites others to seek God within themselves. Jesus, according to Habito, is not calling for his hearers to repent from sinful self-rule and to recognize the lordship and reign of God. Instead he is merely calling them to the realization that God dwells in them and all they need to do to find him is to forsake material pursuits and reach out to the God within them. In keeping with this idea, to distance the phrase from the concept of rule/authority, Habito does not translate βασιλεία as ‘kingdom’ but rather ‘realm’. There is no room in Habito’s view for a God who rules the earth, issues judgement, and demands allegiance.

24 Bowker 1997, s.v. Jesus.

In examination of this claim by Habito that Jesus's statements should be translated as 'realm of heaven', I argue there is no lexical evidence for a translation of βασιλεία as "realm" without connecting a ruling authority to that realm.²⁵ While usage of the term can indicate an area or territory in connection with a ruler, never does it define a spiritual sphere without connection to one who rules it.²⁶

As seen above, Habito heavily modifies the words of Jesus in his discussion because he must if he is to meld the world of Zen and the world of Jesus. The ministry of Jesus in the Gospels is uncontested as a preacher of moral reform, but also as a messianic figure bent on the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy of the reconciliation of the nation of Israel to God through lasting atonement. In the life of Jesus as recorded and portrayed by the Gospel writers, far from pointing people to seek God within themselves and others as a path to redemption, Jesus continually points them to repentance and to love God first and to love neighbors as themselves.

C. Habito on Jesus' Teaching on Repentance

Jesus' teaching on repentance is perhaps one of the areas where Jesus and his message have been subjected by Habito to the most cultural and philosophical modification. Habito, in referencing Jesus' teaching on repentance attempts to bypass any sense of moral reform and acceptance of the rule of God underlying it. Habito seeks to accomplish this

25 Both BDAG and NIDNTTE do well to bring out the progression of the idea of God's rule inherent in the two phrases by tracking the use through Old Testament and intertestamental literature as context to Jesus's statements. See: (*Ardnt et al.* 2000, s.v. βασιλεία 1.b) (*Silva et al.* 2014, s.v. βασιλεύς).

26 LSJ contains myriad usages of the term throughout the classical, koine, and byzantine periods. Each usage without fail is connected to the ideas of authority, lordship, or rule. There seems to be little basis for considering the term to simply indicate a region, or state apart from reference to rulership or authority. Liddell et al. 1940, s.v. βασιλεία.

readjustment from traditional Christian understanding by imbuing the term μετανοέω 'to repent' with a proposed equivalent Zen understanding. In his treatment, μετανοέω becomes the passive allowance of the self's transformation embraced in meditation. (2004, 17) This is in contrast to the use of the term μετανοέω more widely in koine Greek to refer to an active change of one's mind or change of action based on moral compunction or fear of divine retribution.²⁷ However, bypassing synchronic evidence, he clings to the meaning "be transformed", an unattested meaning in the lexica. For Habito, this transformation of μετανοέω is the enlightenment of Zen, the emptying of oneself of the ego and acceptance of the world as it is without judgement. It is not about turning from unrighteous action, but rather the removal of ignorance which leads to a false concept of self.²⁸ This concept, for Habito, is passive transformation, though μετανοέω is an active concept. (Kittel 1964, s.v. μετανοέω) Neither this translation nor this understanding proceed from the wider literary milieu of the New Testament, nor the Greek translation of the Old Testament text. Instead as a foreign import it skews the message of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels.

IV. PAUL ACCORDING TO HABITO

A. Habito on the Pauline Theology of Jesus

Having reinterpreted Jesus' message and mission apart from their literary and social context, Habito proceeds to further proof-text his views from the

27 See BDAG and MM for numerous examples of the use of μετανοέω in period literature. (Moulton *et al.* 1930, s.v. μετανοέω); (Ardnt *et al.* 2000, s.v. μετανοέω)

28 Habito is extremely Freudian at points in his concept of the self. He sees a bifurcation between the ego and the true nature of a person. Thus, the ego feels it needs something outside of it to be complete, but Zen educates the individual that they are complete already. (2004, 60) It is essentially through the education of self, he contests, that the ego can be discarded.

writings of Paul. Habito's use of Paul's writings, similar to his treatment of the words of Jesus, is divorced from the literary context of the cited text and Paul's Jewish-Christian cultural background. As example, I will critique Habito's reference to a single Pauline concept: the Pauline phrase ἐν Χριστῷ. I will argue that Habito has taken this phrase out of context of Pauline theology and applied it too generally to all creation.

B. Habito on Paul's Use of ἐν Χριστῷ

A majority of Habito's use of Pauline literature centers around the Pauline phrase ἐν Χριστῷ. In Habito's theological arguments the phrase ἐν Χριστῷ achieves a technical sense, referring to the creation of all things by Christ. As I stated above, this creation of all things in Christ is an important starting point for Habito's theology. It is here that Habito attempts to infuse the Christian worldview with the idea that, because Christ created all, all creation is in some way part of God. This is his starting point for panentheism. In Habito's formulation, Paul's use of the phrase ἐν Χριστῷ is synonymous with the Buddhist concept of God's presence in all who hold the Buddha-nature. Thus, at several points Habito quotes Pauline statements, infusing them with a Buddhist panentheism based on this phrase. For example, Habito interprets Paul's statements in Romans 12:5 as a statement of universal unity of all living creatures, "And thus, 'We, though many, are one body in Christ, and we are individually members of one another' (Romans 12:5)... this oneness with all living beings in all their joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties... is not just a pious platitude, but constitutes a central aspect of ones mode of being." (2004, 99)

Habito takes the phrase ἐν Χριστῷ to refer to all of creation in either a locative sense, that all creation is being sustained inside of the spirit of Jesus,²⁹ or that all creation, having been created by Christ, is automatically infused with a divine spirit.³⁰

29 See note above concerning Habito's tendency to at times present Jesus as a disembodied spirit.

30 See discussion above about Habito's Buddhist panentheistic view of reality.

While this phrase could at times be functioning in a locative sense, indicating the presence of Christ's spirit, the Holy Spirit, within the individual or the Church, the phrase itself may defy technical use and indicate various kinds of association. (Green et al. 2013, s.v. Christ). While Paul at times may use the phrase in a specific sense contextually, I disagree with Habito's inference that Paul's use of the phrase ἔν Χριστῷ itself allows classification to one technical sense. In support of this objection, Wedderburn in his presentation of the evidence states that grammatical arguments over the meaning of the phrase are not as useful as context in determining Paul's intent and that Paul's use is not necessarily technical. (Wedderburn 1985, 91-7) Instead, Wedderburn argues, we should consider that Paul nuances the phrase contextually. These contexts refer generally to the association with Christ enjoyed by the Church as his people. The Church, according to Paul has a "corporate personality" defined by Christ's action in saving them. Upon further consideration of context, we can establish that most uses of the phrase serve to single out a group as being in association with Christ, often through loyalty or faithfulness to him.³¹ Paul's use of the phrase is at times quite varied, including the aforementioned locative sense, agency of Christ in carrying out God's blessing, senses of Christ's followers' association with him as well as other senses (Wedderburn 1985, 90-1). But the phrase defies constraint to a technical sense, and Paul clearly does not use it solely to refer Christ's role as the originator of all of creation as Habito argues (2004, 98-100). Rather, we must determine Paul's use of the phrase based on context as the chief criterion in which to seeks its meaning.

I contend that Habito's use of the phrase in a technical sense to prooftext pantheism is unwarranted and lacks consideration of context. I maintain that Habito's motivation for imbuing the phrase with a pantheistic understanding is because without this claim he lacks a connecting point with the Pauline theology of Jesus. For Habito, imbuing this often-used phrase allows him to transplant a philosophical understanding otherwise

31 For example: Eph 2:13; 3:6; Phil 3:14; 1 Tim 3:13

not found in the text. While I agree that Pauline writings present Christ as the both originator and sustainer of creation, the phrase ἐν Χριστῷ is not, in most usages, used of all creation nor in reference to Christ in his role as agent of creation.³² Rather, context suggests that much of this phrase's usage links not all the human race nor all sentient creatures to association with Christ, but merely a subset of creation impacted in a special way by his messianic role.³³

V. CONCLUSION

While Ruben Habito makes an ambitious attempt in *Living Zen, Loving God* to reconcile the two opposed theological traditions he lays claim to, his misrepresentation of the Biblical text and the context of its authors is the greatest failing of his theological program. While I cannot weigh in on what distortions Zen philosophy has undergone in the attempt, I can say that Christian theology and the text of the New Testament have both fared badly in Habito's treatment. Jesus and Paul both are subjected to unwarranted proof texting, both having their worldviews transplanted by Habito's own. Far from achieving the stated vision of theological bilingualism between Christianity and Zen, I believe Habito's theology only serves to underline the impossibility of melding the two traditions without modification of either. Taking Habito's theological work to be an exemplar of the Zen-Christian movement we see that the overarching tendency is that orthodox Christian theology is made subject to the theological assertions of Zen-Buddhism. In order to hold a Zen-Christian theology one likely must divorce Jesus from his Jewish theological context; edit, mistranslate, and obfuscate his teachings; and redefine the

32 The possible exception to this is Eph 2:10 where Christ is in view as the creator. However, in this passage the context still references the people of God in the Church, the main referent not being all of creation but rather the creation of those who compose the church for purpose of performing good works.

33 Many Pauline usages can be explained as referring in some way to Christ in his messianic role either as agent of God's blessing or the one in which those who are his followers find their identity.

very purposes of the incarnation. Truly, the moral concerns, simplicity of living, and level of self-reflection advocated by Zen-Christian philosophers are attractive to the evangelical community in the midst of the morally corrupt, over paced, and materialistic modern world in which we live. However attractive a Zen-infused Christian faith may be, starting from a clear understanding of Scripture, the evangelic community must reject this ill-conceived amalgam. The solution to the ills and excesses of modern society must not be sought in remaking Jesus into our own image, but by Christ remaking us into his. Thus, our goal must be to truly live ἐν Χριστῷ, in context.

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The Dialectic between Creation and Crucifixion

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KEYWORDS:

Creation and Crucifixion	Dialectical Theology
Theology of the Cross	Attributes of God
Martin Luther	Karl Barth

ABSTRACT:

Previous conceptions of the attributes of God describe Him as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. These conceptions are based upon the human traits of ability, knowledge, and presence, extended *ad infinitum*. They are thus unacceptable by Luther's theology of the cross. Drawing upon the Psalmist's idea of creation being the handiwork of God and Luther's assertion that God reveals Himself at the cross of Christ alone, I suggest a different attribute of God, one based upon the chasm between the gloriousness of creation and the lowliness of the crucifixion, utilizing the two as extremes of a dialectic between which God is to be known.

INTRODUCTION

Von Loewenich states that “the knowledge of God derived from the works of creation [is] opposed to that which arises at the cross of Christ.”¹ According to Martin Luther’s theology of the cross, the cross is where God chooses to reveal a part of himself.² It is not in creation that He chooses to do so and we cannot understand creation as a proper locus of God’s revelation.³ Despite creation arguably leading to the realization of order and design, it merely points to God while, according to Luther, only at the crucifixion is God truly revealed.^{4,5} Psalm 19 supports this notion: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork,”⁶ thus affirming the awe and admiration one may feel when confronted with astrophysical findings of the cosmos and theories about its beginning. However, Luther reminds us that God chooses to convey knowledge of Himself in a completely different environment, one which induces completely different feelings and impressions, and is rooted in pain, misery and suffering.⁷ He names several reasons for God choosing to reveal Himself solely at the cross of Christ:⁸

A. The creature could not survive a full disclosure of the nature of God. Recalling the story of Moses on mount Sinai, the cross functions as “God’s back,” which He revealed to Moses.⁹ God alone can know who and what God is. This knowledge cannot be understood naturally by the creature, but only as God bestows it.¹⁰

1 Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 21.

2 McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 204,213.

3 Luther, *Luther Works*, 31:41.

4 McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 203.

5 Von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 113.

6 Psalms 19:1, ESV.

7 Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 31:52.

8 McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 214.

9 Exodus 33:18-23.

10 McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 203.

B. The true theologian needs to depend upon God for the location of divine disclosure. God needs to direct the theologian to the cross of Christ as the place where this knowledge of God is revealed indirectly, solely through Jesus Christ and His suffering on the cross.¹¹

C. The crucicentric position that the knowledge of God is made available only by the cross of Christ means that the cross is “the final, decisive and normative locus of the revelation of God.” The crucifixion is to receive precedence over all other Christian events, including Christ’s resurrection and incarnation.¹²

D. By adhering to the revelation on the cross, the true theologian can distinguish between the times he or she encounters real knowledge of God as opposed to when presented with false knowledge produced by the world.^{13 14}

This dialectical gap between God’s observed creation and the place where He chooses to reveal Himself, according to Luther, is the topic of this essay. I intend to argue that the disparity between the appearance of order in creation, which points to God and His handiwork, and God revealing Himself in misery and suffering in Christ’s crucifixion, constitute an attribute of the divine nature of God which is more appropriate for the crucicentric worldview as described by Luther. I shall explain how this dichotomy emerges by describing the magnificence of creation versus the lowliness of the crucifixion (parts 2 and 3), followed by an explanation of why the attributes of God currently held by theologians are insufficient according to Luther’s theology of the cross (part 4), and how the disparity mentioned above constitutes a dialectic better suited to be understood as an attribute of God (parts 5 and 6).

11 Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 31:53.

12 McGrath, *The Enigma of the Cross*, 107.

13 Bradbury, *Cross Theology*, 62.

14 Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, thesis 20.

2. THE SPLENDOR OF CREATION

The well-known account of creation in the book of Genesis has inspired awe in men and women's hearts for thousands of years. It describes how God has shaped our universe into what we see today and inspires us to see in creation the handiwork of the Lord. In the creation process, God wills the universe into existence, a feat that underscores His tremendous capabilities.

I would like to utilize scientific findings as a more accurate portrait of the power involved in creation. When speaking of creation in a scientific context, I shall henceforth refer to the universe's entirety, its formation, and its history as creation. However, I by no means wish to imply that the process is complete. We now have a chance to integrate knowledge gained by scientists with this essay's thesis to strengthen and enrich conclusions reached via our belief system. Such a reference to scientific data underlines the tremendous disparity between the place where God reveals knowledge of Himself and where, as the Psalmist writes, His handiwork is well observed.

Most scientists call the process of the beginning of the universe the theory of the Big Bang. It stipulates the mode in which the current universe has begun. At the same time, some scientists go as far as to describe a variation thereof in which the universe continually oscillates between periods of inflation and deflation (creation and ultimate destruction).¹⁵ Scientific findings describing the big bang illustrate its magnificence in numbers. For instance, at Planck time (10^{-43} seconds) following the initial creation, the universe's temperature was about 10^{32} degrees Celsius, 3.7^{24} times hotter than our sun's core.¹⁶ The universe expanded at an astounding growth factor of 10^{35} during its first 10^{-10} seconds. One hundred seconds

15 P. J. Steinhardt, N. Turok, "A Cyclic Model of the Universe", 1436–1439.

16 <https://solarsystem.nasa.gov/solar-system/sun/in-depth/> retrieved September 13, 2020.

following the Big Bang, the temperature was one billion degrees, by which time electrons and positrons were annihilated, creating photons.¹⁷

These findings show us that God's handiwork is magnificent and enormous. We need to remember, however, that that is only God's work and not God himself. In order to stress the gap between God's handiwork and the place where He chooses to reveal Himself according to Luther's theology of the cross, we now turn to a description of the crucifixion of Christ.

3. DEATH BY AN INSTRUMENT OF TORTURE

The crucicentric mystic Johannes Tauler (1330-1361) believed that by meditating on Christ's suffering on the cross, the soul enters into the darkness where God's light most brightly shines. Following Tauler, Luther believed that the cross is the source of all knowledge of God, embedded in it and Christ's passion. There is a sameness between the two: Christ's suffering and humiliation is the essence by which God reveals Himself, and He cannot be known separately from them.¹⁸ In the Heidelberg disputation, Luther further agrees with Tauler and states that "God can reveal Himself only . . . in the humility and shame of the cross." Elsewhere, he says that "true theology and the knowledge of God are in the crucified Christ."¹⁹

The cross was a Roman instrument of torture,²⁰ and to realize that we can perceive the Lord at such an event as the crucifixion negates all of our preconditioned perceptions of God. Luther noticed that the world does not expect that of God; in its vanity and materialistic adoration, the world

17 <http://www.astro.ucla.edu/~wright/BBhistory.html>, retrieved September 13, 2020.

18 Von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 20.

19 Luther, *Luther's Works*, 31:52-53.

20 Kittel, Gerhard, et al., *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 7, 572.

imagines a god similar to itself.²¹ When we see the cross, we see disgrace, poverty, death, and the suffering Christ; it is not a place where we expect God's revelation to occur.²²

After noticing His handiwork in creation, we would expect to continue seeing His magnificence wherever He may choose to present Himself, but instead we become aware of Him at a very low point: the cross conveys messages of pain and suffering, misery and humiliation. That is precisely the place where we would not expect God to present Himself, but He does, incarnated in human form so He can be subjected to the misery of crucifixion.²³ We turn now to a description of how Luther's concept of God's vulnerability impacts the traditional reckoning of God's attributes.

4. GOD'S INFINITE ATTRIBUTES

Luther would not have agreed with today's commonly held assertions about God's nature. Loewenich remarks that "Affirming [the] omnipresence and omnipotence of God is very pointedly described as a characteristic of the theology of glory,"²⁴ where the 'theology of glory' refers to a type of theology deemed sinful by Luther.²⁵

Our discussion will illustrate Luther's point using only three of God's traditional attributes, for these are sufficient to establish a pattern of characteristics attributed to God. The reader should bear in mind that more attributes of this sort are available in theological literature.²⁶

A. Omnipotence is understood as:

21 Bradbury, *Cross Theology*, 63. Von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 50.

22 Forde, *Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 28-29.

23 Hebrews 2:9-10,14.

24 Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 30.

25 Luther, *Luther's Works*, 31, 225f.

26 See for example Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 168, 177, 178, 197, 205, 267.

- God has absolute power over everything, and nothing can resist Him.
- God can perform every deed, large as well as small.
- God can do whatever He wishes, and nothing can impede Him.
- Once He has performed an act, no one can judge Him or ask Him to justify His doings. This absolute power is also the source of all creaturely powers and abilities, and some believe even of creaturely authority.²⁷

B. Omniscience is defined by Oden as complete knowledge of the entirety of space and time. He adds that God's knowledge:

- Encompasses the entirety of time and is actual, rather than merely potential.
- Is constant in its broadness. It does not change, does not increase or decrease and
- Is always complete, never partial.
- Always pertains to subjects directly, rather than being mediated by a third party.
- Encompasses wisdom alongside factual knowledge: "The wisdom of God is God's incomparable ability to order all things in the light of good, to adjust causes to effects, and means to ends; so that the divine purposes are firm and never thwarted."²⁸

C. Omnipresence is defined as "God's mode of being present to all aspects of both space and time. Although God is present in all space and time, God is not locally limited to any particular time or space."²⁹

These attributes correspond to the human traits of ability, knowledge, and existence. When used to describe human beings, those traits are always partial and incomplete: a person cannot do all possible deeds, does not know everything, and does not exist in all of space-time at once. In

27 Bradley, "Randomness and God's Nature", quoting from Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 246.

28 Bradley, "Randomness and God's Nature", quoting from Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 46, 49.

29 Ibid, 43.

describing God’s attributes, theological thought has taken these human attributes to their maximal extent – to infinity. Theologians try to describe an infinite being by using those attributes without their human limitations: infinitely potent, infinitely sentient, and present everywhere. Describing such an entity by other means would be very difficult, for we would have to use a kind of language which is currently unbeknownst to us and which does not stem from our everyday experience.

Using human language to describe God’s infinite characteristics is an idea to which Luther did not subscribe. Luther rejected the medieval scholastic view that, looking back at Aquinas, attempted to combine Christian faith and ancient Greek philosophy. This view included the idea of *analogia entis*, which assumed a strong commonality between creature and Creator and drew analogies between them. This assumption of commonality enables an epistemology based upon the creature knowing God using analogies drawn upon itself.³⁰ However, Luther utterly denied that the human creature is anything like The Divine: “God who is the subject of this sort of Theology is not the living God of the bible. It is an abstract entity, a theoretical postulate which may be needed to secure the coherence of a metaphysical system.”³¹ He also rejected *analogia entis* as a creaturely attempt at assuming the glory of God. *Analogia entis*, said Luther, speaks nothing of the Fall and does not mention Christ, and since there is no direct knowledge of God for man, we cannot dispose of the cross in the higher structures of thought; the knowledge conveyed by the cross is not just additional knowledge alongside that from other sources – it is the only source of knowledge about God.³²

In summary, according to Luther’s theology of the cross, one cannot attribute God with the notion of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence because they are based on human traits of potency, *scientia*, and immanence, respectively. They constitute an understanding

30 Von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 113.

31 Dalferth, “The Visible and the Invisible”, 24.

32 Von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 21, 51.

of God based on human nature, belittle God, and raise the creature and its existence to the level of God's existence – a prideful and sinful exercise. Furthermore, since their definition does not include an examination of Christ's crucifixion, labeling those attributes as part of a Christian theology would be difficult. They are "theoretical postulates," to use Luther's words. A better understanding of the Divine is possible using 20th-century dialectic theology, which I will outline in the following part.

5. DIALECTIC THEOLOGY

Since this article's thesis is rooted in dialectical theology, I shall summarize the way dialectical arguments are utilized and provide a brief historical background of its inception.³³

The fundamental premise of dialectical theology is the grappling with opposites. It deals with the proper approach to a contradictory duality in a way which furthers understanding of the Divine. The process involves reflecting upon such a contradiction under a specific conceptual framework that guides an open-ended discussion. It directs the outcome and conclusions, but allows for multiple understandings of the contradiction, i.e., does not demand a consensual agreement upon a definite answer. Edwards quotes Warren as saying that "What separates a dialectical theory of knowledge and reality from other variants of historicism and relativism is a particular kind of radical 'openness' – a dialectical openness which preserves the tension between the relative and the absolute."³⁴ Dialectical theology does not strive to arrive at absolute truth, but eschews it by emphasizing "necessary counter truths."

The dialectical method is based on a conversational relationship, whether as a conflict or a resolution, between two polarities that must be related, even if that relationship is merely conceptual and the

33 This chapter is based upon Aaron Edwards' excellent treatment of the subject in "The paradox of dialectic: clarifying the use and scope of dialectic in theology," pages 3-9.

34 Warren, *Emergence of Dialectical Theory*, 16.

polarities themselves are radically different.³⁵ While dealing with such opposing polarities, the theological dialectic does not try to resolve the contradiction or ease its tension. Instead, it strives to utilize it for the benefit of a creative process. The very essence of the dialectic exercise lies in this contradictory polarity, whether we are trying to reconcile the differences between the polarities or maintain them as contradicting. Within theological dialectics, the theologian tries to reveal the ultimate goal or meaning of those contradicting polarities, without necessarily trying to understand how those relate to each other. This kind of reasoning is essential to dialectic theology's aim, while at the heart of it stands the distinction between creator and creature. This qualitative chasm that lies between God and man favors any discussion thereof to form a dialectical exchange.

Dialectical theology emerged following WWI among theologians who opposed anthropocentric liberal theology. The dialectical theologians included Karl Barth as well as Brunner, Gogarten, Bultmann and Thurneysen.³⁶ The new theology they developed was called the "Theology of Crisis," for those theologians believed their predecessors had taken a wrong turn in theological thought by grounding it in anthropocentric and societal terms and conceptions. The theology they developed opposed the "idealism of the *Zeitgeist*" and referred to human thinking as limited, flawed and broken. This thinking, they claimed, cannot reconcile opposing statements but only articulate them.

The theology of crisis distrusted any statement placed "outside of God." It contended that any theological position could not be authentically theological, and any fundamental contention had to deny the very possibility of there being fundamental contentions. This position was a reaction against the theological claims of the liberal theologians who based their statements on the assumption that human thinking is capable of direct knowledge of God, and that God affirmed statements

35 Diem, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Existence*, 10–11.

36 Chalamet, *Dialectical Theologians*, 120.

based on such knowledge. For Karl Barth, God was wholly other, foreign to the human mode of existence.³⁷ A different method of thinking was in order – the dialectical method, which represented the ‘the final security of insecurity.’³⁸ This method had to rely on the tension between human and divine existence, and refrain from arriving at clear “Yes or No” conclusions. Edwards cites McCormack’s definition, who defined the dialectic method as “‘A method which calls for every theological statement to be placed over against a counter-statement, without allowing the dialectical tension between the two to be resolved in a higher synthesis.’”³⁹ The dialectical method, says Edwards, attempts to perceive that which cannot be perceived and describes God’s divine and infinite revelation to a finite humanity. He quotes Barth and Thurneysen, who summed the aim and goal of the dialectic approach thus:

“Precisely this is necessary, that only with human lips we pronounce and with human ears we hear the contradiction – God’s wrath and God’s mercy, God’s dominion and God’s help, God’s majesty and God’s love, God’s law and God’s gospel. This enigma in the external words of God must ever again overwhelm us and convince us, witness to us that God’s goodness and faithfulness are new every morning, lead us to repentance, raise us up, and so prepare us to let God actually speak and listen to Him.”⁴⁰

6. CONCLUSION: THE DIALECTIC BETWEEN THE BIG BANG AND THE CRUCIFIXION

As evident in the Psalmist’s words cited above, no doubt exists about the

37 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 186.

38 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 293.

39 McCormack, *Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 11.

40 Barth and Thurneysen, *The Eternal Light*, 58–9.

awe and admiration one should feel when watching creation. However, another dimension needs to be added to it if we are to use it to gain knowledge of The Divine.

If we are to properly understand God's nature (albeit partially, for no complete understanding of Him is possible for us), the other element which we need to add to the Psalmist's words is the event of Christ's crucifixion. This main event described by the Christian Gospels adds a dimension to God the Saviour, one which is the antithesis to the magnificence portrayed by God's act of creation.

The reason for paring the beauty of creation with an act conveying misery and pain is the dialectic space it creates. In this very contradicted dichotomy, we are allowed a limited understanding of God's nature through both His tremendous feats and His enormous ability to love, evident in the crucifixion and its atoning effect. This understanding does not constitute a further revelation of God. Instead, it includes the human derivation of knowledge about the mode of existence of the Divine from the state of the observed universe coupled with the locus where God, whose deeds are astronomical and beyond our imagination, has chosen to interact with us – in the same limited realm and magnitude He had created us in.

This apparent contradiction allows us to see God the way prescribed to us by Paul, Athanasius, Luther, and others.⁴¹ Although God created the universe, an ability reserved for Him alone, He meets us in the most fragile of situations, in one of the lowest points our kind can take – humiliated on a cross. These two extremes create a gap through which God's nature can be understood: by contemplating the two opposites and the dialectic created between them, we can better understand God and our place in creation.

God's infinite attributes described above offer very little in the way of knowing The Divine. These attributes describe a generic, descriptively unidimensional entity composed of characteristics laid upon it by a human

41 Bradbury, *Cross Theology*, 3.

mind. They claim God is merely infinite and, leaving aside paradoxes such as God's ability to create a stone He cannot lift (or His inability thereof),⁴² describe God as a blank infinity out of which no specific characteristics can arise; a clear canvas comprised of the sole description of an ultimate perfection which, much like a blank sheet of paper, offers no specifics.

The Christian Bible describes a God who asks different groups of people for different covenants at different times and treats them differently.⁴³ The described God is a vibrant one, with personality complexities that add to His image multiple dimensions and angles and convey more complex characteristics than the simple traits of infinity. By anchoring God's handiwork with the crucifixion described by the Gospels, we can describe God more profoundly, describe complexities presented by the Bible and avoid the shallowing of God's description. Furthermore, the attributes of omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience do not mention Christ's crucifixion. To fully understand humankind's place in God's creation and our relation to Him, it is necessary to mention man's Fall from grace when we speak of God. That is what we do when we anchor God's attributes with the crucifixion: it is God's response to man's Fall from grace. Without it, we merely describe the detached god of deism who has no involvement in human history.

Any attribute of God produced by Christian thought needs to revolve around Christ's crucifixion or risk being a mere general understanding of God, perhaps overly relying on a semantic analysis of the word 'god' and not derived from the Christian tradition.

An example of using the dialectics between creation and crucifixion would be explaining the wrath of God referenced in both the new and the old testaments:⁴⁴ God demands that humankind lives by the laws He sets out for them and punishes them when they do not, for example by an all obliterating flood. When the Israelites disobey His commandment and

42 Savage, C. Wade. *The Paradox of the Stone*, 74–79.

43 Jeremiah, 31:30–33.

44 See for example Nahum 1:2-6, Isaiah 13:13, 2 Kings 17:18, Psalm 78:49, Romans 1:18.

build a statue they worship, He punishes them by delaying their arrival at the promised land for forty years.

Can this trait of the Divine be explained using any of the infinite attributes? The ability to perform all deeds without impediment, or omnipotence, does not explain the Lord's motivation for doing any deeds at all. It is devoid of any explicatory meaning and cannot describe why God had created the universe, why He chose a people to serve Him or why He chose to be incarnated in human form.⁴⁵ Similarly, His ability to know all that is knowable does not explain why He prefers His people to act in a certain way, or why He becomes angry when they do not. The third attribute discussed in this paper, omnipresence, adds no information about the way God acts and reacts throughout the Bible. Those infinite traits pertain to divine attributes that do glorify God as the One who is enormous and magnificent but shine no light on why He is also loving, angry, or merciful, traits which the Bible describes as some of His key personality characteristics.

The dialectic between creation and crucifixion, far from being a perfect explanatory tool, can somewhat explain God's personality as described by the Bible. In the case of God's wrath, we can understand that God had created humankind out of sheer love. He then wanted humanity to behave in a certain way, which He deems appropriate. Still, God wanted them to retain their free will (and thus does not use His omnipotence to force them to behave in a certain way) and develop a sense of communal and personal responsibility. He acts as a father to them, and while infinite adjectives cannot explain this, adding the dimension of a mighty God who created the universe and His "children" does give us a limited sense of why He acts wrathfully (or lovingly and mercifully in other occasions⁴⁶).

To conclude, describing God's attributes in the traditional way fails to infuse any meaningful content into our image of the Lord and that to describe God better, we need to incorporate the crucifixion as a Christian

45 Scripture hints at the reasons for this in Colossians 2:15.

46 See for example 1 John 1:9, 1 Peter 1:3, Titus 3:5, Ephesians 2:4-5, Micah 7:18-19.

event into our understanding of Him. I, therefore, suggest that we leverage the gap between God's enormous deed – the creation of the universe, and the low point where He chooses to convey knowledge of Himself according to the crucicentric tradition – Christ's Crucifixion, to better understand God not as a unidimensional being described solely by the notion of infinity but as a complex being who exists in both magnificence and utter misery, a trait which also defines His relation to humanity.

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Evangelical Review of Theology and Politics
Essay Series





Essay Series
Homosexuality:
The Case For & Against

Introduction:
Does the Protestant Bible Support
Homosexual Relationships?

Stephen M. Vantassel

INTRODUCTION

That provocative question is the subject of *The Evangelical Review Theology and Politics* first written debate. Though eschewed by many within and beyond academia, debates have a long and important history amongst people who take truth seriously. Why? Simple, debates have numerous benefits. First, debaters demonstrate intellectual courage by subjecting their ideas to public scrutiny by those familiar with the subject. Too often academics publish their papers certain that they will never be required to engage critics. I was once told by a colleague that academics

frequently do not engage critics because to do so would be tantamount to giving their opponents credibility. The authors engaged in this debate have not taken that common but cowardly position.

Second, debates benefit their audience. Having articles side by side allow the opposing views to be seen in stark contrast which aids clarity and apprehension of the material. Finally, debates underscore the Christian principle that truth is not afraid of critical examination. In today's "Politically Correct" atmosphere which has devolved into the "Cancel Culture", fewer opportunities are available to discuss important and contentious ideas. I am pleased to play a small part in affirming the importance of engaging ideas, even controversial ones.

Paul wrote in Colossians in 2:3, that Christ contained all the hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge. In other words, there is no information that, if true, would undermine the authority or person of Jesus Christ. That is why, followers of Jesus never have to fear education or deep thinking. Because if we think correctly, the conclusion will always align with Christ and his word.

The issue for our opposing parties is, "Does the Protestant Bible Support Homosexual/Lesbian Relationships?" The writers were to focus their attention on the correct understanding of Scripture. Both sides were given the opportunity to have additional authors. Both papers were resubmitted following an initial review. The authors were also given an opportunity to have their papers edited again, but they did not feel there was significant need, so the papers did not undergo additional review. The point is that I wanted to give the author's wide latitude to make their case, not mine. In the interest of transparency, I am not a neutral party on this issue.

Keep in mind that neither side has read the other side's paper. So, do not be surprised if they are not always directly answering each other's claims. I hope that both sides will offer a rebuttal paper following this publication.

As you read these papers, keep the following points in mind.

1. Evaluate the exegetical evidence. Are the sources used of sufficient quality? Does the evidence point in one direction or is it mixed? Is the evidence direct evidence or just implied?

2. Is the interpretive methodology consistent? I think this is one issue many readers, let alone scholars, overlook. Would the authors' exegetical approach or argument yield an acceptable conclusion on a different topic? In other words, would the authors' method affirm or deny the deity of Christ or some other cherished belief? If the methodology for answering this question is different, what is the basis for using a different method and is the exception justified?

3. How tight is the reasoning and logic? Does the evidence necessarily lead to a conclusion or does it just imply or suggest a conclusion? Have the authors drawn the right conclusion or was another option missed altogether?

4. Did the authors make an exegetical argument or did they make a pragmatic argument? Put differently, did the authors explain what the biblical authors' meant to say? Would the biblical authors actually agree with how their words were being treated?

I am certain that other questions could be raised. The point is that readers have an obligation to consider the articles carefully and with charity. Give the writers the benefit of the doubt if a statement is ambiguous. Try to read them in the best possible light. Be sure you understand the argument before criticizing their comments. In this way, you will understand their position and hopefully your own.

I hope you find these articles stimulating as you reflect on your own faithful walk with Christ.

Stephen M. Vantassel, Editor.



Unjustified Exclusion: A lack of Biblical evidence against Homosexuality

David Martin

KEYWORDS:

| Molech | Hospitality | Arsenokoitai | Malakoi |
| Homosexuality | Prostitution | Spirit | Law |

ABSTRACT:

Homosexuality as understood in the 21st Century (a loving, consensual relationship between two monogamous adults in a committed relationship) has been unjustly persecuted by religious traditionalist. There is a lack of irrefutable Biblical evidence regarding this matter. A closer look at the so-called “clobber verses” reveals, apophatically, no condemnation of same sex sexual behavior within the bible. Context matters when considering the meaning of a passage, as such there can be no plain reading of a text that is 2000-3000 years old, translated from an ancient language into modern contexts. This paper looks at the context, word choices, and the placement of words and phrases as an integral part of a whole. Thus, without any viable basis for condemnation of same sex sexual behavior, the issue for theologians becomes one of response to a behavior we do not understand fully. Grace over condemnation, Spirit over legalism should be the response of people of faith.

INTRODUCTION

The secular world and the religious world seem to be on parallel trajectories. The political divide is ever deepening, ever widening; so too are the theological divides. The rancor of our debates drives wedges deeper and deeper between us, separating that which should not be separated. How prophetic does 2 Timothy 4:3 now appear to us? For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires. Preachers, teachers and Christians in the pews seek out theologies that support their predisposed beliefs and cultural bias'. As evidence there are two great issues before us now that have pulled Christianity apart, from denominations, to associations, and even the local church; abortion and homosexuality. Both of these topics have become a line drawn in the sand between churches from the liberal theology tradition, and churches from conservative or fundamentalist traditions. Why so much agita and angst over this when so many other traditionally held views on sin now go unquestioned? Why is there no outrage against bearing false witness? Why do we tolerate Sabbath breaking, or children (grown or otherwise) being disrespectful to their parents? Christianity, and the church's response to sin, has changed in response to increased secularism.¹

The rapid social change of the last 100 years has caused people of faith to respond by shifting to millenarianism, particularism, and dualism.² As the world and the church becomes increasingly secularized, the loss of religious authority has allowed space for a more relaxed

1 James A. Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 47.

2 Meredith B McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*. Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2002. 39, 215. Rapid social change can in part be identified with the sexual revolution, but in truth it is far more complex. The last 100 years has seen a dramatic shift away from agrarian and rural living. Where multigenerational families were the norm, they have become the exception. Modes of living, transportation, communication and moral values along the spectrum have changed as a result of modernity and scientific advancements. As the world changes in unexpected ways, socially integrated faith communities often formalize a communal response as identified above.

perspective on things like divorce, greed, bearing false witness, and other clearly sinful actions.³ Even in the very conservative Southern Baptist Convention there has been space opened up for those who divorce. While they strongly oppose divorce, they call on their churches “to proclaim God’s mercy and grace to all people—including those who have been divorced without biblical grounds.”⁴ They strongly oppose divorce, but still allow membership and the receiving of communion, even to those who remarry. Church history reveals a strong consensus that divorce was sinful, and even in cases of unchasteness it was discouraged, remarriage was out of the question.⁵ Jesus said that one who divorces and remarries commits adultery, it is an ongoing sin.⁶ From Mark 10:11-12 He said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery. This applies equally to both men and women, no sexist preferential treatment offered here. The teaching is repeated in Matthew 19:9 as well, and exists within the same context where Jesus talks about three kinds of Eunuchs, which in some interpretations includes the concept of homosexuality (this will be discussed later in the paper).

The argument from the critical traditionalists is that the practice of homosexuality is a sin (one that God will forgive you for), but the behavior must discontinue as it is not sanctioned by divine consent within the traditionally orthodox texts referred to as “The Bible.” There seems to be a double standard in their way of thinking (as well as a gaping hole in their exegetical arguments). One cannot argue for a purging of behavior in

3 Peter L. Berger. *A Rumor of Angels*. Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1969. Chapter 1.

4 Southern Baptist Convention. 2010. <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/1205/on-the-scandal-of-southern-baptist-divorce>

5 David L. Snuth. “Divorce and Remarriage from the Early Church to John Wesley.” *Trinity Journal*, 1990: 131.

6 Instone-Brewer, David. *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002. 240. It would be tempting to exclude people who have divorced for “Biblical” reasons like being unchaste. However, neither the Biblical text nor the words of Jesus ever makes that particular distinction. Divorce is allowed but remarriage is not permitted. Hence, those who remarry are guilty of adultery so long as they continue in the relationship.

one group of people, and turn a blind eye to it in another. If one operates under the assumption that homosexual behavior is sinful, then why is it worse than divorce? Jesus never condemns homosexual behavior, but he does condemn divorce and subsequent remarriage. In fact, James 2:10 says that if you are guilty of one point of the law, you are guilty of it in its entirety. If grace (and the graciousness of the church) is offered to the remarried divorcé, then why is this grace and hospitality not offered to homosexuals? My contention is that homosexuality as we understand it was never condemned by scripture. At this point a working definition is important. In its basest definition, Homosexuality refers to a sexual orientation where the sexual attraction and romantic attraction is oriented towards members of the same sex. The orientation of a person isn't one of personal choice, but a defining characteristic of behavior and personality.⁷ Homosexuals enter into relationships seeking companionship, love, romance and yes, sex. In this they are no different than heterosexuals who enter into relationships for the same reasons. The bias against homosexuality is a result of cultural ideology, and is not supported by good exegesis. Moreover, these biases have been used to unjustly exclude the gay and lesbian community from full inclusion into the life of the church and society. This paper will look to answer the question: Does the Protestant Bible restrict divine-sanctioned human sexual relations to monogamous male-female relationship? I do not believe there is such a restriction. There are six so-called “clobber verses” critical traditionalists have misused and misinterpreted to justify their cultural bias. A closer look at the context of these passages, and the translations will reveal that no sanction against homosexuality (as we understand it today) exists within the texts.

OLD TESTAMENT RESTRICTIONS

⁷ *American Psychological Association*. 2008. <https://web.archive.org/web/20130808032050/http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/sexual-orientation.aspx>

The three verses of the Old Testament come from the Books of Law or Pentateuch. The first in Genesis 19 and the other two from the holiness code of Leviticus. It seems most logical to start with Genesis 19, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. First, one must read the text in light of its context, and where it is embedded in the Genesis narrative. In Genesis 18, we see the exemplar of hospitality in Abraham. As two messengers from God pass by his tent, he offers them shelter, drink and food. Robert Alter plainly points out that chapter 19 elegantly parallels chapter 18. Even synoptically placing Lot sitting at the gate of the city, just as Abraham sat at the entrance to his tent. This parallel is an important road sign directing us to the welcome of strangers. The intent of the Sodom and Gomora narrative isn't to condemn consensual same sex relationships. It is to condemn the breaking of the hospitality code.⁸ Moreover, one must not forget that rape (homosexual or otherwise) is not about sex, it is sexualized violence. Rape is about the power and control one person exerts over another. In this case, dominating and humiliating strangers who are visiting their city. If the intent of Genesis 19 were to condemn consensual same sex behavior, then that behavior would have been highlighted, not the threat of violent rape.

As Lot attempts to diffuse the situation, he invokes the rights of hospitality, begging the men of Sodom to not harm the two messengers, "for they have come under the shelter of my roof." (19:8). Lot's reproach only angers them more. Lot is then identified as an alien (outsider), and he becomes the focus of their wrath as well, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." (19:9) The men of Sodom were willing to see past Lot's foreignness so long as he played ball as it were, but when he invokes the hospitality rights, he hits to the heart of their true sinfulness.

The true sin of Sodom is told to us by Ezekiel 16:49 This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food,

⁸ Robert Alter, trans. *The Hebrew Bible. Vol. 1.* 3 vols. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019. 60

and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. (NRSV) Brian Peterson argues that there is a sexual component that runs throughout Ezekiel 16. Ezekiel uses graphic sexual images to describe Jerusalem's corruption (and by extension Judah and Israel).⁹ Peterson attempts to argue that the primary focus of Ezekiel's remarks were to reinforce the sexual condemnation of Sodom. The argument is thin at best, and still leaves the exegete with the problem of the actual words Ezekiel wrote. No number of linguistic acrobats can undo or unwrite verse 49. References to their Canaanite heritage, and parental lineage are matters of historical fact, not the prophet casting aspersions on their birth rite. Pride and injustice are at the root of their sin. Ezekiel uses them as a comparison in verse 48 when he writes: your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. This is noteworthy for sure, and placing Jerusalem in the peer category with Sodom serves to highlight just how corrupt Jerusalem had become. But it must be noted that the claims against her are not of a sexual nature.¹⁰

Sodom existed on the plains where the crossroads of trade routes ran. This was likely the source of their wealth and power. Perhaps their arrogance and greed drove them to act out violently against lone travelers. Surely the caravans of silk and spice traders would have entered the city unmolested. But, small groups and single travelers? They would have nothing meaningful to offer, and might need to invoke their right to hospitality.¹¹ A selfish attitude that prevailed within that community might very well be the motivation behind such repugnant behavior towards guests and travelers. No, one cannot offer a credible argument that homosexuality was the sin that destroyed Sodom. No reasonable reading could lead one to conclude that Sodom was destroyed because of homosexuality, and as such should not be considered as a sanction against

9 Brian Neil Peterson. "Identifying the Sin of Sodom in Ezekiel 16:49-50." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 61, no. 2 (2018): 309.

10 Paul M. Joyce. *Ezekiel: A Commentary*. New York: T&T Clark International, 2007. 133.

11 Scott Morschauser. "'Hospitality', Hostiles and Hostages: On the Legal Background of Genesis 19:1-9." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 2003: 464.

consensual same sex relationships.

The two Leviticus passages (18:22, 20:13) reside within the holiness code of the text.¹² Many scholars believe this section of Leviticus was a later “P” source addition that arose in response to behaviors and practices that were adopted during the Babylonian exile.¹³ It is a reasonable conjecture to think that a people taken into captivity for 70 years, and separated from their cultural and religious infrastructure might develop or adopt the practices of their captors. These ideas must be considered when reading the holiness codes for context.

The 18:22 text reads “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman,” (NRSV) And, 20:13 “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination.” (NRSV). The second passage from chapter 20 is the proscriptive punishment. It lays out who the guilty parties are, and how they should be punished. The actions are narrowly defined; laying with a man as a woman. The first passage is the initial claim that this action is wrong. It is embedded in a section of illicit sexual acts that are also banned. However, within the context of this chapter, the writer makes clear that a contrast is being drawn between the Israelites and the practices of the Egyptians from whence they were coming, and the practices of the Canaanites, to where they were heading.¹⁴ This is an important distinction. In verse 5, an addition was placed in the Septuagint that changes the text from “I am the Lord” to “I am the Lord your God.” This is a further argument that is helping the reader to draw a distinction between service to YHWH and the worship of foreign Gods, which presupposes that there were many gods.¹⁵

In chapter 18 the long list of prohibited sexual actions are interrupted

12 Walter C. Kaiser Jr. *The New Interpreters Bible. Vol. 10.* 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994. 993.

13 Ibid 997.

14 Leviticus 18: 3 “You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes.”

15 Ndikho Mtshiselwa. “How the Methodist Church of Southern Africa read Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 in view of homosexuality.” *Old Testament Essays*, 2010: 779.

with the mention of Molech in verse 21. Molech worship persisted in Israel and was practiced alongside YHWH worship for centuries. There are 4 explicit mentions of Molech in the Old Testament (Lev18, 20, Jer 32, 2Kgs 23), and numerous implicit mentions as well.¹⁶ Where YHWH was the living God, and held covenant with Israel, Molech was the god of the dead. Practitioners of the rites were considered necromancers, and the passing of children through fire, and other abhorrent practices were part of the rituals used to speak with the dead. It is no wonder that the worship of this one God, of the many mentioned in Old Testament texts, carries a death sentence. The practice of “passing over” children in the fires of Molech worship may mean child sacrifice, or it could refer to what some scholars believe is the giving of children to be raised as temple prostitutes.¹⁷ Old Testament scholar John Day strongly insists that the sacrifice was an actual child sacrifice.¹⁸ In truth, little is known of the details of Molech worship, but its practices were abhorrent enough to warrant a mention of them in the middle of this passage. One must conclude that the writer’s intent here is to tie the actions that follow this mention to the various acts of Molech worship. It is reasonable to conclude that some form of temple prostitution, or other sexual acts used as religious rites were being referenced here. German Bibles from the early 1800’s translates these passages as “Man shall not lie with young boys as he does with a woman, for it is an abomination.”¹⁹ Almost uniformly throughout Europe and The United States, prior to the 20th Century, these passage were understood to be about child molestation. Child sacrifice and temple prostitution were known traits of Molech worship.²⁰ And, chapter 18 seems to be exclusively

16 Rachel Muers. “Idolatry and Future Generations: The Persistence of Molech.” *Modern Theology*, 2003: 556.

17 *Ibid.*, 548.

18 John Day. *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament*. Vol. 41. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Oriental Publications, 1989.

19 Justin Hershey. The Forge. March 21, 2019. <https://www.forgeonline.org/blog/2019/3/8/what-about-romans-124-27>

20 Rachel Muers. “Idolatry and Future Generations: The Persistence of Molech.” 547.

about immoral sexual relationships, why include anything about Molech if it were not in the context of the Molech rites of worship?

Another point for consideration is Robert Alter's commentary, which rightly points out that the prohibition of anal intercourse between men ("as a woman") is what is specifically condemned in these passages.²¹ There is no mention in chapters 18 and 20 (or in any other texts) that ban other homosexual behaviors. Homosexual sexual acts are not strictly defined by this one act. Only this one act is condemned (and again within the context of Molech worship). And what of Lesbianism? There is no direct Old Testament injunction against same sex relationships between women. So, this begs the question about these two passages, what is it about this one act that makes it an abomination? Why this one act, and none of the other sexual acts that occur within same sex relationships; gay or lesbian? Alter conjectures that it has to do with the "wasting of seed" in a kind of parody of sexual intercourse.²² Consider also that any emission, accidental (nocturnal), or heterosexual emissions, made one ritually impure. Deuteronomy 23:10 "If one of you becomes unclean because of a nocturnal emission, then he shall go outside the camp; he must not come within the camp." The taboos against male emissions were so strong that it carried restrictions for every event. It stands to reason that a "parody" of normalized sexual relations would have seemed outrageous to the Israelites.

None of these Old Testament passages are clear condemnations of same sex sexual relationships as we understand them. Genesis 19 is a study of violence, arrogance, selfishness and inhospitableness. Rape is not sex; it is sexualized violence. Any kind of violence would have been an abomination towards sojourners and immigrants. Deuteronomy 10:19 reads, "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt". Granted this command occurs well after Genesis 19, however one need only look at Abraham's behavior in chapter 18 when

21 Robert Alter, trans. *The Hebrew Bible*. Vol. 1. 3 vols. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019. 429.

22 Ibid.

he offered hospitality to the two messengers. Moreover, when Sarah dies, he invokes the right of hospitality while in Hebron saying, “I am a stranger and an alien residing among you; give me property among you for a burying place, so that I may bury my dead out of my sight.” (Genesis 23:4). Any responsible exegesis of the Genesis 19 passage could not conclude that homosexual behavior was being condemned universally. It was a condemnation of violence against strangers.

The same responsible exegesis must be made of Leviticus 18 and 20. Both passages place this behavior squarely within the context of Molech worship. Other behaviors are embedded within the context, but only here in Leviticus 18 and 20 do we find this particular practice mentioned. The other behaviors find mention elsewhere in the texts. This is not to say that there wasn’t a sentiment then that same sex sexual relationships were sinful. It just simply isn’t supported by any clear reading of the text. No such ban exists within the Pentateuch. Numbers has no mention of sexual immorality, and Deuteronomy 23’s sexual immorality laws make no mention of it at all. Only in the Holiness Code, which is arguably a much later addition, makes any reference, and then only in the context of Molech worship.

NEW TESTAMENT RESTRICTIONS

There are no restrictions, apophatically speaking, on same sex sexual behaviors in any of the gospels. In other words, The New Testament passages never address homosexuality as we understand it today. Paul does mention sexual vices in several of his lists (and Paul is quite fond of making lists). These have often been mistranslated and misinterpreted as negative sanctions against consensual homosexual relationships. Paul uses lists of virtues and vices as part of his rhetorical argument, to reinforce particular perspectives. Their purpose is to steer people in a particular direction behaviorally speaking. To Paul these actions or characteristics

are inconsistent with people of faith.²³ One's witness to the glory of God, to the pureness and goodness of faith in Christ should be reflected in the behaviors of Christianity's adherents. Moreover, Christians must be distinct from the culture they live in on one hand, and be seen as having been transformed.²⁴ The contrast is often with local customs and practices, as well as universal motifs. The letter to Romans differs from the letters to Timothy, for they are addressing different issues with different people. The church of Corinth was different from Ephesus or Rome, and so Paul wrote contextually to them.²⁵ For Paul, it was crucial to think through issues, form arguments, choose words carefully, and create dichotomies in the rhetorical arguments he made.²⁶ In other words, one would not find people who eat meat offered to idols in Jerusalem, so any letter he wrote to a church in Jerusalem would unlikely have any kind of mention of that practice. However, they certainly had thieves, prostitutes and murderers. Understanding Paul means understanding the people he was writing to at the time.

One cannot consider Jude as part of the set of the so-called "clobber verses," as it has already been argued that the mention of Sodom and Gomorrah are not to be considered as consensual sex, but rape. And, the strange flesh, as many scholars agree refers to sex with angelic beings, or even possibly bestiality.²⁷ This leaves only Paul's three often cited references. Two of these mentions (1 Cor 6:9-11, 1 Tim1:9-10) are in dispute in how to correctly exegete these passages, because translation issues abound here. The other is Romans 1:26. This passage must be read in its whole context, and when done so reveals a lack of foundational

23 J. Paul Sampley. *Walking in Love*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016. 84, 123.

24 Romans 12:2

25 Davina C. Lopez. "Visual Perspectives: Imagining the Big Pauline Picture." In *Studying Paul's Letters*, by Joseph A. Marchal, 93-116. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012. 98.

26 *Ibid.*, 100.

27 Kruger, M. A. "ΤΟΥΤΟΙΣ ΙΝ ΙΟΥΔΕ :7." *Neotestamentica* 27, no. 1 (1993) 119; Provance, Brett. "Romans 1:26–27 in Its Rhetorical Tradition." In *Greco-Roman and Jewish Tributaries to the New Testament*, edited by Christopher S. Crawford, 83-116. Claremont: Claremont Press, 2018.100.

evidence for a claim of restriction on same sex sexual behavior. Jesus does speak of the three kinds of eunuchs, but not in a restrictive or condemning way; this will be explored briefly later in the paper. The apostle Paul is the only one to allude to same sex sexual behaviors. Granted, in Romans it is not mentioned in a favorable light, but it does not carry the weight of restriction. Jude makes reference to Sodom and Gomorra, but the context is different (as mentioned above sex with angelic beings, also rape is not sex). To be fair, Paul condemns all sex outside of marriage. He would prefer that people not have any sex whatsoever, but if they are unable to control their passion, then they should marry so they have a “legal” outlet for their passions.²⁸ Only with Paul’s mindset, and the historical context of Greece as a hermeneutic, can we hope to discern what Paul meant.

In both 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10, there is a phrase, or rather word, embedded in Paul’s “list” of unacceptable vices. This word in Greek is: arsenokoitai. It is an amalgam of two words; arseno and koitai. Arseno means a man, and koitai roughly means lying in bed. Together the word is likely a vulgar slang for men who are having intercourse. Its position in the list helps determine the context of use.²⁹ The problem with translation here is that the word is a neologism. Paul invents the word, quite possibly by referring to the Septuagint reference of Leviticus 18 and 20.³⁰ Moreover, this word is hapax legomena. It is used for the first time by Paul, only once in the entire text, and is repeated only once subsequently by a deutero-Pauline writer. Authorship of 1 Timothy is in question, and though it is ascribed to Paul, it is likely a writer using Pauline sources in a new epistle.³¹ Which in essence

28 1 Corinthians 7:9 “But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.”

29 Gordon D. Fee. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014. 244.

30 Wayne C. Mayhall. *Christian Research Institute*. June 11, 2009. <https://www.equipt.org/article/is-arsenkoitai-really-that-mysterious/> (accessed December 12, 2019).

31 Porter, Stanley E. “Pauline Authorship and the Pastoral Epistles: Implications for Canon.” *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, 1995: 107.

supports the claim of hapax legomenon, as the source material is likely 1 Corinthians 6. Though it is “recycled” material, the usage of the word has a slightly different context in 1 Timothy than 1 Corinthians, so they need to be addressed individually.

The list of vices in 1 Corinthians is for a specific intended audience; gentile Christians living in Corinth. As part of his rhetorical style, Paul tailored his vice lists for his intended audience, the context of which guides the understanding of the passage. In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul is addressing the practice of members of the Corinthian church taking each other to civil court. It is the rich who invariably are the initiators of civil court cases.³² Keep in mind that most churches were populated by the very poor (largely slaves and laborers); wealthy or powerful were less common. Paul's rhetoric throughout 1 Corinthians juxtaposes the rich and powerful with the poor and oppressed of the church. It is unfathomable to Paul that a rich church member (one who was “washed” or baptized vs. 11) should shame another church member by dragging them through a worldly court.³³ This is the context that Paul is setting up in this pericope. The wealthy abuse the poor, using their money and social privilege to oppress those who cannot mount a credible defense.

There were several abhorrent practices occurring within Greek cities in this era. One of them was the practice of buying young boys to be used as sexual slaves.³⁴ A reasonable interpretation of Paul's list of vices would be that *arsenokoitai* was such a practice.³⁵ *Arsenokoitai* follows *malakoi* in the vice list. *Malakoi* in the Greek lexicon can refer to moral

32 N.T. Wright. *The New Interpreters Bible. Vol. 10.* 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002. 853.

33 *Ibid.*, 856.

34 Jennifer A. Glancy. *Slavery in Early Christianity.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 65.

35 Robin Scroggs. *The New Testament and Homosexuality.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1983. Scroggs argues that *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* refer to the two participants in pederasty, hence Paul does not use the word pederasty, but indicts the participants in pederasty or by extension prostitution. The vice list identifies people committing vices, not the vice itself. By example the 6th Commandment says we should not murder, but implies we should not be murders. Conversely, Paul condemns prostitutes, but implies we should not engage in prostitution.

weakness, softness, or even calmness of the sea.³⁶ Since it is included in a vice list, we can eliminate the calm sea. Its paring next to arsenokoitai is probably not coincidental. The arsenokoitai would be one who practices pederasty, or who buys young boys for sexual slavery. The malakoi, as some scholars point out, would be a young man or boy who sells himself as a prostitute. Malakoi was also a derogatory sobriquet for men who were seen as weak or soft, conflating them to the passive partners in homosexual prostitution.. In this case, the paring of words likely means that malakoi was the passive sexual partner to the arsenokoitai.³⁷

It does not appear that Paul is condemning consensual same sex relationships in this (1 Cor 6) context. He is very much condemning the sexual practice of pederasty. Rich men buy young male slaves, and violate their person. This practice is one humanity finds universally vulgar and abhorrent. Prostitution, no matter the willingness of the prostitute is not a consensual relationship. Paul condemns the act of prostitution because the two bodies become one flesh (1Cor 6:16). This is an incompatible pairing for one who is in union with Christ. It defiles the sacred relationship. Paul isn't condemning sex, he is condemning the act of prostitution.³⁸ There is a power disparity involved where one person becomes the object of another's lustful desires. The prostitute is the object, the thing if you will, that satisfies desire. The act of prostitution is dehumanizing, and is contemptuous of the inherent spiritual worth of another human being. Paul is right to condemn the practice, but one should not interpret this to mean that he condemns consensual same sex behavior between two loving, monogamous consenting adults in a committed relationship. Apophatically speaking, the text simply doesn't say this. 1 Corinthians 6 neither condemns nor condones consensual monogamous same sex relationships. Citing a poor (and biased) translation as a "proof" that homosexuality is negatively sanctioned is no proof at all.

36 Liddel and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 424.

37 Gordon D. Fee. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. 243.

38 Jennifer A. Glancy. *Slavery in Early Christianity*. 66.

The passage from 1 Timothy 1 has similar issues. The same word, *arsenokoitai*, is employed in verse 10, as was used in 1 Corinthians 6. Yet, here we find an even stronger case for the usage to refer to the practice of pederasty. Like Corinthians, the word is nestled between two words that contextualize the meaning. It is preceded by fornicator (whoremonger in KJV) and followed by slave trader. Fornicator, *pornos* in the Greek, is a poor translation. A more literal translation would be male prostitute.³⁹ The word appears 10 times in the New Testament (including 1 Corinthians 6) and is consistently translated to identify an immoral person, or fornicator. In Martin Luther's translation *pornos* is translated as whore, and *arsenokoitai* is boy molester. Subsequent German translations (as well as numerous European translations) render these words as whore (or prostitute) and boy molester.⁴⁰ The Catholic Bible translates it as "sodomite" but offers in the commentary that it "refers to adult males who indulged in homosexual practices with such boys."⁴¹ Clearly this is an issue with translation and interpretation. Since *arsenokoitai* is hapax legomena, and only Paul truly understood what he meant, there is no "correct" translation for this word. That leaves in interpretation. To interpret a word, one must consider the context of the culture at the time of the writing, the audience, and the writer. Also, of crucial importance is the sum of the source material, the rhetorical style, and how words are used and placed within a text. Paul wrote to Greeks about Greek culture using Greek rhetorical methods. His vice lists were intimately related in structure, and were meant for the reader to draw a conclusion from them.⁴² Sexual immorality is bad. Greek sexual immorality was abhorrent in that they used sexual slaves; that's what one can draw from these passages. Any action that dehumanizes people is detestable, this is the same conclusion Paul makes in Romans

39 Maria Nowak. "Defining prostitution in Athenian legal rhetorics." *The Legal History Review*, 2010: 183.

40 Justin Hershey. The Forge. March 21, 2019. <https://www.forgeonline.org/blog/2019/3/8/what-about-romans-124-27> (accessed November 12, 2019).

41 *Unites States Council of Catholic Bishops*. n.d. <http://www.usccb.org/bible/1cor/6:9#54006009>

42 J. Paul Sampley. *Walking in Love*. 135.

chapter 1.

In the letter to the Romans Paul argues that “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.” (1:20) In other words, nature itself is revelatory to the will and design of God. Those who act outside of nature have either been dehumanized by another, or are dehumanizing themselves. This has been Robert Gagnon’s main argument; that the “fittedness” of sex organs (male to female) is divine revelation enough. Homosexual sex is wrong because it is contrary to the natural order of creation. The parts aren’t being used according to the design of creation.⁴³ Gagnon feels no need to offer proof of this point of view, he merely supports his argument through a misguided perception of nature.⁴⁴ In essence he works in reverse. He has come to a conclusion, then works (and manipulates) natural and divine revelation “evidence” to fit his point of view.

The question should be “what was Paul’s view?” Or rather, what is it that Paul is saying here? Paul too believes in natural revelation, and he sees same sex sexual behavior as unnatural. Yet Paul’s sample size of nature is fairly narrow; mostly limited to animal husbandry, and domesticated animals. There is a mountain of research evidence that is contradictory of Paul’s natural revelation. Same sex sexual behavior is quite common in the animal world.⁴⁵ And, as animals do not have the ability to sin, the behavior cannot be negatively sanctioned nor considered to be unnatural. One might argue that there are always defects in nature, and if a large enough study is done, some odd behavior will present itself. The problem with this argument is that in mammals same sex sexual behavior occurs in

43 Robert A.J. Gagnon. *The Bible and Homosexual Practices: Texts and Hermeneutics*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001. 364.

44 Jack Rogers. *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*. Westminster: John Knox Press, 2009. 72.

45 Bagemihl, Bruce. *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999. 164. It should be noted that “homosexuality” is a term referring to the genus “homo”, or man. Within the animal kingdom it is more appropriate to use “same sex sexual behavior” rather than homosexual to avoid confusion.

8 to 10% of the total population, and for some species of bird (mallards) it can be as high as 19%.⁴⁶ If Paul is making the argument of natural revelation in Romans 1, then he is unwittingly making an argument **for** same sex sexual behavior, as it is a common occurrence in nature.

To understand what Paul meant, the entire pericope must be placed in context. Paul is addressing idol worship, and God's wrath towards those who suppress the truth. Some theologians have argued (again) that Romans 1:26-27 is about temple prostitution, though that is a far stretch. Clearly Paul is focused on the actions of people who are worshipping other gods. N.T. Wright argues that the key to this passage is the consequences of idol worship, and he ties that argument to the three times (vs. 24, 26, 28) in which "God gives them up."⁴⁷ In verse 23 Paul writes "and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles." Paul isn't talking about any specific religion; he is encompassing all religions outside of the Judeo-Christian umbrella. This lack of specificity makes it hard to claim that in this instance (unlike Leviticus) that same sex behavior is in relation to temple prostitution. God's response to this "exchanging the glory" is to give these people up to the degrading of their persons. God allows them to be dehumanized. God gives these people up to degrading sexual behavior (same sex sexual behaviors) and describes it as receiving "in their own persons the due penalty for their error. (1:27)" In this context, homosexual behaviors are a punishment from God. They receive this penalty as a result of their idol worship; which Paul understands as a willful attempt to deny an awareness of God. The issue here with this piece of Paul's argument is one of actual awareness. Paul assumes through his natural revelation argument, that YHWH the God of Israel, has revealed Godself to all other cultures. This also necessarily implies that all other cultures would then have a rudimentary understanding of the moral code within which YHWH operates. Otherwise, how could they deny

46 Ibid., 493.

47 N.T. Wright. *The New Intepreters Bible. Vol. 10.* 431.

YHWH's existence, and the natural moral order? It is a premise as faulty as the argument of natural revelation itself.

The Romans 1 passage is so problematic in its logic, and assumptions that one cannot readily condemn homosexuality as we understand it today; as between two loving, consenting adults. Arguments like this, gleaned from Paul's rhetoric, are the fuel which deeply dehumanizes people, in a similar fashion as slavery or prostitution. It argues that the entire being of a person is defined by the 45 minutes a week they might engage in sexual activity, reducing their humanity to acts, and dismissing the whole of the being. Paul does not take into account the other 167 hours 15 minutes of the week. Homosexuals get reduced to caricatures, ones that do not exist outside the bedroom except in wildly offensive stereotypes. Idol worship does this to people? Or do Christians do this to people?

What of those who are homosexual that never engaged in idol worship? Does God give them up to same sex sexual behavior? This is another logical flaw in Paul's rhetoric. He is operating from too small a sample size to make sweeping claims about divine revelations through nature. Moreover, he is claiming that homosexuality is a punishment. The text does not say that homosexuality is negatively sanctioned, it merely reveals Paul's insufficient argument. Clearly Romans 1 was not written as a sanction, but in context defines particular behaviors as a just punishment for a different offense. This is in effect divine retributive justice, a doctrine of ancient Israel that the sins of the parent were meted out on the children.⁴⁸ Jesus disputes this point of view when he is asked in John 9:2 "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Christ responds that his blindness is merely an opportunity for the glory of God to be revealed. In Luke 5 a paralytic is lowered through the roof for Jesus to heal. His first response is to say "Friend, your sins are forgiven." (5:20) To which the pharisees respond with outrage. Jesus reminds them it is easier to forgive someone's sins than to heal them (5:23). If, in a Christian's discernment, they understand homosexuality to

48 Exodus 34:7, Numbers 14:18, Jeremiah 32:18

be a sin, isn't it easier to forgive that sin, than to try to change their base nature?

None of the New Testament texts can be used to condemn homosexuality as we understand it today. Same sex sexual behavior in the Biblical texts are contextualized as oppressive and dehumanizing behaviors. Rape is not the same as sex, and prostitution and pederasty never quite meet the standard of consensual. Yet for those who have been victims of this kind of inculcation, an apophatic exposition of Biblical passages will not serve as proof enough. How then should Christians respond to homosexuality if we cannot decipher a clear and unified voice on this matter?

GRACE RESPONDS TO SIN

As this paper is primarily a "debate" piece, some liberties must be taken for the sake of rhetoric. With this in mind, any argument that seeks to decipher whether homosexuality is sinful or not, must first and foremost be addressed through the lens of grace, God's response to sin. Necessarily included should be some reasonable working definition of sin. John Wesley's mother (Susanna) wrote to him while at Oxford, including this description of sin: "Whatever weakens your reason, Whatever increases the authority of your body over your mind, Whatever impairs the tenderness of your conscience, Whatever takes away your relish for things spiritual, Whatever obscures your sense of God, That is sin to you, no matter how innocent it may seem in itself."⁴⁹ While this does not name what a sin is, it accurately describes the spiritual effects of sin on the person, and the relationship between God and humanity. Robert Gagnon would like us to believe that homosexuality is a form of idol worship. And, by the definition of Susanna Wesley that sort of idol worship would find itself well within her definition of sin. However, as Jack Rogers points out, this definition only works if one begins first with the assumption that

49 Susanna Wesley. *Susanna Wesley: The Complete writings*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. 109.

homosexuality is a sin.⁵⁰ It is a kind of logical fallacy when one confuses cause and effect, or “getting the cart before the horse.” So, for arguments sake, sin isn’t what we decide it is (or isn’t) it is an impairment of our sense of God (as Susanna Wesley writes). Grace is how that impairment is healed. In that regard, how does a Christian reconcile their faith when confronted with the idea of sin; in self and in others?

In Wesleyan terms, God’s grace is prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying. In all ways, God touches human life and reconciles the fractured relationship through grace. The United Methodist church describes grace as, “the love and mercy given to us by God because God desires us to have it, not necessarily because of anything we have done to earn it”. It is not a created substance of any kind.⁵¹ The overriding argument of grace is that we need do nothing to have it. It is the essential teaching of Christianity that salvation is faith based, not works based. How can Christians of good conscience declare that grace exists for those who are divorced and remarried, but not for those who are gay? It would seem that the doctrines of some churches are confused. Divorced (and remarried) people need only rely on the grace of Christ, while homosexuals must first change completely before they can be accepted in the church and receive the ordinances (or sacraments) of the church. Paul writes in Ephesians 2: 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— 9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast. So that no one may boast, also so that no one may judge another’s sins. The implication is clear that the healing and regeneration of the soul is the work of God, and is offered through faith, not through works. There is no Biblical justification to place further burdens than faith upon a person.

In Romans 4 Paul writes 15” For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.” This is a critical notion when trying to understand the fullness of God’s grace. There is a fracture in the

50 Jack Rogers. *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*. 83.

51 The United Methodist Church. March 12, 2018. <https://www.umc.org/en/content/the-wesleyan-concept-of-grace>

relationship between God and humanity, expressed in the simpler terms of sin. All human beings have sin, and it is a matter of confessing our sins to find forgiveness.⁵² Moreover, Romans 10:9-10 offers the very simple formula for salvation which is undeniable: because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. There are no restrictions on this which prohibits salvation because of sin.

Paul's core argument over and over again is that there is no life in law, only condemnation. The flesh we inhabit is part of the ordered and natural world, bestowed upon us in the beginning. It is problematic, because this weakness of flesh invariably draws human beings into sin, and thus into a fractured relationship with the creator.⁵³ In Christ we find new life; the old self is part of the old creation, whereas in Christ our spirits are regenerated. We are able to see the truth of our broken and sinful nature through prevenient (or enabling) grace. It precedes human action, and is the work that God has done in us that, though not guaranteeing salvation, allows us to see the truth of Christ's salvific work. So, the law reveals sin, prevenient grace helps us to see the truth of that sin. In this sense, as we understand Paul, our sin becomes revealed to us through the spirit. It is no longer a matter of interpreting the law, but living under Spirit, guided by grace. The revelation of sin and the need to repent is a matter between God and the individual. In the same way that we have faith and trust in grace for our salvation, we must trust in the grace that is at work in the life of every other person who embraces faith in Christ.

When we enter into relationship with Christ, we do so because of (and through) justifying grace; the cross and the resurrection. It was the work that Jesus, in obedience to God, did for us. John 3: 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 "Indeed, God did not

52 1 John 1:8-10. All of us have sin. Whether you believe homosexuality is a sin or not, everyone relies on grace to relieve them of the burden of sin.

53 N.T. Wright. *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005. 37.

send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” The implication here is that God through Christ has paid the price, and that condemnation is not God’s wish, salvation and the divide between God and humanity bridged is the endgame. There are no supporting Biblical verses that teach that one must be perfect in thought word and deed to have salvation, only that one must have faith in Christ.

Paul writes in Romans 8 that for those who are in Christ, there is no condemnation. This is not a point that can be sidestepped. Paul, just a few verses earlier (Chapter 7), agonizes over his own ability to refrain from sin (Romans 7:14-24). It is indeed Christ Jesus who rescues us from the body of death! The often-heard counter to this is the rhetorical question: Should we therefore continue in sin (Romans 6:1)? The answer to his question has more to do with attitude and location than actual actions. J. Paul Sampley argues that Paul sees sin as less about singular actions, and more about a controlling power.⁵⁴ Is a Christian ruled by the powers of death, destruction and the evil of sin, or are they ruled by Spirit? Those who follow Christ have died to sin, how can they abide it any longer? The answer is found in vs. 12-14 of that chapter. The reign of sin over humanity (sin only exists within the context of the law) has been broken. Our abode as Christians has changed from the address of sin, to the new location of life under Spirit.⁵⁵ Paul asks again in vs. 15: What then, should we sin because we are not under law, but under grace? By no means!” In this case Paul is referring to actual behavior. If one can refrain from sin, one should do so. Or, just because you can sin (because of grace), doesn’t mean you should. However, this falls quite short of condemning anyone for having sin. All have sin (1 John 1:8), so why do Christians feel it is so important to punish the sins of others? The crucial conclusion to this line of reasoning are found in the words of Jesus himself in Matthew 7:1”Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. 2 For with the judgment you

54 J. Paul Sampley. *Walking in Love*. 52.

55 N.T. Wright. *The New Interpreters Bible*. Vol. 10. 542.

make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. 3 Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?"

Forgiveness is inseparable from the Good News of the Kingdom. Jesus encourages us to forgive without limits. We are to forgive seventy times seven. This is clearly not a literal limitation on how to forgive, it is steeped in numerology. Seven times ten is the perfect number of God multiplied by the number of completeness, again multiplied by the number of God. God is pure and infinite, the subtext is that forgiveness knows no boundaries, has no limitations. However, critics counter that forgiveness is contingent upon contrition.⁵⁶ If Christ wants us to forgive each other in such a way, is it not reasonable to expect that he forgives without hesitation or limitation? Critics of this line of reasoning might worry that this attitude cheapens grace.⁵⁷ Is that the worry of conservative and fundamentalist Christians; that not condemning homosexuality cheapens their own salvation? If this is the stumbling block, then the fault lays with them, not with the homosexual.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

There are no "clear" passages that condemn homosexuality or same sex sexual behaviors as we understand them today. The Old Testament has only Leviticus and Genesis to turn to, and the contextual understanding of those passages renders a condemnation impossible. Jesus never condemns same sex sexual behaviors. He does spend a great deal of time on injustice, poverty, oppression and judgementalism. There are over 3000 verses in the Bible that testify to God's concern for the poor, and just a scant few that are being (improperly) used to condemn same sex

56 Timothy P. Jackson. *The Priority of Love*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. 137.

57 Timothy P. Jackson. *The Priority of Love*. 138.

sexual behavior.⁵⁸ The closest Jesus ever comes after an answer regarding Divorce in Matthew 11: For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.” Those who are incapable of marriage would be eunuchs from birth, who have no sexual desire for the opposite sex. There are scholars that argue that Jesus meant person of same sex sexual attraction.⁵⁹ Jesus does not condemn them, but exhorts anyone who can to accept this idea.⁶⁰

It is difficult for people to accept something they have been told was wrong their whole lives. They see the world in a particular way, and they rely on their “feelings” about homosexuality. These feelings reinforce their support for the natural law arguments, which fall short because they draw a conclusion based on limited data. Moreover, they cherry pick passages to fit the preconceived prejudice based on errant conclusions. It is intellectually dishonest. Using scripture as proof texts to support a predisposed belief, regardless of what the text does or does not say, is irresponsible. It relies on plain readings of passages that cannot and should not be read plainly.

The hard truth for both sides in this theological debate is that the Bible neither condemns nor affirms same sex sexual behavior. But what the Bible does do, is point us in the direction of an all-consuming grace and the perfect love of God. This love calls us to love our neighbors, be generous with ourselves, and be generous (and patient) with forgiveness; to do anything else is unjustified.

58 Jack Rogers. *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*. 89.

59 Randolph W. Baxter. “The Illumination of Context: The Bible and Homosexuality. pdf file.” September 2014. <http://disciplesallianceq.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Bible-and-Homosexuality-English-2017.pdf>

60 Jack Rogers. *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*. 89.

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A Biblical Case Against Homosexuality

Brian Huffling & Thomas J. Gentry

KEYWORDS:

| Homosexuality | Gay-Lesbian | Relationships |
| Biblical Authority | Revelation | Nature-Natural | Ethics-Morality |

ABSTRACT:

Homosexuality has become more and more accepted in western society. Churches have also become more accepting of this practice. Many Christians argue that the Bible allows homosexual behavior. This article explores various passages regarding the question of whether the Bible actually does condone homosexual behavior. The most pertinent passages of the Old and New Testaments are examined on the topic. Objections from scholarly homosexual advocates are presented along with responses to those objections. The conclusion of the article is that the Bible in fact does not condone homosexuality.

INTRODUCTION

There are those who believe that the Bible does not teach that homosexual relationships are necessarily sinful. They argue that each of the texts implicitly or specifically addressing homosexuality in both the Old and

New Testaments, as well as the general approach to ethics taught by Paul and Jesus, reveal that rather than condemning homosexuality in general the Bible’s teaching is focused on culturally conditioned concerns. As John Ankerberg and John Weldon explain, “For homosexuals, the fundamental argument is that when the Bible is ‘understood properly,’ it does not condemn homosexuality. At most, it condemns only homosexual promiscuity—typically related to ancient cultic prostitution. The argument [in the Bible] is ‘culturally conditioned’ and no longer relevant for Christian sexual ethics of the present.”¹ The Bible does not, pro-homosexual interpreters conclude, forbid contemporary homosexual practices between consenting partners in a monogamous homosexual relationship.

This article critiques the arguments used to promote the view that homosexuality is an acceptable behavior in some circumstances, arguing that rather than endorsing certain homosexual relationships, the relevant texts in the Old and New Testaments, and the ethical teachings of Paul and Jesus teach that homosexual behavior is not acceptable in any circumstance. Six biblical passages are considered, three from the Old Testament and three from the New Testament, as well as the relevant ethical principles related to love and grace in the teachings of Paul and Jesus.

KEY OLD TESTAMENT TEXTS

Genesis 1:27; 2:18, 21-22, 24

Those who argue for the validity of homosexual relationships interpret these foundational passages in light of their perceived silence about homosexuality. Daniel Helminiak states that Genesis 1 and 2 are “a lesson

1 John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Facts on Homosexuality*, (Chattanooga, TN: ATRI Publishing, 2011), Kindle location 863.

in religion, a lesson about God's way and [human] sin...The example in this case that is by far the most common in human experience: the man, the woman, their relationship with one another...[The text] is not a lesson in sexual orientation. Nothing in those two chapters suggests that heterosexuality, in contrast to homosexuality, was a concern in the author's mind."² The text is silent on homosexuality, so it has nothing to do with homosexuality.

Joe Dallas summarizes another dimension of the pro-homosexual argument from silence on these passages, stating, "The Genesis account does not forbid homosexuality; it simply doesn't refer to it, for obvious reasons. A gay couple could hardly begin the population process. But these verses cannot be seen as a model for all couples. Many heterosexual couples are childless... Are they in sin because they do not conform to the Genesis account?"³

The pro-homosexual argument for these verses fails insofar as, although not explicitly addressing homosexuality, these passages do provide the foundation for the Bible's two-fold approach to heterosexuality and marriage, carrying with it an implicit rejection of homosexuality. First, the diversity of sexes as male and female is an expression of God's intention in imaging himself, and second, the diversity of sexuality is essential to constitute a one-flesh union whereby the man and woman are joined together in consummating and living the marital relationship. As Kenneth Mathews comments, "[H]uman sexuality expresses both...individuality as gender and...oneness with another person through physical union... [Based upon Adam and Eve,] heterosexual marriage was always viewed as the divine norm from the outset of creation."⁴

God's creation of man and woman reflects the essential sexual diversity

2 Daniel A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality* (Tajique, NM: Alamo Square Press, 2000), Kindle location 2087.

3 Joe Dallas, *The Gay Gospel?* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2007), Kindle location 2855.

4 Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1—11:26*, vol. 1A of *The New American Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen and Kenneth A. Mathews (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 223-224, Kindle.

humanity has in revealing God's image, and God's giving of woman to man in order to make "one flesh" demonstrates that in a male and female relationship the full image of God is demonstrated. Homosexuality, therefore, misrepresents the image of God fully revealed in the relationship between man and woman, both in terms of the complementarity of their biological makeup and their suitability as partners in marriage. Thus, even though the accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 do not explicitly address homosexuality, their content implicitly rejects it as failing to properly reveal the image of God in humanity as male and female and as intended for heterosexual marriage including a one flesh union. There are, therefore, boundaries for sexuality in the Genesis text, viz. that man and woman are made for sexual union within marital covenant; and the boundaries here being man and woman (both in terms of gender and maturity [the latter resulting in an exclusion of pedophilia, as well, since man and woman is not man and girl, or woman and boy]). Rather than an argument from silence, the heterosexual interpretation builds from what is explicitly stated and draws good and necessary conclusions.

Genesis 19:1-29

Genesis 19 is the narrative of Lot's experience in Sodom when angelic visitors came to deliver his family from judgment. The pro-homosexual interpretation of these verses concludes that the sin of the men of Sodom was their inhospitable behavior towards Lot's guests. That the guests threatened homosexual behavior is secondary, if it is even what they really intended by "know[ing] them carnally." David Rosman argues this way, concluding that the intention of the men in Sodom was to conduct an interrogation or gang rape of the visitors in the context of responding to the visit as a potential act of war. Rosman asks, "Did the men of Sodom simply want to talk to the two agents of God? Did they want to have consensual sex with them? Did they want to gang rape the two envoys of God? It appears that the first or third translations may be closer to the

story line and that neither would designate a homosexual relationship.”⁵ Peter Aelred draws a similar conclusion, stating that “the ‘sin’ for which [Sodom was] destroyed was not homosexuality, but inhospitality. Genesis 18 records the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah towards three angelic visitors, and Hebrew theologians noted the explicit contrast in the following story of Sodom... Trying to gang-rape angelic guests is hardly a Martha Stewart-style welcome, especially in an ancient Semitic culture that vowed to protect visitors at any and all costs.”⁶

The pro-homosexual interpretation errs by focusing on inhospitality and excluding homosexuality, since Sodom’s sin of inhospitable behavior does not dismiss the fact of the homosexual behavior attending the inhospitality. The former was the context for the latter, and both were judged by God, but the point is that *both* were judged. As Kevin DeYoung states, “While the violence [inhospitality] associated with the behavior in Sodom certainly made the offense worse, the nature of the act itself contributed to the overwhelmingly negative assessment of the city. Sodom...[was] guilty of a great many sins; [the argument] does not have to prove that homosexual practice was the only sin to show that it was one of them.”⁷

Ezekiel 16:47-50 lists, among other sins, an “abomination” done before the Lord by Sodom. The word for abomination is *toebah*, the same word used in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 to address homosexual sins. As DeYoung explains, “Several sins in the Holiness Code of Leviticus are described as abominations, but only this one is singled out by itself as an abomination. The use of *toebah* in Ezekiel, with reference to Sodom’s sin, is an echo of Leviticus 18 and 20. Sodom’s sins were many: pride, social

5 David Rosman, *The Clobber Passages: The Biblical Arguments against Homosexuality in the United States* (Columbia, MO: Ink and Voice Communication, 2014), Kindle location 3763.

6 Peter Aelred, *To Melt a Golden Calf: An Evangelical Christian Case for Same-Sex Relationships* (North Charleston, SC: Create Space Publishing, 2013), 42-43, Kindle.

7 Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Teach About Homosexuality?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 38, Kindle.

injustice, *and* pursuing homosexual behavior.”⁸

Jude 7 also describes Sodom’s sin in terms of sexual perversity. In the immediate context Jude is reminding his readers of God’s judgment on apostasy, stating in verse 7, “Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.”⁹ Regarding the interpretation of Sodom’s sin of going after “unnatural lust” (from the Greek *σαρκὸς ἑτέρας*, strange flesh), Thomas Schreiner explains that, rather than the text referring to an attempt by the men of Sodom to engage in sexual relations with angels, a position posited by several pro-homosexual interpreters who recognize the potential difficulty Jude poses for their understanding of Genesis 18, “Their sin consisted in their homosexual intentions and their brutal disregard for the rights of visitors to the city...The term [strange flesh] more naturally refers to a desire for those of the same sex; they desired flesh other than that of women.”¹⁰

Were the men of Sodom inhospitable? Yes, and they were judged for their inhospitality. However, as the broader biblical context from Leviticus, Ezekiel, and Jude demonstrate, the sin of the men of Sodom was more than inhospitality. God judged them for the sin of homosexuality.

Leviticus 18:22; 20:13

These two verses are found within the Holiness Code given to Israel. Leviticus 18:22 declares what the code is, stating, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination.” Leviticus 20:13 prescribes the punishment in Israel for breaking the code, stating, “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.”

8 Ibid., 35, Kindle (emphasis in original).

9 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

10 Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37 of *The New American Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen and David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2003), 452-453, Kindle.

The pro-homosexual interpretation of these verses emphasizes the culturally distinct aspect of the entire Holiness Code as related to God's desire for separation from the pagan nations in which Israel was placed. It is an ancient near-eastern prescription that has no bearing on today in any of its specifics. Further, the male with male sexual aspect is not about homosexuality, per se, but about domination of one person over another, one man over another. John Dwyer explains, "Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 were written for a certain time period... Much of sex and sexual relations as we understand them in the 21st Century are different from what was experienced and understood when Leviticus was written. Much of the sexual conduct was about taking, power, and what we would consider, in most instances today, rape."¹¹ Following this same culture-bound approach to interpretation, Dan Via states, "The pertinent point [in Leviticus 18 and 20] is that the condemnation of homosexuality... categorizes it as a source of uncleanness rather than as a sin."¹² What about a cultic context? That it was homosexuality in the context of pagan worship?

The pro-homosexual interpretation concludes that the Holiness Code's concern with homosexuality in Leviticus 18 and 20 is not a matter of God rejecting homosexuality in all instances, but a matter of God's desire to keep Israel clean and holy in relation to the pagan nations surrounding her. What was true for Israel then is not appropriately carried forward for Christians today.

The pro-homosexual interpretation rightly emphasizes that there are cultural considerations when interpreting any biblical text, but it fails to demonstrate that such cultural interpretations necessarily preclude viewing the homosexual prohibitions in Leviticus 18 and 20 as relevant for those living in another time and place. Robert Gagnon argues there are several features related to the Levitical prohibition against homosexuality that establish its continued relevance. Two are considered here. First, the

11 John F. Dwyer, *Those 7 References: A Study of 7 References to Homosexuality in the Bible* (North Charleston, SC: Create Space Publishing, 2007), 40, Kindle.

12 Dan O. Via and Robert A. J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), Kindle location 137.

broader context includes prohibitions against incest (18:6-18), adultery (18:20), child sacrifice (18:21), and bestiality (18:23), all which “continue to have universal validity in contemporary society” due to their culturally transcendent impact on human relationships and sexuality.¹³ To single out homosexuality as “for then and not now” raises the question of why the pro-homosexual interpreter does not insist on the same conclusion for these other acts.

Second, homosexuality is the only prohibition in the code that is specifically identified as an “abomination” (תועבה *tow'ebah*).¹⁴ While the chapter summary in 18:24-30 mentions the group of activities as abominable, only homosexuality is individually identified as such, giving it, in a sense, a higher concern as the primary abomination among the abominations. This helps make sense of Paul’s continued prohibition of homosexuality, which, along with his prohibitions of adultery and incest, are consistent with his knowledge of and commitment to the Levitical code. Gagnon concludes that this code is the basis of Paul’s condemnation of incest in 1 Corinthians 5:1, of his statement that “those who practice such things deserve to die” in Romans 1:32, use of *aschomosye* in Romans 1:27, *akatharsia* in Romans 1:24, and his use of *arsenokoites* in 1 Corinthians 6:9, which is a compound of the words in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 for “male” and “lying.”¹⁵

Taken together, these features of the Levitical prohibition against homosexual relations demonstrate their continued relevance. Both the way God singularly describes the abominableness of homosexuality, and Paul’s bringing the Levitical code into his New Testament teaching reveal

13 Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), Kindle location 1569.

14 As Mark F. Rooker discusses in commenting on 18:22, “The next prohibited sexual activity is homosexuality. This offense is characterized as an abomination (*tow'ebah*) a term that occurs five times in this context (18:22, 26, 27, 29, 30; 20:13). An abomination, a term especially frequent in the Book of Deuteronomy, refers to an act that is abhorrent or repugnant, such as idolatry and inappropriate worship of God (see Deut 7:25; 27:15; 17:10 12:31; 18:9–14).” *Leviticus*, vol. 3A, in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000), Kindle location 7018.

15 Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, Kindle location 1669-1675.

that, rather than these prohibitions being culturally bound to ancient Israel, they transcend culture. The prohibitions against homosexuality in Leviticus are for today.

Summary of Old Testament Findings

How do the pro-homosexual interpretations of the Old Testament hold up to careful critique? The answer is two-fold. On the one hand, the pro-homosexual view of the creation of male and female and their coming together in a one-flesh union in Genesis 1 and 2, of the sins of the men of Sodom in Genesis 19, and of the prohibitions against homosexuality in the Holiness Code in Leviticus 18 and 20 bring to light relevant aspects of each text that may be overlooked by other interpreters.¹⁶ Yes, the creation of male and female is communicating something more than a simplistic “God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.” Yes, the sins of Sodom include egregious violations of ancient near-eastern hospitality norms and other concerns for justice. Yes, the Holiness Code contains certain culturally-bound elements related to Israel’s cultic purity. Such elements deserve attention when interpreting these texts, though, as argued above, the pro-homosexual interpreters have not given such culturally-bound elements their proper contextual assessment. Further, on the other hand, what the pro-homosexual interpreters demonstrate is a consistent failure to take into account how the broader Bible, especially the New Testament, incorporates the teaching of these texts into the New Covenant ethic, and how it does so with a decided concern for the sexual behavior either implied or explicitly addressed therein. The Bible’s interpretation of itself in these matters is concerned with the sinfulness of homosexuality. That is the message of the Old Testament in this regard. What about the message of the New Testament? Three Pauline texts will

16 While there is at least one other Old Testament text related to the discussion of homosexuality, Gibeah in Judges 19, the pro-homosexual interpretation and a response to it are fundamentally the same as that of the men of Sodom in Genesis 18. Thus, this author chose not to use additional space to restate the argument.

now be considered in order to answer this question.

KEY NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS

There are several texts in the New Testament (NT) that deal with the issue of sexuality. Most notably for the purposes of this article are Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:8-11. All are written by the same author (Paul) and have the same basic message: only monogamous heterosexual relationships are condoned by God and Scripture. These texts would prohibit any homosexual behavior.

Romans 1:26-27

In Romans 1 Paul introduces, among other things, the fact that all men know about God via nature (vv. 18-20). However, they rejected the truth of God and were left only with a lie. It is

26 For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, 27 and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

As J. Glen Taylor notes, “Romans 1:26–27 is clearly the most important passage on homosexual intercourse in the NT.”¹⁷ The “reason God gave them up” is because they exchanged the truth they knew about God for a lie (the only option left once truth is rejected). It is vital to note the universal scope of who has knowledge of God “through the things he has made” (20). Who has such knowledge? All people since all have the ability (as long as their faculties are working properly) to see and experience the world and thus know God through it. Paul says, “the

17 J. Glen Taylor, “The Bible and Homosexuality,” *Themelios* 21, no. 1 (1995): 5.

wrath of God is revealed against *all* ungodliness” (18).¹⁸ Paul declares that God’s invisible attributes “have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (20). Thus, whoever can know the world can know God. The point is the universal nature of Paul’s language includes all people. The basis for the condemnation is universal and not cultural or individual. Paul says those in question exchanged the truth they knew about God for a lie, focusing on the creation rather than the creator. This is the reason God gave them up. What did he give them up to?

“God gave them up to degrading passions.” Women and men were said to thus commit unnatural intercourse. The natural way for intercourse to take place was with one man and one woman. However, God had given them up to what is unnatural. It is interesting that Paul does not use the typical words for ‘women’ (γυνή) and ‘men’ (άνηρ) here; rather, he uses the words ‘female’ (θηλυς) and ‘male’ (αρσην). Such could possibly harken back to the creation account as stated in the LXX.¹⁹ Thomas R. Schreiner makes another point for Paul relating this text to the creation account. He claims that “the phrase ‘contrary to nature’ (παρὰ φύσιν) is rooted in Stoic and Hellenistic Jewish traditions that saw homosexual relations as violations of the created order.”²⁰ In the creation account God

18 Emphasis mine.

19 Cf. note in Grant R. Osborne, *Romans, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series* Vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 52 for such an argument. R. C. H. Lenski takes a different view: “Paul does not say ‘women’ and ‘men,’ he says θήλειαι and αρσενες, ‘females’ and ‘males.’ To say that this is done in order to denote sex is too weak, for ‘women’ and ‘men’ would certainly fully denote sex. When women and men are called females and males in a connection of the lowest vices such as this, the terms are degrading. They descend to the brutish level of being nothing but creatures of sex.” R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1936), 112. C. E. B. Cranfield says this: “The use of the adjectives meaning ‘female’ and ‘male’ rather than the words γυνή and άνηρ is appropriate here, since it is the sexual differentiation as such on which attention is specially concentrated (cf. Gen 1:27; Mt 19:4 = Mk 10:6; Gal 3:28). C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, International Critical Commentary* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 125.

20 Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Vol. 6, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 95.

is seen to have created humankind with a certain nature and telos with the divine plan for man to unite to one woman and procreate (Gen. 1:27-28; 2:24). Such was the natural way God created males and females. This nature is the centerpiece in Paul's condemnation of homosexual behavior.

As Grant Osborne notes, "The key term here and in the debate today is *nature* (Greek *physis*)."²¹ The term 'natural' (φυσικός) only occurs three times in the NT, twice here and once in 2 Pet. 2:12. As Osborne goes on to argue, the idea of nature here has to do with the natural order of creation.²²

C. E. B. Cranfield's words here are instructive:

By φυσικός (here used to describe that which is κατὰ φύσιν) and παρὰ φύσιν Paul clearly means 'in accordance with the intention of the Creator' and 'contrary to the intention of the Creator,' respectively. For this appeal to 'nature' in the sense of the order manifest in the created world compare 1 Cor 11:14, where ἡ φύσις αὐτῆ might almost be translated 'the very way God has made us.' That Paul had some awareness of the great importance which φύσις had had in Greek thought for many centuries is not impossible; that he was aware of its use in contemporary popular philosophy is very likely. He was at any rate using a word which—significantly—is not to be found in the LXX except in Wisdom and 3 and 4 Maccabees. But, for all its far-reaching and varied Greek background, the decisive factor in Paul's use of it is his biblical doctrine of creation. It denotes that order which is manifest in God's creation and which men have no excuse for failing to recognize and respect (cf. what was said above on vv. 19 and 20).²³

Thus, Paul is saying that the exchanging of heterosexual relations for homosexual ones is against the created order. The very passions in view here are said to be "degrading."

Douglas Moo, however, notes that "Paul generally uses the word 'nature' to describe the way things are by reason of their intrinsic state or birth, and in these cases, while sometimes perhaps implicit, there is no

21 Osborne, 52 (emphasis in original).

22 Ibid. This is, again, possibly why Paul chose the words 'female' and 'male' which is the wording of the creation account in the LXX.

23 Cranfield, 125–126.

explicit reference to divine intention.”²⁴ However, he rightly notes that what Paul likely has in mind here follows not only the Old Testament and Jewish teachers, such as Philo, but natural law.²⁵ In other words, all men share a certain human nature that Paul is saying is being violated by homosexual behavior. However, he writes that some scholars argue that the passage in question does not make homosexuality an issue of God’s volition; rather, they say that Paul is simply imposing his Jewish culture.²⁶

Meghan K. DeFranza is an example of one who takes such a position. She states, “As a whole, the passage is meant to describe the depravity of those who have rejected God, not faithful gay, lesbian, and bisexual Christians seeking to solemnize their relationships with the vows of Christian marriage.”²⁷ Such a position argues against any universality of prohibition since Paul is writing from a certain cultural perspective. DeFranza thus claims Paul does not have in mind certain acceptable homosexual relationships such as those just mentioned. She further writes, “Romans 1 was not written to provide a universal natural law to ground Christian sexual ethics. More importantly, it provides no guidance for those Christians who have not rejected God but nevertheless experience same-sex attraction.”²⁸ In other words, she is saying that the problem Paul has is not so much the issue of homosexuality, but the rejection of God. Further, she states (a la Neil Elliot) that such prohibitions may have in view certain members of the aristocracy or even temple prostitution.²⁹ She maintains that marriage’ today “is not ‘biblical marriage of the

24 Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., 2nd ed., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 125.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Megan K. DeFranza, “Journeying from the Bible to Christian Ethics in Search of Common Ground,” in *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church*, ed. Preston Sprinkle and Stanley N. Gundry, Zondervan Counterpoints Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 86.

28 Ibid., 92.

29 Ibid., 83-85. She cites Neil Elliot’s *Liberating Paul* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 195 in James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 159.

Old or New Testament. The biblical teaching of the image of God in all people has come to supersede ancient patterns of marriage. The question before Christians today,” she says, “is whether ‘biblical marriage’ can be revised *yet again* to better honor the humanity of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people . . . in ways that honor God, benefit the common good, and promote their own growth in health and holiness.”³⁰ However, such a view fails to notice the universal basis for Paul’s statement and the way in which the term ‘nature’ is being used, especially in relation to the created order. The created orders is such that the female and the male unite as one and procreate. Homosexuality violates this natural order and cannot uphold the biblical mandate (naturally) to procreate.³¹ There are no special circumstances in which Paul allows for homosexual behavior. Such can be seen here as well as the other passages that will be explored below. Moreover, given that he is writing from a Jewish perspective, his writing would be consistent with the Old Testament which also universally prohibits homosexual behavior. It is the homosexual relationship itself and not the way in which it is committed that is in view. Paul’s words only refer to the acts that are committed, not the circumstances in which they take place. The only circumstances mentioned concern the homosexuals’ rejection of God and consequent lie they are left with. However, there is no room in this text for appropriate homosexual actions; the actions as such are said to be unnatural. Even John Boswell, a noted advocate for homosexual behavior rejects this view saying

[Th]is view proves to be inadequate. First of all, there is no reason to believe that homosexual temple prostitution was more prevalent than heterosexual or that Paul, had he been addressing himself to such practices, would have limited his comments to the former. Second, it is clear that the sexual behavior itself is objectionable to

30 *Ibid.*, 90 (emphasis in original).

31 Homosexual advocates retort that some heterosexuals cannot procreate either. However, such is the case only when there is some physical defect with one or both in the relationship, or if one or both are too old. In principle every (healthy) heterosexual couple can procreate; however, in principle no homosexual can naturally procreate. Thus, homosexuals cannot, even in principle, uphold the biblical mandate.

Paul, not merely its associations. Third, and possibly most important, Paul is not describing cold-blooded, dispassionate acts performed in the interest of ritual or ceremony: he states very clearly that the parties involved “burned in their lust one toward another” . . . It is unreasonable to infer from the passage that there was any motive for the behavior other than sexual desire.³²

Such comments by DeFranza are interesting given these that she made just after:

The unanimous picture of marriage in the Bible is heterosexual. While polygyny and marriage to women captured in war were regulated by Old Testament law, the consistent witness of marriage is nevertheless heterosexual. Even more significant, the covenant between a husband and wife was chosen by the prophets and apostles to illustrate the relationship between God and God’s people.³³

Admittedly, DeFranza notes that the Bible only approves (even if only descriptively) of heterosexuality. The Bible is indeed consistent about this.

In the same work as DeFranza, William Loader, another advocate for homosexual behavior, admits that the Bible is clear in teaching that homosexuality is wrong, at least in the biblical world. Loader recognizes that what Paul means by ‘natural’ has to do with the creation account and how God designed men and women.³⁴ He further maintains that when “biblical writers address the issues of same-sex relations, the message is relatively clear.”³⁵ When it comes to Romans, “Paul sees both the action and the attitude, homosexual passion, as sin.”³⁶ While thinking the text

32 John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 108.

33 DeFranza, 86.

34 William Loader, “Homosexuality and the Bible,” in *Two Views on Homosexuality and the Bible*, 39.

35 *Ibid.*, 42.

36 *Ibid.*

is “relatively clear,” Loader advocates for supplementing the biblical view to make way for a viable homosexual lifestyle for those who are genuinely homosexual.³⁷

Another objection that Paul is not categorically prohibiting homosexuality claims that “against nature” really refers to heterosexuals who committed homosexual acts. Thus, John Boswell argues that “the persons referred to [as being against nature] were considered by influential early Christian theologians to have been necessarily heterosexual (i.e. ‘naturally’ attracted to the opposite sex). There was no implication in the passage that homosexual acts, much less homosexual persons, were *necessarily* sinful.”³⁸ Thus, according to Boswell, what was unnatural were heterosexuals acting like homosexuals.

Nothing in Paul’s language comes close to such a strained “interpretation.” Several points demonstrate that such cannot be the case: (1) Paul uses the relationship between males and females as the natural relation, not one’s alleged sexual orientation; (2) it is arguably the case that Paul is pointing the reader back to the creation account which states that one man and one woman shall become one flesh, which is a universal foundation for his argument; (3) the other passages in which Paul discusses homosexuality are blanket condemnations of such behavior; (4) such blanket condemnation is consistent with the Old Testament which also makes no exceptions to such behavior; and (5) Schreiner argues

This interpretation should be rejected since there is no evidence that Paul understood the “nature” of human beings in the individualized and psychological sense that is familiar to us in the twentieth century. Instead, in accord with Stoic and Hellenistic Jewish tradition, Paul rejects homosexuality as contrary to the created order—homosexual activity is a violation of what God intended when he created men and women.³⁹

37 *Ibid.*, 47.

38 Boswell, 114 (emphasis in original).

39 Schreiner, 95–96.

The idea that Boswell has put forth is completely lacking. It is homosexuality as such, not homosexuality in some circumstances, that is condemned.

Some advocates of homosexuality argue that Paul only has in mind pederasty. For example, in reference to Paul's reference to "men committing shameless acts with men," Robin Scroggs writes that Paul does not necessarily "have anything in mind other than pederasty, any more than Philo, who can use the 'male and male' terminology when he is explicitly referring to pederasty."⁴⁰ In harmony with the argument presented here, James D. G. Dunn notes that while Scroggs makes this assertion, viz., that "Paul has in mind here pederasty in particular," such is false since "Paul's indictment seems to include all kinds of homosexual practice, female as well as male, and was not directed against one kind of homosexual practice in distinction from another."⁴¹ Paul could have mentioned such practices, but instead says that such relations between females and males is what is the "error." Age (or social status) had nothing to do with it—gender and human nature did. Paul gives no qualification to when and how homosexual behavior is permissible; rather, it is against nature as such.

In summary of this passage, the prohibition of Paul's condemnation of homosexuality is best seen as rooted in the creation account and is applicable to all regardless of age, consent, culture, etc. Paul's words to describe such acts include "degrading passions," "unnatural," "shameless," and an "error." According to Paul, such behavior is simply unnatural and against the way God created males and females. The following is a clear and accurate summary of this passage: "Paul's attitude toward homosexual behavior could hardly be more adversely expressed. For he condemns it totally—as did also all Jews and all Jewish Christians of his day."⁴²

40 Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1984), 115.

41 James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, vol. 38A, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1988), 65.

42 Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary on the Greek*

1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:8-11

First Corinthians 6:9-10 is another important passage on the issue of homosexuality. The text reads:

9 Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, 10 thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

The context of this passage concerns the use of Christians bringing lawsuits against each other. Paul seems to think that their actions are like wrongdoers who will not “inherit the kingdom of God.” Paul expands who will not inherit the kingdom of God to include many others, notably what the NRSV calls “male prostitutes” and “sodomites.” The dispute over the meanings of these words has been great. “Male prostitutes” is translated from the Greek word *μαλακοί*. According to BDAG such a translation by the NRSV “is too narrow a rendering [while other translations such as] ‘sexual pervert’ REB is too broad).”⁴³ The first definition in BDAG for this word is “soft,” while second definition, which contains this passage as an example of this meaning, says the word pertains “to being passive in a same sex relationship.”⁴⁴ *The Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* states, “The vice catalog of 1 Cor 6:9 mentions the *μαλακοί*, soft people / weaklings, as reprehensible examples of passive homosexuality.”⁴⁵ *The Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* claims the word refers to “the passive male partner in homosexual intercourse—’homosexual.’”⁴⁶

Text, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner, *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 217.

43 William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. *μαλακός*.

44 *Ibid.*

45 Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds. *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, LTD, 1978-1980), s.v. *μαλακός* (emphasis in original).

46 Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New*

Both μαλακοί and the word for “sodomites” (ἀρσενοκοίται) are difficult to translate, especially due to the paucity of their usage. According to Gordon D. Fee:

What makes “male prostitute” (in the sense of “effeminate call-boy”) the best guess is that it is immediately followed by a word that almost certainly refers to male homosexuality, especially to the active partner. This word (arsenokoitai), however, is likewise difficult, in that this is its first appearance in preserved literature, and subsequent authors are reluctant to use it, especially when describing homosexual activity⁴⁷

The word μαλακός is used by Matthew (11:8) and Luke (7:25), but ἀρσενοκοίται is used exclusively by Paul—only here and in 1 Tim. 1:10. BDAG says ἀρσενοκοίτης refers to “a male who engages in a sexual activity w. a pers. Of his own sex,” and lists 1 Cor. 6:9 as an example of such a use.⁴⁸ Alan F. Johnson notes, “This latter term [ἀρσενοκοίτης] refers to men and boys who take the more active role in homosexual relations. Behind Paul’s rejection of these practices are Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, which he sees as still valid for the Christian community.”⁴⁹

One of the most popular objectors to this is John Boswell. Regarding μαλακός, he says that it has a wide variety of meanings, but never having to do with homosexuality.⁵⁰ He notes that ἀρσενοκοίται “is quite rare, and its application to homosexuality in particular is more understandable.”⁵¹ However, he argues that it is better translated “male prostitute.” The word

Testament Based on Semantic Domains (2nd ed. New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), s.v. μαλακός. Of course, one could point to other lexicons or dictionaries that have a somewhat different definition, but these are standard works and at least show there is a strong case for these definitions and this meaning of the text.

47 Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., rev. ed., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 268–269.

48 BDAG, s. v. ἀρσενοκοίτης.

49 Alan F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians*, vol. 7, *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 97.

50 Boswell, 106-107.

51 *Ibid.*, 107.

is a compound (“ἄρσῃν ‘male’ + κοίτη ‘bed’”).⁵² Fee notes, “There is no question as to the meaning of the *koitai* part of the word; it is vulgar slang for intercourse (which probably accounts for its seldom being found in the literature).”⁵³ Fee notes that what is not clear is whether “male” is the subject or object in this compound word. If “male” is the subject it would mean “males who have intercourse”; whereas if it is the object it would mean “intercourse with males.”⁵⁴ Boswell states that the first word’s “relationship to the second half of the compound” is ambiguous.⁵⁵ This would mean it is not clear if “male” is the subject or the object. However, after examining other ways in which the word ἄρσῃν is used as a prefix, he states that “no words coined and generally written with the form ‘ἄρσῃνο-’ is the prefix demonstrably objective.”⁵⁶ He concludes that ἀρσενοκοίται “then, means male sexual agents, i.e. active male prostitutes, who were common throughout the Hellenistic world in the time of Paul.”⁵⁷ It is interesting that Boswell moves from the word being “ambiguous” to being fairly sure of what it means. Such is quite a leap of logic. If it is ambiguous, even for him, then he cannot conclude that the word cannot possibly mean homosexual. Fee avers,

His argument, however, seemed to be a case of “divide and conquer.” What may be true of the words individually is one thing. But here they are not individual; they appear side by side in a vice list that is heavily weighted toward sexual sins. Although one cannot be certain, and even though it is quite impolitic to suggest as much in our contemporary culture, it is very likely that the original NIV had moved in a generally right direction by rendering the two words “male prostitute” [μαλακός] and “homosexual offender,” [ἀρσενοκοίται] with the proviso that “male prostitute” most likely

52 BDAG, s. v. ἀρσενοκοίτης. According to Fee it is a compound of “‘male’ and ‘intercourse.’” Fee, 269.

53 Fee, 269. Boswell agrees with this definition. Cf. Boswell, 342.

54 Fee, 269.

55 Boswell, 342.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

denoted a consenting homosexual youth.⁵⁸

In other words, these two words (μαλακός and ἄρσενοκοίται) taken together seem to be evidence for an argument against homosexuality. David E. Garland makes a very interesting argument for this conclusion by saying that it is “likely, however, that it was coined in Hellenistic Judaism, or perhaps by Paul, from the Levitical prohibition against males bedding males.”⁵⁹ Garland cites the LXX version of Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 to demonstrate how this could have been done given the similarity in wording:

Lev. 18:22: “You shall not sleep with a male as with a woman, for it is an abomination” (καὶ μετὰ ἄρσενος οὐ κοιμηθήσῃ **κοίτην** γυναικός· βδέλυγμα γάρ ἐστιν, *kai meta arsenos ou koimēthēsē koitēn gynaikos; bdelygma gar estin*).

Lev. 20:13: “Whoever sleeps with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they are liable to be put to death” (καὶ ὅς ἂν κοιμηθῇ μετὰ ἄρσενος **κοίτην** γυναικός, βδέλυγμα ἐποίησαν ἀμφοτέροι· θανατούσθωσαν, ἔνοχοί εἰσιν, *kai hos an koimēthē meta arsenos koitēn gynaikos, bdelygma epoïēsan amphoteroi; thanatousthōsan, enochoi eisin*).⁶⁰

Noting the similarity of the usage of the words in these passages, it is easy to see how such a coining of a new term for this instance was fitting. David F. Wright calls this similarity between these two passages and 1 Cor. 6:9 “surely inescapable.”⁶¹ He further notes that this argument is strengthened if such a word group was indeed coined by either Hellenistic Judaism or Christianity, which he argues “seems likely.”⁶² It is arguably

58 Fee, 269.

59 David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, a vol. of the *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 212.

60 *Ibid.*, 212–213 (emphasis in original).

61 David F. Wright, “Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The Meaning of ἄρσενοκοίται (1 Cor 6:9, 1 Tim 1:10),” *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Jun 1984): 129.

62 *Ibid.*

the case, then, that Paul is denouncing homosexual activity in 1 Cor. 6:9-10. Such is likely the case since Paul's guiding authority would have been the OT and it clearly denounced homosexuality as such, not merely in certain circumstances.

1 Timothy 1:8-11

Paul's third passage that discusses homosexuality is 1 Tim. 1:8-11. The text reads:

8 Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately.
9 This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, 10 fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching
11 that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

The base word for "sodomites" is ἀρσενοκοίταις, the same word (in a different case) as in 1 Cor. 6:9. The discussion on the meaning of this word from the last section applies here. Boswell generally treats these two passages as one argument given the same word usage; although, he does argue that the presence of "πόρνοι" in I Timothy suggests very strongly that prostitution [1 Cor. 6:9] is what is at issue."⁶³ In short, the arguments regarding this word in 1 Cor. 6:9 pertain to this passage as well.

Summary of New Testament Findings

It has been argued here that the New Testament does not allow for any homosexual behavior. The texts above thus prohibit any form of homosexuality, even in a monogamous and consenting relationship. In the next section of the article, consideration turns to appeals made by

63 Boswell, 341.

pro-homosexual interpreters concerning an ethic of love and grace in the teachings of Paul and Jesus.

Paul on Love and Grace

The pro-homosexual argument that Paul's teaching on love and grace allows for homosexual relationships has two basic elements. One, Paul teaches in 1 Cor. 13:4-8 and 13 what godly love is, identifying it as something that is not necessarily romantic but that is certainly a matter of the will in placing the other person first in the relationship. Thus, if a homosexual couple manifests the marks of true godly love based on 1 Corinthians 13, how could God condemn them? Would God tell someone what love should look like and then condemn them for showing it to another person? Certainly not. As Aelred states in his appeal to Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians, "Even the staunchest critic of same-sex relationships would be unlikely to say gay and lesbian couples don't love each other ... it's hard to deny they are attempting to love their significant other. So here is the point of tension...How can we label any relationship as sinful, if it approaches God's difficult and exhaustive standard for healthy relationships?"⁶⁴

Two, Paul teaches in Gal. 5:16-23 that the fruit of the Spirit is the opposite of the desires of the flesh. Thus, the argument goes, if he who is homosexual bears in his homosexual relationship the fruit of the Spirit, how could the relationship be considered sinful. To quote Aelred again, "If gay or lesbian couples, both corporately and individually, are exhibiting love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, how can we call homosexuality intrinsically sinful?"⁶⁵

Does Paul's teaching on love and the fruit of the Spirit provide the basis for concluding that some homosexual relationships are indeed good

64 Aelred, *To Melt a Golden Calf*, 86, Kindle.

65 Ibid., 89, Kindle.

and godly? No. The presence of love in a relationship, even love that resembles the definition of 1 Corinthians 13, or the presence of attributes similar to the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, does not necessarily legitimize the homosexual relationship. The pro-homosexual argument at this point falls into the error of the ends justifying the means by assuming that the presence within homosexual relationships of characteristics associated with godly love or qualities associated with the fruit of the Spirit means that homosexual actions are acceptable to God without regard for the actual sexual activity.

“Scripture places boundaries on human relationships,” states Dallas, “offering no compromise even if love is present.”⁶⁶ Consider, also, Biery’s critique of the homosexual approach in this instance, especially as it relates to an appeal to love: “One of the most popular errors in the realm of Christian ethics has been the effort to make love an omnipotent spiritual quality which has the power to sanctify anything that is done in its name.”⁶⁷ Love or what appears to be the fruit of the Spirit is not enough to justify a homosexual relationship, as the ends do not justify the means.

Jesus on Love and Grace

Commenting on Jesus and the Holiness Code specific to homosexuality in Leviticus 18 and 20, Rogers states, “When we see Jesus as the fulfillment of the law (Matt. 5:17), we understand that our challenge is not meticulously to maintain culturally conditioned laws, but rather, with Jesus, to love God and love our neighbor (Matt. 22:36-40). When these texts in Leviticus are taken out of their historical and cultural context and applied to faithful, God-worshiping Christians who are homosexual, it does violence to them.”⁶⁸ Rogers dismisses the Levitical

66 Dallas, *The Gay Gospel?*, Kindle location 2546.

67 Roger Biery, *Understanding Homosexuality: The Pride and the Prejudice* (Austin, TX: Edward William Publishing, 1990), 176.

68 Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, 69-70.

passages as “culturally conditioned” since they are in conflict with both his interpretation of what it means for Jesus to have fulfilled the law and with his interpretation of Jesus’s command to love God and neighbor. Affirming the Levitical denial of homosexuality would, in Rogers’ way of thinking, reverse Jesus’s intentions and lead to an unloving and harmful action toward homosexuals, something Jesus would never do. Further, since Jesus is most concerned with showing love, so the pro-homosexual interpreter concludes, Jesus would encourage homosexual relationships between loving, committed people. Again, Rogers emphasizes this higher concern in Jesus which leads to viewing love, as he defines it, as the ultimate goal and good in all considerations: “Whether our interpretation of Scripture results in love for God and neighbor is a practical test of whether our interpretation is correct.”⁶⁹ While one might agree that there is need for interpretation to line up with the command to love God and neighbor, Rogers’ assumption is that doing so, in the case of monogamous homosexuals, allows only an interpretation of the Bible that would permit homosexual relationships. Anything else is unloving and must involve faulty interpretation of the biblical text.

What should one conclude regarding this pro-homosexual argument that appeals to Jesus’ ethic of love and grace as ultimately endorsing rather than condemning homosexual behavior? That the pro-homosexual argument is incorrect. Given that Jesus did not specifically address homosexuality, but did appeal to the Genesis account of Adam and Eve as the normative view of marriage in Matt. 19:4-6, and that Jesus did state his intention was fulfillment of even the smallest aspect of the law in Matt. 5:17-20, calling his followers to a righteousness that “exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees” as prerequisite to entering the kingdom, the burden of proof is on the pro-homosexual interpreters to demonstrate Jesus would teach anything contrary to the Old Testament understanding of homosexuality. As Gagnon states, “Jesus’ ‘silence’ regarding same-sex intercourse is comparable to his ‘silence’ about incest and bestiality.

69 Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, 61.

That is, Christ's silence on homosexuality is attributable to complete agreement with the sole position found in the Old Testament and early Judaism.⁷⁰ That Jesus taught love for God and neighbor as the summary of the law is not in question. How this teaching somehow abrogates the sexual teaching of the Old Testament is the question the pro-homosexual interpreters do not answer. Assertion does not an argument make.

Findings Based on Paul and Jesus

The pro-homosexual attempt to find in the teachings of Paul and Jesus an appeal to love and grace that supersedes any condemnation of homosexuality fails insofar as it makes an appeal to something that does not exist. There is no conflict between the explicit condemnations of homosexuality in Paul's teaching and an ethic of love and grace. There is no conflict between Jesus' fulfillment of the law, the New Testament's blanket condemnation of homosexuality, and an ethic of love and grace. Further, the presence of love and qualities similar to the fruits of the Spirit in individual homosexuals and in homosexual relationships does not justify or legitimate homosexuality, as the ends do not necessarily justify the means.

CONCLUSION

The research above has considered the pro-homosexual interpretations of Old and New Testament passages related to homosexuality, as well as the ethic of love and grace found in Paul and Jesus, critiquing the pro-homosexual conclusion that the Bible only condemns homosexual acts associated with pagan temple prostitution or other cultic elements. Rather than supporting the pro-homosexual conclusions, the Bible has

70 Via and Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible*, Kindle location 997.

been shown to reject all forms of homosexual behavior as inconsistent with, and a sinful rejection of, God's intention for human sexuality.

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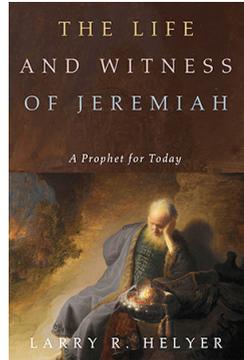
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Review Article Jeremiah: An Ancient Voice with a Relevant Message

Esteban Miranda



Larry R. Helyer *The Life and Witness of Jeremiah. A Prophet for Today*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019. pp. 126. \$20.00. ISBN 978-1-5326-1693-8.

KEYWORDS:

| Christian Nationalism | God's Providence |
| Prophecy | Kingdom | Israel | America |

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Larry R. Helyer is Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at Taylor University, in Indiana. He received his doctorate from Fuller Theological Seminary in 1979. Heyler has published several books including *Yesterday, Today, and Forever: The Continuing Relevance of the Old Testament*, *Exploring Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period: A Guide for New Testament Students*, and *Mountaintop Theology among other works*.

In *The Life and Witness of Jeremiah. A Prophet for Today*, Helyer invites the reader on a journey that makes the usual stops through the book of Jeremiah. These are listed in the table of contents: Profile of a Prophet, The Temple sermon, Jeremiah's Symbolic Actions, Jeremiah and the False Prophets, Jeremiah's complaint, and Jeremiah's Vision of the Future. However, the reader needs to understand that, unintentional or not, these chapter titles, as stops in the journey, are significantly misleading, and that is the beauty of this book.

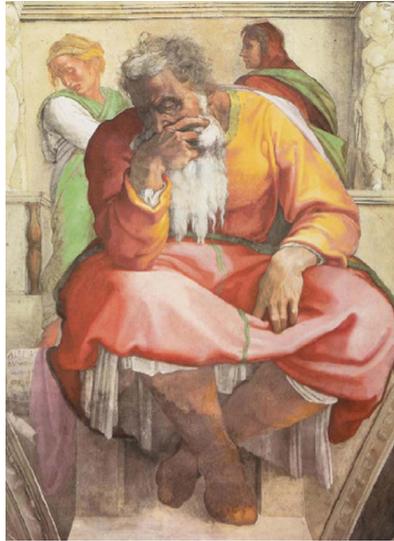
Helyer introduces his work by pointing out the one element that pervades its pages, namely Jeremiah's relevance for the current religious and sociopolitical reality in the United States. He writes, "Jeremiah's urgent appeal, however, if sincerely acted upon, offers an antidote to the ethical, moral, and spiritual malaise so endemic to our culture." (xi) Although not overtly proposed, *The Life and Witness of Jeremiah* is aimed at those who, physically and culturally, live in United States. The author is clear, however, about this book being conceived and written for readers seeking to understand the prophet's circumstances and reaction to them.

In Profile of a Prophet (chapter 1), Helyer challenges us to understand Jeremiah by looking beyond what we have learned through years of Sunday School and Sunday sermons, while closely reading the text. Jeremiah is not just another prophet supernaturally called by Yahweh to speak harshly to his people. Jeremiah is of priestly lineage and this sets the stage for his turbulent ministry against the ritualistic hypocrisy of the priestly family. The people Jeremiah wrestled with throughout his life knew him at somewhat at a personal level.

Jeremiah's call and commission is arranged by Yahweh's Preordination (compared to the Apostle Paul in his prenatal call, personal divine revelation, and preaching mission in Galatians 1:15-16), Jeremiah's Protest details how the prophet admits feeling completely inadequate for the job, Yahweh's Provision explains how God assures the prophet of divine guidance and strength, Yahweh's Proclamation is one of judgement and destruction, but also of comfort and restoration, and Yahweh's

Program details how Jeremiah's work would develop effectively. (3-6). A brief historical context is also provided by describing the *national* (emphasis mine) situation under kings Josiah, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah, ending with the prophet's possible exile and death in Egypt.

Especial attention is given to Jeremiah's temple sermon (chapter 2). He explains the purpose of this chapter, "1) to understand why Jeremiah's message elicited such anger, and 2) to discuss its theological significance for our day." (19). The importance of this sermon is understood by the fact that it is narrated twice (Jeremiah 7 and 26), however, the second time, Helyer points out, focuses on the audience reaction. Although we do not know the sermon's occasion, Helyer proposes that it was during a time of introspection and self-examination (whether during a time of pilgrimage or a publicly-announced fast) that Jeremiah found the opportunity to initiate a call to repentance after Israel's failure to keep the Sinai covenant (21). The author explains, "His main point is unmistakable: the



Top : 'Jeremiah' from *The Sistine Chapel ceiling (Volta della Cappella Sistina)*, Michelangelo Buonarroti 1508-1512

Bottom : Horace Vernet, 'Jeremiah on the ruins of Jerusalem,' (1844)

actions and deeds of the audience are irreconcilable with the meaning of the temple as the dwelling place of the ‘Lord of hosts, the God of Israel.’” (23) The audience’s extreme reaction to such poignant message (“You must die!” Jeremiah 26:11) leads the reader to Jesus’ anger, in the temple’s courtyard, expressed by tossing tables and casting out the moneychangers (Mark 11:7) while alluding to Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. Jesus’ actions provoked the religious leaders to look “for a way to kill him.” (Mark 11:8) (30).

Carefully finding the significance of this event for the reality of the United States today. Helyer says, “Just because ‘In God We Trust’ is printed in our currency and stamped on our coins does not confirm our status as a new covenant people of God.” (32) However, he follows that with a statement that somewhat may be understood as supporting what he pushes against; “God’s providence rules the world, and in his providence, God has singularly blessed this nation. For this we give thanks. Nevertheless, we have experienced his stern judgement for injustice and oppression.” (35) He explains that Christian nationalism, as he would later label it, finds its roots in “Puritan interpretation of America as the new covenant people of God.” (34) Embracing such interpretation Christian America has fallen into a flawed theological construct that has led to a “subtle fusion of the kingdom of God and the United States of America. God and country have become indivisible and inseparable.” (35) Being a true American is being a true Christian, therefore, anything that challenges or jeopardizes Christian values endangers American identity.

By following this thought process Christian America found in Donald Trump an opportunity to regain favor with the Lord. The slogan “Make America Great Again” was heard by American evangelicals as “Make America Christian Again.” Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, stood for everything that had eroded Christian/American values. (36) Helyer admits that he may have touched a “raw nerve” among fellow evangelicals (38) through this chapter but makes no apologies.

The description of Jeremiah’s symbolic actions, in chapter 3, seeks

to go beyond the usual description paired with the biblical narrative. The author explains that prophetic symbolic actions could be placed in two categories: "spontaneous and planned." Jeremiah, Helyer explains, "ensures that his grim message, appalling to his listeners, remains fixed in their consciousness." (41). These sign-acts are listed as follows: The Linen Belt: Airing Out Dirty Laundry, which exposes Judah's moral and spiritual condition leading to its ruin and shame (44); Jeremiah's Celibacy: A Preview of Tragedy serves, not so much as a warning but as a show-and-tell of what is to come. His withdrawal from normal social life serves as picture of the consequences of disloyalty to God. (46); The Potter and the Clay aims at how "Yahweh appeals to Israel (the clay) to repent and reform their ways. If Israel repents, God will reshape the destiny awaiting them." (48); Wearing a Yoke is described with careful detail as the most dramatic of Jeremiah's sign-acts, describing the future bondage of the people of God (50); Finally, Buying a Field shows God's promise of restoration and blessing after destruction and ruin. (54)

Jeremiah's mission involved much more than delivering a message to the people of God, it exposed and rebuked the false prophets of his time (chapter 4) Helyer makes a significant point here, one which serves the overall argument of his book; "These prophets, whom Jeremiah does not hesitate to call 'false prophets,' emphasized patriotic nationalism and downplayed the ethical and moral demands of the Sinai covenant." (58) Jeremiah does not hesitate to indict these false prophets; this is described by dissecting Jeremiah 23. Context is also provided by the author to understand how and why the prophet is so sure in calling out those who claimed but did not speak on Yahweh's behalf. Helyer explains the tests for a true prophet provided in the book of Deuteronomy. The empirical test (Deuteronomy 18) which exposes a prophet claiming to speak for God and his prophecy not materializing, and the theological test (Deuteronomy 13) which exposes a false prophet by his/her very own proclamations to follow other gods. (63) Jeremiah's confrontation with Hananiah is described in this chapter as an example of the prophet's

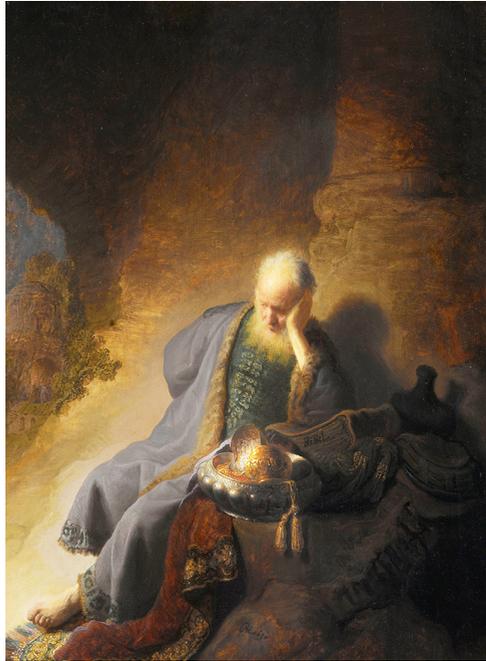
difficult task of exposing false prophecy and those who practiced it. Although Helyer's work is on the prophet Jeremiah's life and witness, he finds a way to balance each chapter with some reference to the New Testament. In this chapter he dedicates almost half of its contents on the New Testament and false prophecy.

In chapter 5 the author dives into Jeremiah's laments, where the prophet accuses God of unjust actions. The prophet finds, in the present work, two complaining companions, namely Jonah and Job, whom also raised accusations against what they saw as Yahweh's injustice (78). All of Jeremiah's five complaints are studied with careful detail throughout this chapter. However, Helyer's poignant description of their significance to American Christianity in the twenty-first century is worth noting. He complains (no pun intended) that the gospel message being proclaimed from many of our megachurches sugarcoats the core message to follow Jesus by taking up one's cross. He writes, "One does not hear much about the struggles of Jeremiah. It's almost as if to acknowledge such would be an admission of defeat." (97) He goes on to indict, just as Jeremiah did (I wonder if he realized it when writing this book), pastors and teachers for failing to communicate the "full counsel of God" which they were charged to proclaim. In a very deep and sensitive statement Helyer says, "The dark night of the soul, the bitter disappointments of life, the anger and resentment that flood into our hearts, and even the attempted (and, tragically, sometimes successful) suicides that occur among those who confess Jesus as Lord, represent a much more prevalent reality than most are willing to admit." (97)

The Life and Witness of Jeremiah's final chapter deals with Jeremiah's Vision of the Future. Here the focus is on the prophet's hopeful view of God's people's future. The author proposes two "horizons" in Jeremiah's view. On the one hand, there is the returning of the exiles to Judah, and on the other the "regathering" of Israel from the nations of the earth. (100). The leading themes of this hopeful side of the book of Jeremiah, according to Helyer, are 1) regathering of Israel to the ancestral homeland, 2) restoration

of national life, 3) renewal of spiritual life, and 4) reign of a Davidic king. He adds, "The central idea that actualizes these saving events is the institution of a new covenant. This is the single most important concept Jeremiah claims." (101) Nevertheless, he recognizes that as direct as the prophet's message is to his people, the people of God, the eschatological messages are very inclusive, at times involving Judah's neighbors. Although several of these oracles are oracles of judgement, others promise restoration of other nations such as Egypt and Ammon.

Helyer makes a bold and uncompromising statement with regards to the regathering of Israel to the ancestral land, he writes, "I hold that the OT prophecies about the regathering and return should be taken literally." (112) While not dismissing the New Testament spiritualizing of Old Testament passages and seeing the benefit of this, he asserts that doing so to the concept of exile, regathering, and return would be stretching the language "to the breaking point." However, he warns against siding with any particular agenda. He rejects the idea of taking sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict asserting that it is "not our calling." (115) Nevertheless, he argues that the regather and return of the people of God has already happened and we have been witnesses to the fulfillment of this prophecy.



Rembrandt van Rijn,
Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem,
c. 1630

On the other hand, he believes that the repentance and rebirth of God’s people remains unfulfilled. Helyer ends his book (chapter 7) with a brief warning against a spiritually bankrupt nationalism, pointing to Jeremiah’s powerful sermon. Helyer considers this condition a “clear and present danger. He writes “Christian nationalism threatens to sidetrack us from our primary task. Jeremiah believed what Jesus later proclaimed, ‘My kingdom is not of this world.’” (124)

It is hard to believe that such a short book (126 pages) would require such a lengthy review. The reality is that after the reader is done with it, he/she will understand why. Helyer is able to pack, very tightly, information that could very well occupy double the space he dedicates to it. However, the reader will not feel rushed or “cheated” since the author takes good care on presenting all the information in a concise and effective manner. Also, although the preface claims that the book is not aimed at the specialist but rather to “the reader who wants a better understanding of what made this prophet tick—and what ticked him off!” (xi), the reader needs to proceed with caution since the author, at times, has no other choice but to take a more technical approach to the study of the book of Jeremiah. However, he does so by transitioning from casual language to technical language and back to casual language almost effortlessly.

Finally, Helyer is very clear in his proposed argument which he carries through without losing track of it. His goal is to invite the reader on a journey that will uncover the relevance of Jeremiah’s message to twenty-first century United States of America. Very critical of Christian nationalism, Helyer positions Jeremiah’s sermons and prophetic actions opposite the U.S. by repeatedly warning against the common thread that runs through, from the time of the prophet’s ministry to our day. The ritualistic hypocrisy that warranted such harsh words from Yahweh through Jeremiah, peaks its head out in our own end of the chronological timeline. Today an alarming number of American evangelical churches suffer from the same watered-down, ear-pleasing message that the false prophets of Jeremiah’s time poison the people of Judah with. This message

becomes uncomfortably linked to the politics of our day when we realize that the job of the prophets was to provide advice and word from God in political matters.

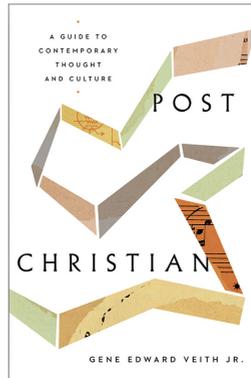
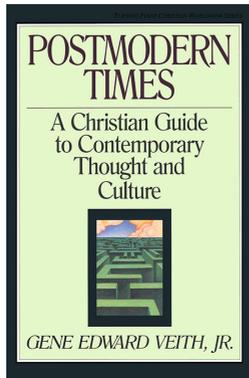
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Review Article

From Postmodern to Post-Christian: Gene Veith's Cultural-Ideological Analysis



William B. Bowes

Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Series edited by Marvin Olasky). Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994. pp 256. ISBN-10 0-89107-768-5

Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Post-Christian: A Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020. pp.320. ISBN-10 1-4335-6578-1

KEYWORDS:

| Postmodernism | Postsecularism | Post-Christian | Apologetics |
Worldview | Culture |

INTRODUCTION

The last several decades have brought seismic shifts in culture and ideology, particularly in the west. There are many contributors for this, from the advent of internet and computer-based technologies to increased globalization and political change. For Christians, comprehending the widescale moral and religious change that has accompanied these shifts can be overwhelming, as processing such shifts and respond in a manner faithful to historic orthodoxy has become increasingly complex. In both of these books analyzing recent cultural movements, Gene Veith seeks to thoughtfully inform and edify Christians who feel a sense of confusion and displacement in an era that has moved into and beyond being postmodern to what some have called “postsecular”, or what Veith coins as “Post-Christian”.

Veith is very much a student of culture and philosophy, being the author of nearly two dozen books in addition to scores of articles at the academic and popular level. Veith is also a popular and active blogger, has received numerous honorary doctorates, and has most recently served as dean, provost and professor of literature at Patrick Henry College in Purcellville, Virginia. His background in literature and established record as a writer only serves to benefit his readers, as he writes in a flowing and easy-to-follow manner, having both a penchant for colorful examples and a unique ability to break down complex ideas into an organized and understandable form.

Veith’s work is timely in its confrontation of a culture trying to redefine itself now that its previous foundations have been removed. Veith originally wrote the first book in this series in 1994, and his analysis was very much necessary then. However, given the vast epochal shifts that have taken place in the last twenty-six years in such areas as sexuality, gender, epistemology, language, technology, as well as in the political and religious climate, a sequel to the first book was certainly in order. Even so, this review will begin with an analysis of Veith’s 1994 book to set

the stage for his 2020 book, and in order to explain and examine Veith's overall contribution to the study and critique of the broader arc of cultural change.

2. AN ANALYSIS OF POSTMODERN CULTURE

Both books are divided into four parts, each examining a facet of culture along with its ideological assumptions, precedents, and implications, followed by a Christian response and evaluation at the end. In each book, the author follows a method of surveying the history and development of certain ideas or expressions, describing the consequences of those ideas now and in the future, and suggesting a Christian response. He defines his purpose in writing as being to encourage the church not to capitulate to the postmodern *Zeitgeist* but rather to "recover and apply its spiritual heritage" (24). He rightly notes from the introduction that it is always necessary for the church to confront its culture and exist "in tension with the world", not courting irrelevance by ignoring the culture or risking unfaithfulness by embracing it. Thus, Veith intends for his evaluation to point to the inadequacies and points of need within culture in order to display the sufficiency of the gospel as an alternative.

2.1 Postmodern Thought

Veith contends that in the postmodern system of thought, reason is replaced by emotion, morality is replaced by relativism, and reality itself becomes a social construct. Regarding relativism, by the mid-1990s postmodernism had rendered as prevailing orthodoxy an aversion to absolutes, paired with an emphasis on the tolerance of different (and even contradictory) beliefs. Following the thought of philosophers like Lyotard (many of which, in Veith's view, follow in the spirit of the Enlightenment), the claim that one belief system is true was recast as an attempt to gain power over others, and thus postmodernism proposed that all belief systems be relativized.

To Veith, one of the most significant aspects of postmodern thought is deconstructionism, which assumes that meaning is not objective or independent, but is created by and thus dependent upon a social group and its language. In this view, one's own thoughts and identity are considered purely social constructions, with freedom being construed as rebellion against the oppression of absolute structures or metanarratives. Language, in postmodern parlance, has no objective meaning but is a cultural creation that is part of its own system, formed by its own group.

Veith argues that this view renders language as not independently viable, meaningful, or applicable, and when applied to texts like the Bible, produces analytical paradigms like the "hermeneutics of suspicion". Such a paradigm, for the postmodern thinker, does not seek to find the meaning of a text but rather seeks to liberate the text from its biases, power-relationships and historical-cultural origin. In taking apart the meaning of a text in this way, it is deconstructed.

In his evaluation, Veith suggests that the danger of deconstructionism and relativism is that "when the objective realm is swallowed up by subjectivity, moral principles evaporate" (58). This becomes precarious for developing any reference point for inherent human rights or dignity, since human beings cannot be deemed valuable in an absolute sense, but rather because of what they contribute to the person determining their value. This "repudiation of humanness", says Veith, is also supported by the postmodern idea that human beings are not only not superior to any other species, but are actually a drain on the environment and are an ecological danger to other (ontologically equal) species. Therefore, Veith surmises, while modernism sought human control over nature, postmodernism "exalts nature at the expense of human beings" (74).

2.2 Postmodern Art

Art is included in the discussion of postmodernism because Veith sees it as a way of concretely expressing postmodern beliefs, "making clear the implications of their worldview and dramatizing what it means for human

life" (93). The arts (whether television, music or traditional artwork) are the major vehicle of expressing worldviews through culture, and he follows Francis Schaeffer in seeing postmodern art as reflecting a political rather than a moral or a philosophical aim. In contrast with modernist art, postmodernist art capitalizes on the experience and reception of the art by the audience, minimizing the intention or role of the artist. Television and movies also reflect a postmodern shift in that they tend to blur the lines between what is real and what is not real, communicating an underlying ideological flexibility surrounding meaning and appearance.

Veith's discussion of these tendencies is balanced in that it is not entirely polemic; he is sure to applaud the advances, creativity and positive aspects of postmodern expressions where they arise (whether in ideas or architecture). When discussing the relationship of postmodernism to Christianity, he is sure to note the opportunities and possibilities for Christians in terms of how the gospel can be contextualized to the postmodern person. For example, he writes, "the postmodern age has room for Christianity in ways that modernism did not. Its openness to the past, its rejection of narrow rationalism, its insistence that art refers to meanings and contexts beyond itself – these insights are all useful to the recovery of a Christian worldview" (119).

2.3 Postmodern Society

Some of Veith's strongest language of critique and lament is reserved for this section, as he argues that postmodernism, in its abandonment of overarching cultural identity, has fragmented society "into contending and mutually unintelligible subcultures", creating a new form of subculture-oriented tribalism (144). This tribalism spills over into the political arena, which manifests in culture wars and widening polarization due to a focus on special interests rather than traditional systems. A reader can again see the relevance of Veith's insight even in 1994, as the past twenty-six years have confirmed that his warnings about these trends were apt.

In an interesting excursus on the political effects of postmodernism, Veith warns that

... nearly every assumption that gave rise to democracy is under attack, from the freedom of the individual to the existence of a transcendent God whose Law is above all cultures and who endows human beings with inalienable rights. Not only do postmodernist theories undermine the notion of a free, self-governing society; the practice of contemporary politics seems to be following their lead in moving governmental structures in a sinister, anti-democratic direction (157).

The “anti-democratic” part of postmodernism in his view is that it denies that individuals are free or can govern themselves. Political postmodernism is generally aligned with post-Marxism, and as a result is collectivistic and suggests that morality should be imposed by the state. This, to Veith, can lead to “the imposition of terror”, because a postmodern person cannot appeal to authority but instead must wage political battles to protect his or her preferences and oppose those with other preferences.

2.4 Postmodern Religion

In postmodernism, spirituality becomes increasingly aesthetic, with people attending gatherings or taking positions because of how it makes them feel. By the mid-1990s, Veith noted a rise in individualized, personal spirituality as over against organized or institutional practice. He noted that this appeared to coincide with a Christianity that had numbers but lacked substance. He contends that this spiritual limpness comes from believers who seem to want to be at peace with the culture and thus lack the staying power and spiritual commitment to be faithful to biblical standards. Part of the problem, he suggests, is a preference for “therapeutic approaches to well-being” over truth, and an embrace of consumerism for the sake of numbers. Thus, he argues that for the church to thrive in the postmodern era, it must emphasize doctrine, stand on the reality of truth and morality, and not capitulate to cultural relevance.

3. AN ANALYSIS OF POST-CHRISTIAN CULTURE

In a sense, Veith wrote *Postmodern Times* at a turning point in western culture, following the fall of the Soviet Union, amidst the rise of relativistic epistemologies and during the internet's infancy. *Post-Christian* then follows it in view of the disorienting morning-after experience of more than two and a half decades of the postmodern experiment, as that which was nascent in postmodern thought has been taken to its furthest conclusions. Just as *Postmodern Times* recognized that western culture was at a crucial turning point in the mid-1990s, so also *Post-Christian* considers today's culture to be a crucial turning point.

In the introductory portion of the book, Veith muses about the transformation of postmodernism since 1994, explaining how it "did not end...(but) rather, it hardened, becoming more political and less playful, more dogmatic and less tolerant" (15). While he had previously discussed the deconstruction of texts, this has now become the deconstruction of marriage, the body, gender, and identity. Pluralism has transformed into identity politics, relativism into speech codes, and humanism into transhumanism. In this way, postmodernism has "mutated" into what Veith calls "exaggerations" of prior postmodern thought or else something entirely different. Therefore, he labels this era as "Post-Christian" or "what we are left with when we try to abandon the Christian worldview" (18).

3.1 A Post-Christian View of Reality

All of culture in a post-Christian world, Veith says, is reduced to groups exercising power over other groups, with "every dimension of life (being) politicized and critiqued as part of a system of oppression" (19). While this was present in a lesser form in postmodern thought, it has expanded in a post-Christian system, with oppression being construed not economically but rather as related to social and cultural groups based on their will to power. Intersectionality unites oppressed and disparate groups against

their oppressors, and the post-Christian concept of the power relationships that propagate these notions of oppression is as localized in systems and structures. Thus, this era is one of an increasing disconnect between a person (or group) and other people (or groups).

A post-Christian understanding of the relationship of people to nature casts individuals as lonely selves in a subjectively defined and ultimately meaningless world. He argues that regardless of how much is known about a phenomenon, science is heralded as “an overarching, all-encompassing authority”, bifurcating reality into the purely naturalistic or material and the subjective and moral. Beyond this, the post-Christian era has continued in the footsteps of the postmodern environmentalist contention that humans are a menace to nature.

In the years since his previous book, perhaps the most significant cultural shift has been in technological advancement. Veith notes that technology has amplified the human creative ability and has provided opportunities for people to attempt to transcend or extend themselves, creating ways to compensate for their limitations. While there are many benefits to recent technological advances, Veith notes that these advances also continue in the postmodern trend of blurring the line between the real and the construct. In a world where technology provides endless opportunities for alternative virtual realities, a person can create different identities online where unacceptable behavior becomes allowable and anonymous.

A post-Christian view of meaning is also distinct from the postmodern view, in that the assumption today is that the will is what gives meaning. This often manifests in the idea that it is morally wrong for someone to oppose another person fulfilling his or her desires, or that it is a virtue for a person to behave in a certain way simply because he or she wills to do so. Such a perspective further cements the postmodern virtue of individualism which has so come to define western thought, and places individual preference above the needs of the larger community.

In contrast with *Postmodern Times*, Veith’s tone in *Post-Christian* is

less optimistic related to the place of Christianity within culture. Even so, he hints that at the end of the post-Christian era there may indeed be some sort of “cultural rebirth”, in which many of the more negative aspects of modern culture correct themselves. He argues that the beginnings of this can be seen in things like the #metoo movement, which functioned as a corrective against the sexual permissiveness of the previous decades. However, rather than seeing this era as providing a unique opportunity for Christian witness (as he did in the previous book), he simply advocates for persistence, writing, “Christians should be undaunted at the post-Christian onslaughts, knowing that such onslaughts are ultimately doomed, in the world as well as in the next” (21).

3.2 A Post-Christian View of the Body

To Veith, the “characteristic infirmity of our time” is the “repudiation of the creation and creatureliness”, which separates sex from its meaning related to the family. Beyond this, through technology, sex is separated from the body itself. He argues that the unique aspect of the post-Christian era is an obsession with sex, suggesting that the desire for sexual liberty and the fear that religion threatens this liberty is “a major cause of contemporary secularism” (99). Given the explosion of internet pornography, Veith’s contention is that sexual pleasure has become the culture’s *summum bonum*. In his view, changes in conceptions of sex which began with the advent of birth control and abortion have steadily led to more unprecedented results, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage.

He argues that today’s cultural mindset sees people as distinct from their bodies, which in turn has led to transgenderism and a growing incredulity toward the idea of a gender binary. Transgenderism, in Veith’s words, is “the most extreme example of today’s repudiation of the body”, carrying with it an ideology that has immense influence among the general public (128). While in a previous generation, feminism had sought to separate sex from social or gender roles, now it is believed that

one's body actually makes no difference. In light of this, Veith declares that "the self is standing over and against the physical world", and what matters most is how a person identifies (129).

Since language shapes thought, these shifts have resulted in the creation of new pronouns based on such identities, and legislation has tended to follow these ideas in influencing societal systems. As a result, Veith calls for a return to a view of the goodness of creation in light of the unsustainability of the current sexual revolution. He proposes a "counterrevolution", in which the church returns to a high view of the body and marriage as a counter to the primary association of such things with self-fulfillment.

3.3 Post-Christian Society

Veith suggests that one of today's most significant societal problems is an increased polarization with and separation from others, causing people not to interact with those of different views and thereby cutting off normal community. While in 1994 Veith may have assumed that the legacy of postmodernism would be cultural relativism, now he argues that its legacy is "undoing communities and the sense of community. This dissolution was reinforced and enabled by a technological revolution that has refashioned society, while cutting it off further from reality" (172). The result of this, in his words, is that "our culture has become an anticulture", and since "there are no longer any truths or moral obligations of religious awareness to bind us together", each person withdraws into his or her own "unreality" (189).

In such a milieu, all aspects of everyday life are politicized, with what were opinions in the postmodern era hardening into contending ideologies. This is one of the most interesting shifts from postmodernism, namely that the previously-held "easygoing relativism" has been supplanted by a sense that there are actually right and wrong beliefs, and these are enforced not by an appeal to moral absolutes but by an appeal to social norms which are enforced through social shaming, ostracism and the

intimidation of cancel-culture.

Over time, today's culture has seen this infiltrate every area of life and lead to the bitterness of identity politics and tribalism. Veith's response to such trends is to advocate that Christians should and must engage with the culture and help rebuild society, but simultaneously note that aligning too closely with political leaders can hinder and not help this effort. While he notes that some Christians have argued for a withdrawal from cultural involvement, he contends that faithfulness to calling requires that we remain in, speak into, contribute to and exist as a transformative influence within society.

3.4 Post-Christian Religion

In a more developed form than that of *Postmodern Times*, Veith begins his analysis of religion with a detailed discussion of the rise of the "nones", or those who identify as having "no religious affiliation", or who are "spiritual but not religious". In his evaluation of this spirituality, he notes that it is not typically equivalent to atheism or agnosticism, but more often involves a conglomeration of various syncretistic beliefs which align to various degrees with eastern spirituality. As he suggested in the previous book, the "nones" based their beliefs not on reason or revelation but likes and dislikes, and their inward, internalized spirituality is one that makes no moral demands but is about personal fulfillment.

Veith observes that hidden within the worldly, materialistic façade of post-Christian ideologies is an "interior spirituality" that represents a cry for more than these ideologies have to offer. His exhortation to the church in the post-Christian era is that it must be "desecularized" and loosed from the vice-grip of its capitulation to culture, and he hypothesizes that this loosing will come about from the influences of churches outside the west. "The postsecular church", Veith writes,

... will need to recover not just its spirituality but also its materiality. Though the postsecular public will be most interested in personal, inner spirituality...they are also in need of a Christianity that can

take them outside of themselves. They need to recover objective reality, that is, God's creation. And they need to recover what it means to belong to a community, that is, Christ's church (300).

For the church to be a voice in the post-Christian era, Veith writes, it will need a robust theology of the body that undoes the harm caused by the sexual revolution, a robust sense of community that can reach today's isolated individuals, and a robust conviction in the truth of scripture which offers an alternative understanding of meaning and purpose as well as a deep and profound alternative to the spurious spiritualities common in our time.

4. MERITS AND SHORTCOMINGS OF VEITH'S APPROACH TO CULTURAL CRITICISM

Veith's keen analysis makes his work commendable. The best contribution of both books individually is in their way of breaking cultural movements down into parts and pinpointing the precursors, assumptions and implications of each part, so that the whole makes more sense in light of the parts. The best contribution of both books together is to show the arc of progression that postmodernism has taken over the course of a few decades, which is exceptionally helpful for examining the trends and tendencies of cultural change more confidently in the future.

Given the fact that many Christians are misinformed, uninformed or unaware of how to respond to today's culture, what Veith has provided is a useful tool for developing a basis from which to understand, dialogue, and build bridges with people today. While some of his stronger language of warning about aspects of technology or politics may put off some readers, it seems he is simply being consistent with the rapid pace of our times, assuming the current state of things will continue in the same direction. For example, what was discussed about sexuality or transhumanism in *Post-Christian* would have been inconceivable in *Postmodern Times*.

In terms of the shortcomings of his work, Veith occasionally comes to

seemingly excessive conclusions, sometimes more supported by his own assumptions than the clear indications of the evidence. This could have been avoided with more robust source-work and citations, and in some places Veith's citations were woefully scant, weakening his conclusions and making some claims sound like sweeping generalizations. For example, in his discussion of advances in genetic engineering, he warns of the perils of applying genetic alteration to humans, and prognosticates that it could conceivably lead to the government being involved in the reproduction process and the family becoming "technologically obsolete" (124). However, he does not include references to people or initiatives genuinely trying to make that happen.

While Veith exposes assumptions and diagnoses problems, the reader is left asking how to respond practically and concretely, and this may be the book's biggest drawback. Readers need a feasible solution as a goal; they need clear next steps envisioning a what a Christian presence in or resistance to post-Christian culture will look like. He emphasizes a commitment to desecularization and strong doctrine within the church, stronger marriages and closer communities, a persistence in the face of ideological-spiritual resistance rather than capitulation or societal withdrawal, and faithfulness within vocations, but the daily particulars of applying this remain obscure.

Lastly, the book is limited in terms of the audience that would benefit from reading it. First, it is only concerned with western culture and focuses on western movements, and as a result his conclusions are only applicable in certain contexts. Therefore, readers who would find the book most helpful would be Christians living in western nations. The book struck a balance between readability and technicality, and although Veith discusses some esoteric aspects of philosophical trends and movements, these are clarified so that a reader without a background or understanding of philosophy would still be able to understand. Even so, it is best suited for a reader familiar with basic philosophy and apologetics.

5. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHRISTIANITY TO CULTURE

G.K. Chesterton is quoted as saying, “whenever you remove any fence, always pause long enough to ask why it was put there in the first place”.¹ If the postmodern era was one that dismissed the fences that had long defined the way people saw the world, the post-Christian era is a fenceless one. And the church will need to adapt to its environment.

Such adaptation will require not only an awareness and understanding of the currents underlying our cultural moment but also an optimism and confidence that the Christian message has a profoundly timeless and practically helpful response to these times. This optimism and confidence clings to the unique promise of the gospel to offer life in the midst of death, community in a time of isolation, healing in a time of brokenness, meaning in a world of triviality and a true Savior among a long list of enticing but insufficient alternatives.

To begin to see Christianity in this light and to stand firmly as the church when it feels that the foundations are being removed, one must first understand the culture. Understanding the culture is a necessary prerequisite of engaging with the culture and having an active role in being a different voice and a different way, not absconding but living faithfully and intentionally among those who are different. Veith would agree with Francis Schaeffer that “the fundamental tragedy of today is that men and women are being fundamentally affected” by the changes in culture around them, “yet they have never even analyzed the drift”.² Despite its limitations, Veith’s meticulous and insightful work is a helpful step toward developing a more aware church, able to understand its changing environment.

1 As quoted in Ravi Zacharias, *Recapture the Wonder*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005: 36.

2 Schaeffer, Francis. *The God Who Is There*. InterVarsity Press, 2020: 21.

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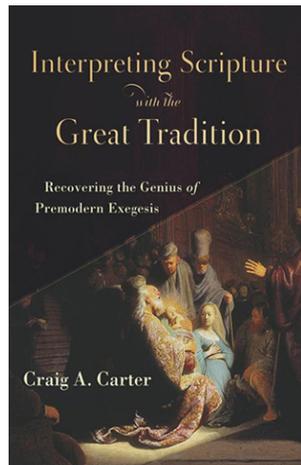
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Book Reviews

Craig A. Carter.
*Interpreting Scripture with the
Great Tradition:
Recovering the Genius of
Premodern Exegesis*
Grand Rapids, MI:
Baker Academic, 2018. 279 pages.
\$27.99. ISBN: 9780801098727.

Reviewed by, Emily Buck, Fuller
Theological Seminary.

Craig A. Carter, professor of theology at Tyndale University College and Seminary, offers a stinging rebuke of Enlightenment historical-critical biblical interpretation and calls on Evangelicals “to recover the approach to biblical exegesis that characterized the Great Tradition” (xii). Carter’s book, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis*, names the problem of the departure from Christian Platonism, and shows how views of metaphysics, exegesis, and doctrine affect one another. The modern



abandonment of Christian Platonism leads to an abandonment of the underlying philosophy that formed Nicene theology.

The book opens by posing a problem in contemporary interpretation: How should the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 be interpreted? Carter here shows the chasm between the academy and the church, and argues that the church is more in keeping with Great Tradition teaching, while the academy has drifted from this teaching. After showing the problem of modern interpretation in chapter one, the bulk of Carter's book is divided into two major parts.

In the first part, Carter critiques modern biblical interpretation by examining classical views of Scripture and God, metaphysics and Christian Platonism, and the Enlightenment rejection of Christian Platonism, ending with a call to retrieve Christian Platonism. In his second chapter, Carter relies on John Webster and Hans Boersma as he argues for a sacramental nature of the Scriptures in keeping with the Great Tradition, writing: "On the issue of the sacramental nature of Scripture, there is no disagreement between the early church fathers and Protestant Reformers" (36). In chapter three, Carter draws extensively from Augustine to explain and defend Christian Platonism. He also carefully distinguishes Platonism from the *Christian* Platonism that the modernists rejected. In chapter four, Carter lays out his argument that the narrative of the history of biblical interpretation needs to be told more accurately to highlight the "skill and spiritual insight" of this history. (93) The "modern myth of progress," which divides history into "precritical" and "critical" needs to be rejected. (93-94) Carter, explaining the consensus of interpreting Scripture in the Great Tradition, draws on and critiques Brevard Childs's views of the common features of Christian exegesis from the patristic era to the twentieth century.

Particularly helpful in this first half is Carter's explanation of how the metaphysics of Christian Platonism formed the theology of the Great Tradition, and its relationship to biblical interpretation. Key to Carter's argument is that historical criticism does *not* enhance biblical interpretation.

While there are positive elements in modern interpretations, much of what is good is not new; it is a continuation of the past. Carter bluntly writes: “as a general rule, *what was good in the Enlightenment was not new, and what was not new was not good*” (126, emphasis original). For example, textual criticism, history, and reason were not developed by the Enlightenment—these elements appear in the writings of Origen, Augustine, and Aquinas.

In the second part Carter shows practically what we should learn from the church fathers in interpreting Scripture. Chapter five argues that reading the Bible is a spiritual practice and that the Bible’s unity is centered on Christ, giving examples from the writings of Ambrose of Milan, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus. Chapter six deals with the literal sense and views of history. Carter helpfully explains how the term *literal* can be misused, giving as an example Genesis 1 and the creation account. In this section Carter shows Calvin drawing on Augustine to argue that spiritual meaning comes from the Bible’s literal sense. Carter further shows the tradition of deriving meaning from the plain sense—which includes Christological interpretation—from interpreters ranging from Origen to Calvin. Last, in chapter seven, Carter shows how the fathers interpreted the Old Testament christologically. Carter uses Augustine’s interpretation of the Psalms to show examples of Christological exegesis. He also defines prosopological exegesis, and points out problems with the discussions surrounding typology.

In his conclusion chapter, Carter takes up the problem posed in his introduction—how to interpret the identity of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. He dialogues with Evangelical scholars D.A. Carson and Kevin Vanhoozer, and then examines interpretations of this passage by three contemporary interpreters. Carter’s example of a sermon on Isaiah 53 is helpful in seeing what retrieval of Great Tradition hermeneutics might look like today. After closing the book with reflections on Evangelicals working together, Carter includes a brief appendix on criteria for limiting the spiritual sense in interpretation.

While a strength of Carter’s writing is his blunt and to-the-point

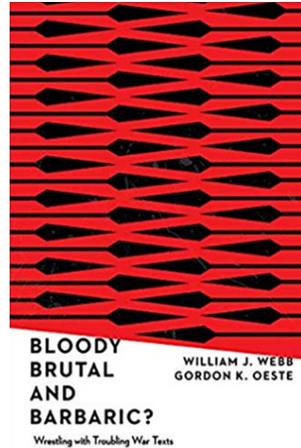
nature of his argumentation—leaving no question as to his position—this bluntness and directness takes a polemical tone that may not be helpful to all readers. For example, writing that “new atheists” are “hotheads,” (110) and that poststructuralists “are emotivists with a persecution complex,” (125) might either amuse or bother some readers, but would hardly be persuasive for a reader who has sympathies for the concerns of the new atheists or poststructuralists. In this way, Carter limits his audience. His writing is geared toward Evangelicals who value the Great Tradition—this is a book for insiders.

Carter accomplished his goal well. He insightfully not only shows the strengths of the Great Tradition, he carefully explains the importance of philosophical underpinnings of Nicene Theology. Instead of merely arguing against the historical critical method, he shows how the philosophy behind it is not in keeping with Christian tradition, and also explains well how the Enlightenment shift changed both the methods and results of biblical interpretation.

Readers unacquainted with nuances of the historical critical method, Enlightenment philosophy, and contemporary dialogues of interpretation may find parts of the book difficult, but will also benefit from Carter’s clear and direct writing. This book is recommended to students and scholars interested in the methodology and philosophy of biblical interpretation. Carter’s work also aids greatly in putting language to naming the problems associated with aspects of Enlightenment thinking on the church.

William J. Webb
and Gordon K. Oeste.
*Bloody, Brutal, and Barbaric?
Wrestling with Troubling War Texts*
Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity
Press, 2019. Paperback. Pp. 1-397.
\$40.49. ISBN 978-0-83085249-9.

Reviewed by, Stephen M. Vantassel,
King's Evangelical Divinity School



Christians throughout the ages have struggled with aligning the ethics of the Old Testament with the ethics of Christ and the New Testament. The events of 9-11 and criticisms of the New Atheists have renewed interest in the intersection of religion and violence (p.11). Put simply, “How are Christians to understand the Old Testament’s teaching on war?” Though recognizing various nuanced ways to understand the violence in the Old Testament (p. 20), they essentially fall around two main poles, anti-traditional and traditional. The antitraditional view says the war texts exemplify dark or evil ethics. Webb and Oeste, adjunct biblical studies professors at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto, Ontario, contend that the antitraditional view, though recognizing the moral tension, fails because its criticisms are anachronistic and ignore important cultural realities (p.37). In contrast, the traditional view holds that even though holy war required the killing of non-combatants and combatants alike, there is no real moral problem because a righteous God commanded the killing. Webb and Oeste argue that the traditional view is not adequate because it does not seem just. Since the traditional view dominates contemporary Christian thinking, the authors spend their time explaining why the traditional view is inadequate and should be

replaced by their incremental ethical view.

Webb and Oeste argue that the traditional view employs four main theses: 1. God's commands are just, 2. God had a good purpose for holy war, 3. Canaanites were not innocent, and 4. Holy war foreshadowed God's eschatological judgement. As strong as these arguments may appear, Webb and Oeste point out that they fall short under closer scrutiny. They suggest that thesis #1 does not take into consideration the highest ethical principle. Thesis #2 is inadequate because it employs an ends-justifies-the-means-ethic which no Christian could support. Thesis #3, though true, neglects the effect on infants and others unable to participate in the sins of the adults. Lastly, thesis #4 fails because God's judgement in the eschaton will be pure and just and inflicted by the word of Christ's mouth.

At this point, readers may suspect that the old pacifist trope will be repeated in this text. But they would be wrong. (It should be noted that the authors are about as close to being pure pacifists as possible, but nevertheless could not bring themselves to reject the legitimate role of some violence (pp. 318ff). Webb and Oeste use the concept of sacred space to explain how the traditional view justifies holy war in the Old Testament. The authors detail how God's judgement/commands can be understood in terms of maintaining the integrity of sacred space through numerous examples of how evil (what the authors designate as literary Canaanites, i.e. those opposed to God's law) is driven out of sacred areas as an expression of God's judgement. If God judges literary Canaanites (e.g. Adam and Eve) by evicting them from the Garden (sacred space) then how much more should the actual Canaanites (i.e. flesh and blood Canaanites) be driven out of the promised land? In the end, the authors conclude the traditional view answers the question, "Why did God command Israel to drive out the Canaanites?" Answer, to maintain the integrity of sacred space.

If the traditional view only answers Israel's moral question, how do we answer contemporary moral questions? It is here the authors spend the majority of the book's space. In brief, they argue that God employed an

incremental ethic in his dealings and commands with Israel. In effect, God is/was not a blood thirsty warrior God but a weeping warrior showing Israel a higher way.

The authors argue their case by inviting readers to read the bible “redemptively.” This means that the reader must not simply read the bible from his/her contemporary moral perspective but rather to read the bible from the perspective of Israel’s historical and cultural setting. In this way, the reader can appreciate both the horror of the war texts but also to appreciate how God sought to establish rules to soften and improve those actions and thereby place them on a higher ethical trajectory. The authors demonstrate this by engaging the topic of war rape before discussing mortal combat. War rape is the umbrella term for the actions of soldiers during and after a battle of requiring non-consensual sexual acts of captured women. I was initially dismayed by the authors’ use of war rape to describe the Israelites actions portrayed in Numbers 31 and Deuteronomy 21. But their detailed discussion of the texts and, albeit limited, recognition of the practices’ redemptive qualities softened my concern.

The authors then proceed to address the graphic language of God’s command for Israel to exterminate the Canaanites. They argue that war language in the ancient world tended toward being hyperbolic. So, it should come as no surprise that God likewise used language that was also hyperbolic. In other words, God did not’ command Israel to kill all the Canaanites. He commanded Israel to create a monotheistic land (sacred space, p. 249ff). Whether that occurred by killing or eviction does not matter (p.252). The goal is what mattered not the specific means. The authors’ arguments in these chapters are careful and rather convincing. I was particularly thankful that their arguments did not require the existence of contradictory sources or a denial of inerrancy. I was surprised, however, that the authors did not pay significant attention to the idea of evangelism and conversion. For example, is it possible that God wanted Israel to march around Jericho for seven days to prove that a relief force

would not come (i.e. Jericho was abandoned by their fellow pagans) and to provide Jericho the opportunity to surrender (i.e. convert) like Rahab did?

The authors move readers through the bible showing how God was a reluctant warrior and how the process of divine revelation continued to show God's ultimate bias toward redemption and forgiveness. God's forgiveness bias is fully and most graphically revealed in the person and work of Christ on the cross. The authors explicitly thank Moltmann's theology of the cross as helping them fully appreciate the God who loves is the God who suffers. But what about the violence in the book of Revelation? The authors simply contend that the violence is metaphorical. They do not believe the language used by the Apostle John should be understood in any literal way. For example, they contend that warriors hold swords in their hand, but Jesus' sword is in his mouth, suggesting that Christ's speech is doing the fighting. In addition, God's judgement is pure and just, as He perfectly rights the wrongs, which is categorically different than the war in the Old Testament.

The authors have written a compelling work. I think they have correctly situated holy war within the sacred space theological theme and rightly noted the hyperbolic nature of Old Testament war language. Similarly, they properly demonstrated that God's support for war was qualitatively different than that of Israel's neighbors. I commend the authors for bringing proper historical context to this highly emotional issue.

As important as their arguments are, however, I think the authors' case has a few remaining problems that fall into two categories. The first category is exegetical/hermeneutical. God may be a reluctant warrior, but God's actions in the flood and the Egyptian plagues reveals He is not afraid to kill the "innocent" with the guilty. So, the ethical challenge surrounding holy war is not eliminated, only softened. Likewise, how should Deuteronomy 4 be understood? There God argues that the laws He has given Israel are good and righteous. {As a side note, it is ironic that in verse 34, God takes responsibility for using war against the Egyptians.} If God's laws are good and righteous how does this compare with the authors'

incremental thesis claim? Are the New Testament teachings more just? Or is it possible that the authors' have confused interpersonal morality with the morality that governs states?

The next exegetical/hermeneutical problem considers the place of the Jewish people in the eschaton. Certainly, the authors are correct that there is much in Revelation that is figurative and universal. However, can Old Testament promises of the restoration of the Jewish people (ethnically) in their land (geographically) be completely spiritualized and universalized? Would the prophets even have understood or conceived of that future? I do not think so. Plus, allowing gentiles to be adopted as children of Abraham, allows for universalization without ignoring the concrete promise of God to His chosen people. Finally, the authors correctly observe that Israel's war-making ability was divinely restricted (e.g. warnings on chariots). However, I do not believe that these restrictions were pacifistic in nature designed to reduce Israel's fighting or imply God's reluctance to fight. Rather the restrictions were intended to toughen Israel's fighting spirit (cf. Judges 3:2) and to encourage Israel's reliance on God (i.e. faith). If we accept that there was a distinction between Israel's holy wars and wars outside the land of Israel, then I would concur that the restrictions would have reduced Israel's war making ability beyond the land. But I am not aware of anyone who thinks that God intended Israel to be a regional superpower on par with Assyria or Egypt.

The second category is pragmatic. Despite the authors' acknowledgement that the ethical problem of these war texts has not been eliminated, I suggest the solution only begs another criticism. For instance, even if Israel only needed to evict the Canaanites, how does this absolve Israel (or God) from the charge of ethnic cleansing? If not ethnic cleansing, could not the argument be cultural cleansing? It seems to me that the authors only forced the Bible's critics to recharacterize their moral complaint. Which leads me to suggest, that perhaps the problem is not the ethics of scripture, but the heart of the critic which will use any reason to reject any overreaching authority beyond themselves. Please understand

that the authors have helped diminish the ethical problem, but I think in the end the problem lies with our rebellious desire to judge God rather than to be judged by Him.

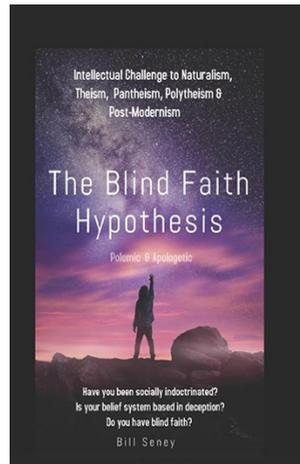
Despite these challenges, I commend the reading of this book. Instructors teaching on ethical issues should consider including this book as required reading. The book is thoroughly student friendly as demonstrated by its straightforward organization, step by step argument, and helpful summaries. Students will also appreciate the authors' clear writing style that avoids the hyper arcane and tedious writing contained in too many academic works. Finally, the authors provide additional information in appendices available as a free download from the IVP website.

Bill Seney.

*The Blind Faith Hypothesis:
Intellectual Challenge to
Naturalism, Theism, Pantheism,
Polytheism, and Post-Modernism*
Author. 2019. 978-1-0917-7849-8.

Reviewed by, Kenneth R. Marple,
Director/Founder of C2U Ministries

Bill Seney is an avid researcher of theology, philosophy, and the sciences. Seney works in the business and marketing field, where he specializes in performance management and solution development. Seney has married his professional experience with his research interests which culminates in this large research project, *The Blind Faith Hypothesis*.



The Blind Faith Hypothesis is broken up into two major sections. The first deals with the structuring and evaluation of each worldview

(naturalism, polytheism, etc.); the second reveals Seney's apologetics endeavor.

In section one, Seney explores the factors that comprise a worldview and some of the cultural "invasions" (influences) that have occurred and affect the development of a worldview. He discusses how each worldview attempts to construct a coherent view of man, reality, truth, and morality, noting that each of these rubrics must also be logically consistent, empirically adequate, and experientially relevant. Individually these worldviews are evaluated upon this basic structuring. A great deal of the text is dedicated to naturalism and how it has been ingrained into the societal psyche. Seney suggests that naturalism is a view based on blind faith and social indoctrination. The author argues that under scrutiny, naturalism fails in each of the above categories. Emphasis is placed on genetic coding and the probabilities associated with these systems becoming functional without a mind to ensure the transfer of information into the system. By the end, Seney points out how naturalism fails to prove the origin of this information. His thesis, suggesting that most beliefs are held because of social indoctrination or authority, seems to have merit. Based on the arguments he presents and the inability of naturalism to find grounding, it seems the only way to believe that naturalism is true is a negative disposition towards the idea of God or the social order tells you to believe it.

In section two, Seney lays out a formal defense of Christian theism. This section spans roughly 80 pages and covers material that could be categorized as biblical apologetics, with the primary focus centering on defending biblical concepts, teachings, and the quality of the text (i.e., reliability). Seney investigates and defends the existence of God through the Design Hypothesis and biblical archeology. There are two chapters dedicated to biblical prophecy concerning the first and second coming of Christ. Also included is an evaluation of scientific statements made throughout the Bible. For example, the Bible asserts that the Earth is circular, as opposed to flat (Isa 40:22), and modern-day science confirms

this. There is material from many fields but deals heavily with probability within the design hypothesis and the likelihood of observable things arising by chance.

Seney has fully documented the book, but unfortunately included is a spattering of unreliable sources that could be replaced with better material. The text also suffers from several minor grammatical issues that affect the overall readability of the book (e.g., p. 34: sources). The text is reminiscent of Ravi Zacharias' work, in the sense of how he describes the structure of a worldview. Nevertheless, much of Seney's material is a rehashing of biological and philosophical criticisms already established but stated in different terms and from a different perspective. An interesting exception occurs in the section on naturalism. Here, Seney employs arguments against naturalism not encountered by this reviewer. For example, Seney argues that according to Solar nebula theory, Mercury's core should be frozen solid and that its core should not be composed of sulfur. Yet Mercury lacks a frozen core and its core is composed of sulfur. The reason this is interesting is that all naturalistic theories suggest that, based on the placement of Mercury within the solar system and how certain elements come about, Mercury should not have the characteristics it has.

Information revealed in the section dealing with naturalism, and the scientific/ philosophical data can be used against the other "isms;" Seney does exactly that with strong and convincing exposition against the other worldviews. He shows that pantheism or polytheism fails when considering information known outside of the cultural setting where these beliefs exist. For example, eastern religions hold that all of the physical world is an illusion or not ultimate reality; however, this does not find its grounding in either reason or observation. Worldviews that do not take into account what we can see and what we can know from experience should not be considered a valid pursuit truth.

Seney states a few times the aphorism made popular by Carl Sagan that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." Though the sentiment, in this case, is understood, it does seem to be a false statement.

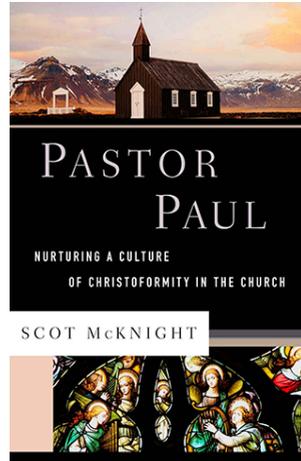
The idea if a claim is extraordinary (i.e., something that is very rare or remarkable), one needs overwhelming evidence is a misunderstanding of probability theory. One must consider how likely the evidence would be if the event claimed were not to happen. If an event has happened, what would be the probability of the evidence supporting this claim to be present if the event did not happen? If the probability of the evidence being present is sufficiently low, then there is no problem. If the probability is sufficiently high, that the evidence would be present without the event, then there is a problem. There should be care taken when borrowing a statement that is traditionally used against the stance you are defending and attempting to turn it around. As it is often said, these sorts of things can be a two-edged sword and can cut both ways.

The Christian apologetics section focuses on the non-standard arguments traditionally associated with this discipline (e.g., Cosmological argument). Seney takes a look at the biblical evidence. He shows the Bible to be a reliable source of information, that scientific observations made in the Bible are accurate, biblical prophecy is, has been, and is being fulfilled, and the resurrection happened based on observing the historical evidence. The material presented in the apologetics section is biblio-centric. Seney's case for Christian theism is one that can be used across different spectrums of belief. A major benefit is Seney's attempt, successfully, to remain biblically accurate and relevant. This approach is effective and if taken seriously, does provide a solid case for not only the Bible and its reliability but also for the Christian worldview.

This book is nearly four hundred pages and covers a wide array of information but is focused primarily on naturalism. This book seems to be geared towards a lay, high school to college-educated audience and makes a good introductory perusal of polemics and apologetics. Though there are some editorial concerns, those can be remedied with a subsequent edition and do not affect the message of the text in any major sense, though readability is affected.

Scot McKnight.
*Pastor Paul: Nurturing a Culture of
Christoformity in the Church*
Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press,
2019.
pp. xvii, 253, \$21.99. ISBN: 978-1-
58743-426-6.

Reviewed by, Aaron Perry, Associate
Professor of Pastoral Theology and
Leadership, Wesley Seminary at Indiana
Wesleyan University, Marion, IN.



Scot McKnight, Julius R. Mantey Professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary, has spent his professional life training people for a job he has not had. Though he is not a pastor and is clear that he does not pretend to tell pastors how to do their jobs, McKnight has written an exegetically grounded and critically formed set of theological reflections on seven themes related to pastoral practice from the life and writings of the apostle Paul. Bookending these seven chapters is an introduction to McKnight's pastoral theology and a summary reflection—a benediction, really—followed by almost 50 pages of endnotes and significant bibliography for the research-oriented reader. The result is a well-ordered, readable work of pastoral theology.

For McKnight, spiritual formation is the starting point of pastoral work (p. 1), yet this work ranges over and through many other duties, including administration, preaching, counseling, teaching, and biblical study. All summed up, “The pastor is called to nurture a culture of Christoformity,” which includes conforming to the life, death, resurrection-ascension of Jesus (p. 4). The pastor is not simply the one nurturing this transformation in the local body, but one in whom this transformation is nurtured. God's

mission is as big as the cosmos and as personal as one person in community. Spiritual formation, if it is to be *through* the pastor, must be *in* the pastor. With this foundation in place, McKnight offers seven theological themes for the pastor's nurturing work if the church is to be Christoform: the church should be marked by friendship, family relationships, generosity, storytelling, witness, world subversion, and wisdom—a practical and critical knowledge that discerns and directs right action and posture in the world.

Because of the nature of this journal, I want to focus the bulk of this review on political aspects and implications, offering an affirmation, a request, and a critique. First, the affirmation: McKnight rightly affirms the local church as a place to learn ethics through *imitation*: members of the church community may learn behavior to be repeated outside the church. For example, McKnight grounds Paul's value for helping the poor in the story of Israel (p. 100) and subsequently affirms that the local church can provide the communal structure where people learn to value and aid the poor outside the local church. In this way, McKnight is critical of the homogenous unit principle: there should be diversity within the church in order to learn relationships and care for those outside by caring for those inside. The local church is thereby a web of friendships and new family relationships for those in need of support, stability, and protection (p. 76).

Second, a request: I would like to hear more reflection on the political imagination. Under his chapter on the church being a community of storytellers, McKnight critiques the story of statism, "the theory that the state ought to rule and the state can solve our problems" which he claims is "America's dominant narrative today" (p. 105). McKnight quickly softens the statement by saying that other narratives, including racism, capitalism, or elitism could be the dominant one. It is unclear if by "dominant narrative" McKnight means a narrative that one must lay over the events of the United States in order to understand these events or if statism or the other options mentioned *may* be dominant narratives that form the imaginations of individuals or communities in the USA. In

other words, is statism a necessary narrative hermeneutic or one of several narratives that form political imaginations? Further reflection would also be welcome to discuss whether it is possible for the contemporary church's story to be formed with the state as *part* of its political imagination without succumbing to statism as a dominant narrative. No doubt Christians do not want to fall prey to idolatry, so is it possible to live and conceive of life in the West outside a form of life that involves the nation-state? McKnight's warning to avoid statism is not entirely clear. He writes, "By elevating humans on the towers of honors and adoration, modern statism questions the lordship of Jesus every time one or another version of it becomes our ruling narrative" (p. 112). What exactly does this elevation look like? Does a form of life that uses interstate highways, pays taxes, votes in local and federal elections, advocates for policy and party fall prey to statism? At what point?

Finally, a critique. McKnight could expand his consideration of the pastor's available *influence*. McKnight critiques the pastor who acts as a platform presenter, writing, "Mastering the proper gesture, knowing where the camera is for the projected image of the pastor on the screen behind them, knowing the right color to wear, focusing on the most emotive story rather than the Word of God—these are all at work in the celebrity pastor who understands Sunday morning as a performance. That's not pastoring, and it is decidedly non-Christoformity" (p. 28). With the exception of emotive story over the Word of God, the other elements may be tools for a pastor to use appropriately for influence. Just as McKnight uses writing structure and technique for rhetorical effect to convince the reader, so may gestures be part of preaching and preaching to congregations of various sizes a kind of performance. (In fact, McKnight mentions how Phoebe may have been responsible to perform Paul's letter to the Romans upon delivering it [p. 51]). The work of the pastor may be faithfully discharged, deploying various tools for influence, provided they do not betray the faith.

Ultimately, *Pastor Paul* is exactly what it wants to be—a readable,

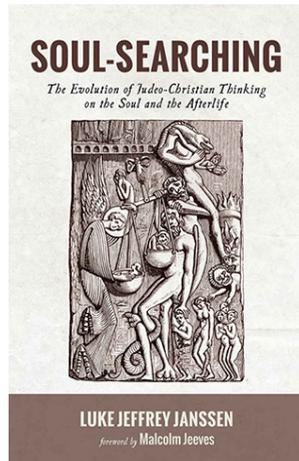
theological reflection on pastoral themes from the Apostle Paul's life and writings by a New Testament scholar who loves the church and teaches emerging and established pastors. Readers who are familiar with McKnight will find *Pastor Paul* a valuable intersection of previous thought developed throughout his career, including McKnight's work on atonement, ecclesiology, and Paul's letter to Philemon.

The book has several of potential uses. It may serve as an optional text in a course in pastoral theology or pastoral ministry, or as a book for discussion among pastors in an online or in-person forum. Finally, individual pastors, especially those in solo situations, may consider the book a personal reorientation for ministry as they explore their own pastoral call and theology. As these solo leaders attempt to identify with their people, pray for their people, suffer with their people, and celebrate with their people (p. 15)—and do so while going through the same things in their own lives—McKnight's text introduces them to a first century pastor who remains a pastoral companion in the 21st century.

Luke Jeffrey Janssen,
*Soul-Searching: The Evolution of
Judeo-Christian Thinking
on the Soul and the Afterlife.*
Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock, 2019,
Softcover, pp. 242, \$31. ISBN: 978-
1-5326-7981-0.

Reviewed by, Viktor J. Tóth, PhD
candidate, Fuller Theological
Seminary

The writer of this book is a professor of medicine at McMaster University (Hamilton, Ontario), with a PhD in medical science (physiology and pharmacology) and a master's degree in theological studies. He is the



author of several book and articles, and a regular blogger in the field of theology and science, which makes him one of the rare experts of this field. There are only a few contributors in the current debate on human nature who are in the position to do full justice to the highest scholarship both in science and religion. His newest book, *Soul-Searching*, is a real treat for anybody who is interested in this field.

His goal in the book is not to give a final authoritative answer to the question of the nature of the soul and afterlife, but to demonstrate “how our understanding of both has been changed tremendously over the past several thousand years” (p. xiii). He is not about to dispel the traditional Christian notions about God, spirit, heaven, or any other traditional elements of theology, but to find a more scientifically relevant and complete understanding of the human-Divine relationship. He also hopes to encourage more dialog about these notions concerning the issues presented in his book.

When it comes to biblical inspiration, Janssen expresses a view in which the authors of the sacred texts were immersed, and thus influenced by, the ancient Near Eastern *zeitgeist*. His proposal is that the Hebrew writers might have been formulating their own religious ideas by “*simply responding to and adapting*” (p. 22—emphasis original) them through the lenses of ancient Near Eastern ideologies. He treats this idea as a possible means of divine revelation. Thus, he surveys the ancient sacred texts and the way they might have influenced the Hebrew sacred texts. He assesses, siding with the majority of contemporary scholars, that the Old Testament assumed a holistic view of human existence. When it comes to the New Testament, and its host Greek culture, he writes that “it is an oversimplification to say that ‘the Greeks’ saw humans as a duality of an immaterial soul and a material body: there was instead a range of views regarding precisely how material the soul was” (p. 48). He concludes that the biblical view of human ontology is not monolithic, or even “decidedly monistic in nature” (p. 84). He agrees that it depicts human being as

psychosomatic unities while the body functions, but it also teaches that something immaterial which conveying the very personhood of the individual person exists after bodily death.

In the rest of the book Janssens tries to find solutions to this perceived tension in the Biblical texts. One possible way is to “soften dualism” by understanding the material and immaterial parts of human nature not entirely distinct (i.e., substance dualism), but as a single functioning whole (p. 88). However, he considers these attempts ending up merely softening the term “substance’ or producing a fairly dualistic form of monism” (p. 89). He finds the idea of mind and personality as emergent properties of the brain a much more appealing alternative. In a fairly technical (but still accessible to lay readers) section of the book, he proposes other options. He introduces Attention Schema Theory, Integrated Information Theory, Global Workplace Theory, and Multiple Drafts models which focus on the cognitive strategies employed by the brain to produce consciousness. He gives special attention to the model proposed by Roger Penrose and Stuart Hameroff, which propose that “a structural molecule in our neurons—tubulin—might account for consciousness itself” (p. 96). The author also gives a detailed overview of Non-reductive Physicalism.

The topic of chapter four is afterlife. Here Janssen follows a similar structure than in the previous chapters. He surveys prehistoric and ancient Near Eastern material followed by Old and New Testament exegesis to argue for a progressive evolution of such concepts as afterlife, Sheol, Heaven, and resurrection. In the final chapter he recuperates his main notions framing them in the wider science-religion dialog.

I found Janssen’s concept of organizing theological anthropology into four classes appealing. In his schema “Anthropology 1.0” covers the first four thousand years of ancient Near Eastern ideology, followed by “Anthropology 2.0” which is roughly placed from the fifth century BCE to the fifth century CE having an unequivocally dualistic perspective. “Anthropology 3.0” is referring to the past several centuries of “scientific age” in which solely naturalistic explanations were developed about

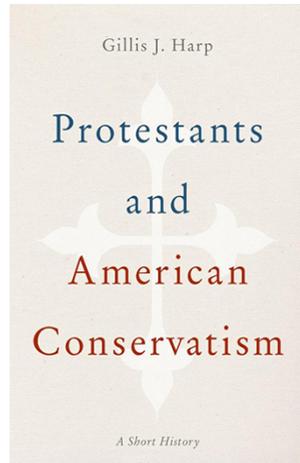
human nature. He hopes that we are on the verge of seeing “Anthropology 4.0” in which the science-religion dialog can help us to find more relevant interpretations of the Bible and classical doctrines.

I judge that the most troubling issue from an Evangelical perspective in the book is Janssens’s idea of “Progressive Revelation.” However, he provides a comprehensive argument for his notion. My second critique is more from a scholarly perspective. He obviously rejects the Platonist/Cartesian soul-body dualism, but I find that his arguments often only replace this notion with another kind, that is brain-body dualism. Furthermore, using tubulins as an explanation for consciousness seems too reductionist for me. Its connection to quantum theories (p. 101) only leads to another concern, namely substituting one “mysterious” concept (i.e., the soul) to another (i.e., quantum mechanics). When it comes to the notion of bodily resurrection, his support for James H. Charlesworth and N. T. Wright is also leads to a dualist position of human nature (especially when using the software/hardware metaphor on pp. 181–82). Finally, it is not clear if he agrees with the physicalist explanations of spirituality, but if he does, it puts him outside of the scope of traditional Evangelical theology.

Overall, I found the book a first-rate attempt to move theological anthropology toward the right direction. I judge that it might be a helpful resource both for clergy and lay persons who want to be more informed about some of the most contemporary issues in this particular field.

Giles J. Harp.
*Protestants and American
Conservatism: A Short History*
New York, NY: Oxford University
Press, 2019.

Reviewed by,
Brendon Michael Norton,
New England Bible College, South
Portland, ME



There is no doubt that there is a close association between Evangelicals and political Conservatism in contemporary America. Given the depth and public nature of this alliance, scholars have attempted to trace its roots, primarily to the Religious Right in the 1980's or slightly further back into the post-war evangelical resurgence. Rather than starting with recent history, Gillis J. Harp's book traces this relationship between Protestantism and Conservatism from colonial times to the present. Through this survey he demonstrates how both groups have been modified by their relationship and, despite a theology which emphasized an organic conception of society and an emphasis on duties rather than rights, Protestants since the early twentieth century have shirked the hard work of political theology, instead opting for an uncritical acceptance of modern libertarian principles.

Before delving into the history between the two groups, Harp offers the central questions his work is attempting to address. The first is how Protestantism has shaped conservative thought, secondly what elements of both ideologies have encouraged their alliance, and finally how both

have been changed over time by their interactions, focusing particularly on manner in which conservatism became unmoored from explicitly Christian presuppositions and reasoning (3). After explaining the aims of his work, Harp goes in to define terms.

In speaking of Protestantism, Harp limits his definition to White Evangelicalism as defined by Bebbington's quadrilateral of conversionism, crucicentrism, biblicism, and activism (4). What becomes somewhat problematic with this stated focus on evangelicals is that a number of the figures and movements which Harp refers to are not entirely evangelical. The Anglican Loyalists in chapter 2 do not fit the evangelical definition set forth and figures such as John Adams do not fit the definition of Christian orthodoxy. While not a major issue with the book, as the focus tends to be on Evangelicals, nonetheless some readers may find themselves confused as to what some groups or individuals actually believed.

As for conservatism, Harp acknowledges the nebulous nature of the term 'conservatism' and seeks to anchor it in several impulse and ideas derived from the work of historian Jerry Z. Mueller. These impulses/ideas include, a view of human nature as imperfect, a rejection of social contract theory, protection of established institutions, social utility of religion, importance of family and cultural norms, and suspicion of economic trends which may harm traditional values (6). Having established these parameters, Harp moves onto the task at hand of chronicling these two movements' relationship.

The first chapter deals primarily with the views of New England Puritans. The Puritans adopted a medieval conception of society in which Church and State were linked and society was naturally stratified. Puritans held that the differing abilities and ranks among people, far from being restrictive or oppressive, was conducive to social unity as each member/bloc of society was forced to rely upon the others (19). In this arrangement, the state was not simply the guarantor of minimalist protections, but an active agent seeking the common good of the society (20). In this regard, the community had a claim to its individual members to sacrifice and

cooperate with one another for the good of the whole, with government existing to facilitate and enforce these standards.

Chapter 2 delves into the conservative reaction to the American Revolution by both Loyalists and Patriots. In general, the Loyalist clergy sought to defend the aforementioned Christian view of society, opposing the Enlightenment liberalism of the revolutionaries, and the disruption of order on solidly theological grounds. Even while disagreeing on the substance of independence, Patriots also embraced an organic notion of society more in line with the Puritans than the Enlightenment. What stands out in this chapter is that those who perhaps were most consistent in their application of theological and biblical ideas to the notion of independence were the Loyalists. If this is the case, one wonders how contemporary Protestant conservatives should evaluate their views of America as a nation with an explicitly Christian founding.

In the chapters 3-4, Harp examines the beliefs of Christian conservatives in the Antebellum and Civil War period. In summary, these conservatives, like their forbearers disavowed social contractualism, emphasized duties over rights, and a strong alliance between Church and State in the promotion of virtue and a Christian society. The Civil War would bring these views into great popularity, but ultimately they would begin to recede. This recession is chronicled in chapter four. Here Harp shows how, with the rapid industrialization of America, traditional Christian conservatism gave way to a secular libertarianism which stressed unrestricted capitalism as the great engine of societal advance. Christian traditionalists were opposed to the individualism and cut-throat nature of corporate competition. Unfortunately this group was marginalized as society secularized and some of their critiques began to be associated with Progressivism.

Chapter 5-7 bring us into more familiar territory in the history of Evangelicals and Conservatism. Tracing out this history from WWI to the present, Harp emphasizes the unreflective embrace of libertarian principles and arguments by evangelicals. With the ascendancy of this

libertarian brand of conservatism, coupled with sidelining of traditional Christian thought, conservatism was essentially secularized. The joining of evangelicals to this brand of conservatism was due to the influence of pietistic individualism on the movement and a guilt-by-association rejection of any policies or ideas associated with the theological liberalism of the Social Gospel. This created the perfect storm which caused evangelicals to wholeheartedly embrace the libertarianism of the newly secularized conservatism (137-38).

Harp concludes his book by reiterating that until the 1900's Christians had built their conservatism on theological grounds. He concludes that modern evangelicals are less distinctively Christian in their political outlook and less conservative vis a vis their forbearer's traditionalism (231)

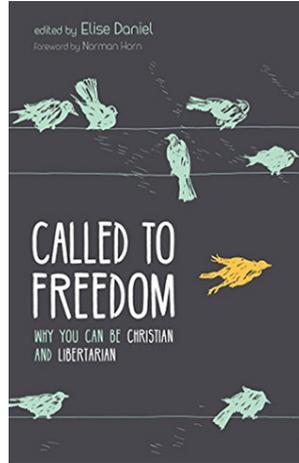
The greatest practical import of this book is its demonstration of the lack of theological and biblical reasoning that went into the new libertarian consensus of Evangelicalism. Rather than grappling with the difficult issues such as the nature of society, the morality of capitalism, etc. Evangelicals simply baptized the secular views of libertarian conservatives. Given that this is the case, that question arises, what reasons exist for Christians to adopt these views. Particularly given the historical and biblical arguments against rampant individualism and the deleterious effects of unfettered markets, libertarianism begins to seem less and less like a legitimate option for Christians.

The anti-Lockean elements of conservative theologians may offer a historical precedent for some recent developments in American conservatism. With the publication of Patrick J. Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed*, a number of intellectuals, many explicitly Christian, have begun to question the central ideas of liberalism such as social contract theory and the deleterious effects transnational capitalism can have on social mores and local institutions. Perhaps these "National Conservatives" will be able to re-source the past to offer a theologically informed and historically grounded alternative to the *de facto* libertarianism of most American evangelicals.

Harp's chronicle of Protestantism and Conservatism could equally be viewed as the history of the decline of American political theology. In light of current political trends within Evangelicalism it is hoped this history will provoke greater reflection upon our political loyalties and what, if any, theological rationale they have.

Elise Daniels (ed.).
*Called to Freedom:
Why You Can be Christian and
Libertarian*
Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017.

Reviewed by, Jonathan Ashbach
Lecturer in Politics at Baylor
University, in Waco TX



Every so often it is worth going back and dealing with something that was not adequately addressed at the proper time. A review of Elise Daniel's *Called To Freedom*, published in 2017, is just such an exercise. It is no secret that American politics has become increasingly partisan in recent years, and Daniel's book gives a voice to the faction within Evangelicalism that is becoming increasingly drawn into the libertarian camp.

Libertarianism comes in two broad varieties, perhaps best denominated principled and non-principled libertarianism. Non-principled libertarians like Nikolai Wenzel¹ and F.A. Hayek² are not deficient in political-moral

- 1 Nikolai G. Wenzel, "What is Libertarianism," in Wenzel and Nathan W. Schlueter, *Selfish Libertarians and Socialist Conservatives: The Foundations of the Libertarian-Conservative Debate* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 45-80.
- 2 F.A. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism*, ed. W.W. Bartley III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

theory. Rather, their theory may be relatively uncontroversial, and their libertarianism consists more of an empirical perception that smaller government works better at achieving common goals. Principled libertarians like Murray Rothbard³ and Ayn Rand,⁴ by contrast, embrace a libertarian or even anarchistic ethic that is fundamentally distinct from other political perspectives and is rooted in individual autonomy rigorously worked out across the political board.

Christianity has little to say about non-principled libertarianism, per se. Prudential questions about the best means to political ends should be decided by experience. Traditional Christian political thought is radically opposed, however, to principled libertarianism. From Augustine's meditations on the use of punishment to drive the wicked to moral reflection⁵ to Aquinas' argument that law habituates individuals to goodness,⁶ Christians have typically believed that government possesses authority to seek human spiritual and material wellbeing, not merely to protect a minimalist conceptualization of negative bodily and property rights. This judgment has endured among American evangelicals, somewhat unreflectingly, to the present day.

Daniel and her co-authors are aware of the popular presumption that Christianity and principled libertarianism are incompatible, but they seek to convince readers that this judgment is unfounded. They also believe this may be the ideal moment to make that case. Introducing the book, Daniel and Norman Horn cite a recent groundswell of popular interest in libertarian ideas driven by the expansion of the state over the past century, a groundswell that Daniel chronicles from personal experience.

3 Murray N. Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

4 Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 50th anniversary edition (New York: Signet, 1985).

5 Augustine, "Letter 93" and "Letter 153," in Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, eds., *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 119-33.

6 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 95, Article 1.

The ensuing chapters make the case for libertarianism (generally defined, when articulated, as the principled variety) from a number of angles. In chapter 1, Jacqueline Isaacs argues that an understanding of salvation history cultivates appreciation for free will, which she conflates with political liberty. In chapter 3, Taylor Barkley distinguishes libertarianism from libertinism. One can adhere to traditional moral standards without seeking to coerce others to adhere to them. In chapter 4, Leah Hughey explains how Christian theology and empirical data both encourage an optimism that should lead people to value productive labor and trust information provided by the price system over the organizational capacity of any individual mind. In concluding the book, Philip Luca recalls the destructiveness of communism and Daniel calls on libertarians to embrace the responsibilities as well as the opportunities that freedom bestows.

The moral heart of the book, however, is chapter 2, which deserves separate treatment. Jason Hughey notes the intrinsically violent nature of governance and lays out the principled libertarian position that this is justified only in defense of person or property from physical aggression. Hughey notes several biblical themes, including the human depravity of rulers and the supremacy of divine authority, that he argues provide support for libertarianism. These themes are generally uncontroversial and worth heeding, though “My kingdom is not of this world” is proof-texted as libertarian-sounding with little regard for the statement’s contextual significance. Next, Hughey tries to make the Bible safe for libertarianism by reinterpreting several passages that fit poorly with libertarian ideals. For example, “Render unto Caesar” is glossed as an esoteric indication that nothing belongs to Caesar, and “There is no authority except from God” is presented as prudential advice relevant only to the letter’s original recipients. Hughey’s fundamental argument, however, seeks to derive libertarianism from an orthodox affirmation of human corruption.

Unfortunately, the book fails to come to grips with many of the most fundamental difficulties with principled libertarianism noted

by more traditional Christian thinkers. The authors speak in reverent tones about “liberty,” but they tend to work that out in economic terms with which Christians across the political spectrum can easily sympathize. None significantly addresses the critique that the liberty principled libertarianism uniquely defends is specifically the liberty to do what is wrong, which is indefensible from a moral perspective if not necessarily from a prudential one. Further, none addresses the critique that libertarianism is predicated on a false concept of harm as merely material. As Nathan Schlueter notes, principled libertarianism permits the infliction of harm to reputation, social order, and others’ and one’s own moral wellbeing. “Libertarianism essentially denies that both self-regarding harms and moral harms exist...Accordingly, it promotes a legal regime in which some individuals are legally entitled to harm others in noncoercive ways,” which is unjust.⁷ Nor do any of the authors display awareness of the educative function that law plays, and the implications this has for its capacity to promote human flourishing by inculcating virtue.

Nevertheless, the book highlights some opportunities for productive engagement between libertarian Christians and those of more traditional political persuasion. First, the authors emphasize the underappreciated power of the free market. Horn is probably right that theologically aware Christians are frequently drawn toward increased governmental intervention in part by economic ignorance. The economic literacy that the authors demonstrate is a wakeup call that should not be ignored.

Second, the manner in which various authors describe the attractiveness of libertarianism indicates a misconception that one must impose all morality if one imposes any, and thus an opportunity for productive clarification. Barkley speaks of the ideal of “[t]otal eradication” of prostitution as demanding universal government surveillance (94). Daniels and other authors join Hughey in presuming that emphasis on human imperfection

7 Nathan Schlueter, “What’s Wrong With Libertarianism,” in Schlueter and Wenzel, *Selfish Libertarians*, 114-17.

implies libertarianism. This suggests that the underlying motivation driving many Christians towards radicalization into principled libertarianism is actually a praiseworthy caution about the abuse of authority and a lack of awareness of the heavily prudential assumptions of traditional Christian political thought. More traditional Christian political thinkers need to do a better job at explaining that emphasis, perhaps most enduringly expressed by Aquinas:⁸ Any virtue may be legislated. Not every virtue should be legislated. Political decisions must always be determined prudentially—taking human weakness into account—to promote the real flourishing of the community.

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove
*Revolution of Values:
Reclaiming Public Faith for the
Common Good*

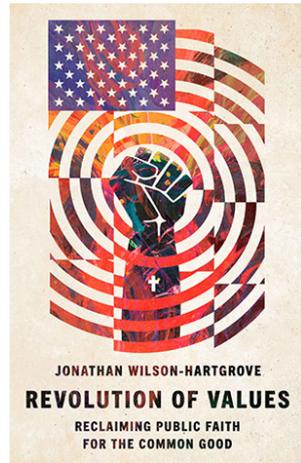
Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity
Press, 2019. 201 pages.

\$22.00. ISBN: 978-0-8308-4593-4.

Reviewed by, Rev. Timothy R.
Scheuers, Ph.D. (c.).

Fuller Theological Seminary

In the aftermath of Donald Trump's unconventional albeit successful campaign for President in 2016, a considerable sector of the American public began to suffer a type of cognitive dissonance. The shock stemmed not only from the fact that the polls had so inaccurately predicted the will of the general public, but also that the Republican candidate, a man infamous for his dubious business ethics, extra-marital affairs, and suspected racism, was able to garner



a coalition of evangelical support. How could Christians known for backing moral candidates have approved of such an immoral man? Was Trump's election a sign of deeper moral problems within the so-called religious Right?

Author, preacher, and moral activist, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, believes the answer is a disturbing “yes.” His book, *Revolution of Values: Reclaiming Public Faith for the Common Good*, attempts to expose “the genocidal white supremacy and patriarchy that have compromised Christian witness throughout US history” (7). It argues that American evangelicals who look to the Bible for moral authority have in fact thoroughly misread it, wielding it instead as a weapon against the common values of equality and generosity in society. In conjunction with his critique of American evangelicalism, Wilson-Hartgrove demands that a moral revolution take place in the church that “resists the false gods of Christian nationalism and rediscovers a biblical vision for justice and mercy in our common life”—a vision closely aligned with a recent and fast-growing wing of Liberal-Progressivism (8).

The author's *modus operandi* is to use personal stories to prove that a white supremacist agenda undergirds evangelical public policy. His book reads like a series of vignettes, each recounting the experience of someone harmed by the “policy agenda of politicians who promised to stand for ‘biblical’ or traditional values” (6). With each successive chapter, the author compiles human stories as evidence to expose the immorality of immigration and voter I.D. laws, the capitalist system, women's rights views, as well as America's stance on climate change and war. Wilson-Hartgrove calls on Christians to re-read the Scriptures through the eyes of these oppressed minorities and to “reclaim the moral narrative” from white evangelicals who have coopted the Scriptures for their own nationalist goals (168).

The most convincing aspect of Wilson-Hartgrove's book is his critique of the latent ‘Americanism’ that persists among many evangelicals. As the author illustrates, certain popular teachers routinely

misinterpret the Scriptures, fostering notions of a civil religion that intertwines the fortunes of America with the destiny of the universal church. These religious leaders champion a form of American freewill individualism that leads many evangelicals—well-intentioned or not—to downplay the communal plights and responsibilities of American society. Embracing American civil religion stems, in no small part, from bad theology.

Despite his valid critique of some disturbing trends in American evangelicalism, however, Wilson-Hartgrove's overall appeal for a revolution of values through the embracement of Liberal-Progressive values is not convincing.

A brief caveat before offering a critical assessment of the work: Reviewing a book of this kind poses a unique challenge, mainly because the author makes no effort to mask which side of the political spectrum he occupies. This lack of dispassionate objectivity nearly forces a reviewer to engage in lengthy debate where his own political worldview might differ. Because I have no intention of using this review as a platform for publicizing or defending my own political viewpoint, I will focus my comments on assessing the author's form of argument and analysis.

A noticeable problem with Wilson-Hartgrove's approach to the issues he treats is his lack of objective assessment. He relies almost exclusively on recent sources that align with his own political and moral sensibilities; his bibliography is riddled with web articles from mainstream, politically Left-leaning news outlets. Lacking from the book is a concerted effort to fairly evaluate the best representatives from the opposing side of the argument. The author portrays evangelical celebrities—those heavily criticized for their views, even within broader evangelical circles—as the most qualified representatives of Christian “conservatism,” although more biblical and trusted voices are readily available for consultation (e.g., Timothy Keller, a *New York Times* Bestselling Author of “Generous Justice”). This lack of critical

exchange with qualified representatives of both sides of the political and theological divide is very unsatisfying.

The author's overall case is also hindered by his failure to offer any compelling evidence that the religious Right actually occupies the commanding heights of moral influence in America today. It is difficult to accept his claims that the nation's current moral woes are mostly the result of evangelicals misreading Scripture, especially given the obvious proliferation of Liberal-Progressive thought within the most influential sectors of our society, including public schools and universities, the mainstream media, as well as the healthcare, sports, and entertainment industries. The author also leaves many moral stones untouched, betraying selective moral outrage in the matters he treats. For example, while his chapter on women's rights excoriates Christian insurance companies for refusing to cover ethically-dubious birth control options, he nevertheless urges readers to support many pro-choice organizations for their work in poor communities. Meanwhile, he fails to acknowledge the abject horrors of abortion clinics, including the murderous deceptions of Planned Parenthood, to be a significant moral blot on our nation's history. This kind of selective outrage pervades the book, hurting the author's moral credibility.

Finally, despite his legitimate critique of some evangelicals' misreading of Scripture, Wilson-Hartgrove engages in a fair amount of convenient eisegesis himself. The author routinely calls us to read the Bible anew through the experiences of the individuals about whom he writes. As a result, the Apostle Paul's inspired words about spiritual bondage prior to faith in Gal. 3:23, for example, are made to refer to the physical bondage of border walls and unjust immigration laws. Creative interpretations like this—which make no account of the analogy of Scripture—fill the entire book. One is left to wonder why we should accept Wilson-Hartgrove's interpretation over that of his opponents, since he is equally willing to play fast and loose with the plain teaching of Scripture.

In summary, although Wilson-Hartgrove tackles important moral and political issues that should be of concern to evangelical Christians today, the author's strawman portrayals, selective moral outrage, and innovative exegesis significantly weaken the book's main argument. His call for a complete moral revolution that embraces a Liberal-Progressive worldview falls short of rallying the troops.

John S. Dickerson.
*Jesus Skeptic:
A Journalist Explores
the Credibility and Impact of
Christianity*

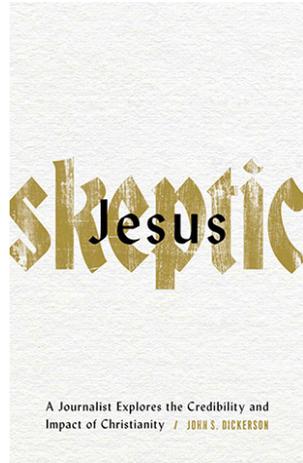
Ada, MI: Baker Books, 2019. 978-
0-8010-7808-8. 294 pp.

Reviewed by, Kenneth R. Marple,
Director/ Founder of C2U Ministries

John S. Dickerson is an award-winning journalist, a millennial, and a bestselling author. His writing has appeared in the New York Times and USA Today, among others. Tom Brokaw (NBC News) and Christiane Amanpour (CNN and ABC News) have named him the winner of the Livingston Award for Young Journalists. Now convinced that Jesus launched the greatest movement for social good. John has given his life to join the cause. Today he serves as lead pastor at Connection Pointe Christian Church in Indianapolis.

Christian apologetics has had the primary focus of "proving" the existence of God to her interlocutors. This text, however, takes up the apologetic task using a pragmatic approach, namely how God shapes culture.

Specifically, *Jesus Skeptic* centers on the fecundity of Christianity or, more concretely, Jesus. The three main sections of the book are 1. The



introduction, 2. The case and evidence, and 3. The apologetic section. Like any good prose, the author uses the first section to grab the reader's attention by connecting through his skeptical attitude. This skeptical disposition is one that is common in the modern era.

Section two of the book takes the reader through all the positive contributions followers of Jesus have made in the world. Dickerson uses "primary evidence" to showcase how those who proclaimed to follow Jesus have changed the world for the better. He contends there is little evidence to suggest that without these historical Christians, the world would have acquired these benefits. For example, Christians have improved society by founding hospitals, launching the scientific revolution, establishing public education, advocating for fair and equal treatment of all peoples, and generally influencing society with the teachings of Jesus. As a matter of fact, westerners often forget the Christian worldview and teachings of Jesus spurred on the development of the West in general and this is a point the author tends to highlight repeatedly.

Dickerson uses the final section of the book to defend the basis for Christian belief and its accomplishments. He surveys questions such as: did Jesus exist, what was Jesus' impact, Jesus' influence, etc. The author presents evidence (not just an expert opinion) from the time of Jesus by citing sources from the first century. However, the author uses modern research to provide an empirical gauge to measure or validate the impact of Jesus and his followers. This empirical gauge is based upon the influence and change made by followers of Jesus. To more accurately describe this "gauge" would be to call it an experientially and empirically measuring Jesus' claims and influence.

Nothing presented in the book is difficult to follow, nor is it intended to be. Nevertheless, the author took pains to cite his sources as demonstrated by a substantive endnotes section. The author encourages the reader to examine these notes for further personal investigation. In one respect, apologetics has needed a text like this. Many criticisms of Christianity, such as those from the New Atheists, have contended that religion

including Christianity, has harmed human flourishing. The text provides excellent evidence to refute that accusation. As stated above, there is strong evidence (provided by Dickerson) showing the positive effect of Christianity throughout time since its inception. The evidence provides a basis to say even though bad things are done in the name of God, that is the exception and not the rule.

Though the text is well constructed and slightly verbose, it does seem to leave one wondering what the point is. As previously stated, it does well in showing the teachings of Jesus, and how those who have followed them have invariably added and advanced human society. However, from a philosophical standpoint, the utility of a thing does not automatically make that thing true. From an apologetics perspective, the text offers something that is missing within the community. However, it lacks the philosophical punch needed. One thing possessing some apologetic force is the author shows, through historical evidence, that the existence of Jesus is an undisputed fact of history or it can be reasonably asserted, similar to any other historical figure. Providing strong evidence that Jesus existed, had a following, was known to teach and do miracles, was arrested and crucified, and believed by his followers to have raised from the dead does well to dispel the current virtual trend of not accepting these as historical.

The apologetics section did not adequately address the question of whether the world would be in its current state if Christianity did not exist. The issue here is not the claim because the author provides historical evidence to show that the modern Western world has been shaped in significant ways by Christianity. However, there is little evidence provided to answer the objection, mainly that humankind would have eventually developed these things (e.g., hospitals, public education, ending slavery, etc.). Missing this is no small point. Any reader would ask the opposite of what the author presents as the point in fact. The author does make a small case, referencing what little evidence there is in non-Christian influenced societies towards general improvements mentioned throughout the text. But it fails to substantially deal with this one area. The one benefit in favor

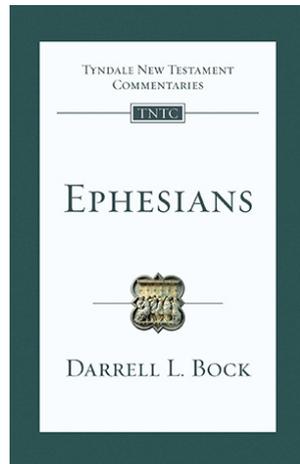
of Dickerson is the opposition is stating a positive claim (i.e. mankind would have developed these advancements without Christianity) so the burden of proof is placed securely on their laps. With that said, Dickerson is not required to provide any substantive case but it would help round out the information and give the reader the security in knowing the author has covered all his bases.

Jesus Skeptic is a well-researched book that offers an extensive endnotes section with virtual resources as well. It is tailored towards a high school educated or above audience. Given the stated thesis as showing the fecundity and effect of Christianity and Jesus, the book hits its mark. Some apologetic value can be gleaned since a point of dissension for those outside the faith is the conduct of Christians. The text makes it a point to shine the light on how people living in the West have forgotten the foundational beginnings of our culture. This book would be a valued resource for any owner.

Bock, Darrell L.
Ephesians
(*Tyndale New Testament*
Commentary).

Downers Grove, Il: IVP Academic,
2019. pp. 213.

Reviewed by, Anthony P. Royle, PhD
Student at Dublin City University
and Tutor in Biblical Studies at King's
Evangelical Divinity School



This commentary is one of the latest contributions to the third generation of Tyndale commentaries, succeeding the previous volumes which ran from 1956-1974 and 1983-2003. This new series is not intended to supersede the previous Tyndale Commentary series, but it is rather a

new corpus of commentaries that engages with recent developments in modern scholarship with an accessibility in the model of their predecessors. The commentary series has a new unified structure that divides each section into the following categories: Context, Comment, and Theology, replacing the old dreary format which are structured in blocks of commentary for every verse. This series also maintains the Evangelical ethos of their predecessors in providing exegetically rich commentary with systematically thoughtful theological concepts useful to theologians, pastors, and laymen.

Darrell Bock, who is known mostly for his scholarship on Luke-Acts and historical Jesus studies, has rarely written on Paul's letters with the exception of one small contribution on Ephesians-Colossians; however, his previous work on progressive dispensationalism, Jewish-Gentile relations, and the theology of the ascended and exalted Jesus at the right hand of God provides a refreshing reading of the letter to the Ephesians. Bock summarises this letter as 'an amazing summary of God's blessings, his plan, the enablement believers have access to and the reconciliation God has achieved in bringing Jew and Gentile together in Christ' (p. 212). Bock's central focus in reading Ephesians is the power of God working through the exalted Messiah who sent the Holy Spirit to work in both Jews and Gentiles. This union between Jew and Gentile is also expressed in Bock's use of contemporary literature as Bock draws extensively from contemporary Jewish writings with the concept of many applications from Paul which is regarded as *halakhah*, as well as citing Greco-Roman sources providing a cultural backdrop for metaphors familiar to those living in Ephesus, such as adoption.

The structure of the analysis of Ephesians is in three sections: firstly, section 1 is given the title *Praise for God's Work in Christ and Prayer for an understanding of God's Power*, which covers chapters 1 and 2. The second section looks at chapter 3, which Bock entitles *Paul's Calling in the Mystery to Minister to the Gentles Culminates in Prayer for Strength*

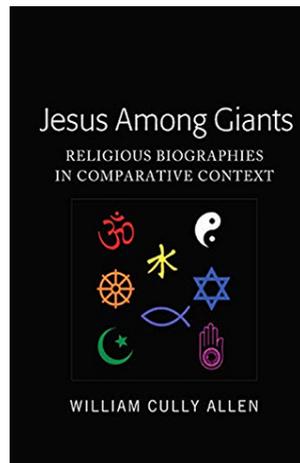
and a Benediction of God's Capability. The concluding section, *The Church and the World*, disseminates chapters 4-6. The overall flow of the book is helpful to pastors and preachers in breaking down the epistle into thematic sections that are pertinent for current cultural and ecclesiastical discussions.

Bock's expertise as the Executive Director of Cultural Engagement at The Hendricks Center on social issues shines through on some of topics as Ephesians requires pastoral sensitivity to some controversial issues. Although Bock provides a theologically astute reading of Ephesians much of this commentary is ordinarily conservative in many of the talking points of Ephesians including Pauline authorship of the letter to the Ephesians and a Complementarian view of headship in the husband/wife relationship. Bock offers little to the contribution of scholarship of these areas, but he does offer sound exegetical precision to the position he takes. This, in microcosm, reflects the overall summary of this commentary as it is a solid piece of Evangelical writing.

William Cully Allen,
*Jesus Among Giants:
Religious Biographies in
Comparative Context*
New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2019.
ix-142 with index

Reviewed by, Stephen M. Vantassel
Kings Evangelical Divinity School

The author held the position of Associate Professor of Asian Religions at Temple University between 2001-2011 and has published books on Taoism and debate in Sanskrit literature. As the title suggest, Allen discusses the founders and beliefs of major world religions/philosophies and then provides a brief comparison



to the teachings of Christ. Considering his work in Asian religions, it is understandable that Allen discusses Mahavira, Buddha, Krishna, Confucius, Laozi, Moses, Muhammad, ending with Jesus.

Smartly using the same outline to discuss each religious figure, Allen begins by situating the founder in his socio-political context to give readers a sense of the culture and issues that gave rise to the religion. Allen then provides a summary of the texts associated with the founder followed by relevant biographical information. He may mention that some questions of a historical-critical nature exist amongst some scholars regarding the historicity of certain aspect of the founder and his faith. None of these questions are explored to any depth and are likely mentioned simply to make the reader aware of a concern. Interestingly, the author does not mention any historical-critical issues in regard to Islam. The next major section is devoted to the founder's teachings. Allen identifies key pillars of the founder's beliefs and provides a non-critical explanation that endeavors to be understandable to western readers. Each chapter ends with a section devoted to what Christians can learn from each of the respective religions.

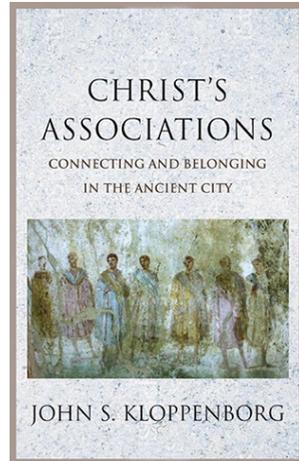
At only 142, 6x9 inch pages the book is best understood as a primer for the study of Asian religions from a comparative religion's perspective. Though not a specialist in comparative religions, it certainly appeared to this author that the major highpoints of the respective religions were covered. Christians, at least Biblically informed ones, will wince at some of the statements Allen makes about Christ. For example, Allen calls Jesus an ascetic (p. 13) like Buddha. While true Jesus did not accumulate wealth, that is different than being an ascetic particularly given that Jesus was accused of attending dinner parties (Mt 11:19). Nevertheless, Allen gets Jesus mostly right (i.e. Messiah) but not to the extent that Jesus saw himself as God.

Allen is a clear writer so that readers as young as high school age should be able to apprehend the material. Thus, I think that the text is suitable for consideration as a text for community colleges and those interested in starting their journey of understanding other religions.

John S. Kloppenborg.
*Christ's Associations:
Connecting and Belonging in the
Ancient City.*

New Haven, CT: Yale University
Press, 2019. pp. 536, \$40.00.
ISBN 978-0300217049..

Reviewed by Brendon Michael Norton,
New England Bible College, South
Portland, ME.



What were ancient churches like? How many members did they typically have?

Where would they have met? What were the logistics of a common meal or funding the business of the church? These seemingly basic questions are all essentially unknown about the church from the first century because of a paucity of data from the churches themselves. John S. Kloppenborg's most recent work, *Christ's Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City*, seeks to provide a framework with which we might be able gain possible answers to these questions by comparing them to the epigraphic, literary, and archaeological data we currently have about Greco-Roman associations.

These associations, small face-to-face groups which could be organized around an occupation, family, ethnic group, or cult are organizations for which scholars have a wealth of data. This data includes membership lists, fee structures, details of banquets, bylaws, and more. Kloppenborg posits that by using this data we can create a conceptual framework for understanding the characteristics of the early church. He is quick to emphasize that this does not provide any new information, but rather that by using data from similar groups we have more information about, we can make reasonable assumptions about what may have been possible

for early churches (5). Nevertheless, having laid out his rather chastened set of expectations, Kloppenborg amasses a stunning amount of data to suggest how the early church may have functioned.

Each chapter addresses a specific aspect of the early church which can be illuminated through comparison to other Greco-Roman associations. While some material is repetitive, each additional chapter can be profitably read on its own if the reader only has interest in a particular topic. Several examples of the value of this comparative analysis serve to demonstrate the validity of Kloppenborg's method.

First, how large were the congregations of a typical early church? Kloppenborg theorizes that churches had roughly fifteen to thirty members each (110-111). He arrives at this conclusion by examining membership lists over time for various occupational guilds, as well as the physical spaces which were likely to be rented out by such guilds. In commenting on the meal practices of early Christians, particularly 1 Cor 11:17-24 he bucks against the notions that one or a few wealthy patrons would have subsidized the entire cost of a church's meals, or that everyone would have brought some food (an ancient potluck). Rather based on the practices of other associations, he posits that the Corinthian, and other churches, would have paid for their meals through membership dues or a rotating responsibility for a member to provide for one meal (232-234).

One of his most tantalizing suggestions comes in his final chapter dedicated to recruitment of members. Generally speaking, Christianity did not offer much to the rich by way of social capital or prestige, as he notes that cultic associations rarely had anyone of rank patronizing them. He suggests that the appeal Christianity may have been its book culture emphasizing literacy and the interpretation of Scripture. The ability to not only to read, but to understand and discuss complex texts was highly valued by the upper crust of Roman society. Given that Scripture and its attendant interpretation form the bedrock of Christianity, it makes sense that this would appeal to such a culture (335-337). These are but a few of the suggestions, Kloppenborg offers, but all are grounded in copious

comparisons with extant data about various Greco-Roman associations.

While offering a number of possible scenarios of church life and logistics, Kloppenborg does leave some questions unanswered. Kloppenborg opens Chapter 10 with the example of a 4th century Christian guild of fullers who dedicated a mosaic. He uses this opportunity to discuss the language used by the association but moves on without comment on any other facet of the association's life or organization. Upon reading about a 'Christian' guild a number of questions came to mind, what was the relationship between the guild and a local church? Did members of the guild pay dues, participate in funerary rites, etc. in the church as well? Was it financially feasible to be a member of two associations at the same time? What does it mean for his general thesis if guilds could be 'Christianized'? Despite the potential significance of a Christian guild, these additional line of inquiry are left untouched.

A major issue present throughout the book is not so much Kloppenborg's approach as with his accepted range of evidence. Kloppenborg out of hand rejects the historicity of the majority of Acts as well as the Pastoral Epistles. For a person with Evangelical presuppositions about Scripture, this would be problematic, but it is also problematic for purely historical reasons. Regarding Acts, Kloppenborg simply asserts that it is "utterly unreliable" (98). No attempt is made to defend this or other assertions. Admittedly, given the topic of the book, it is understandable that Kloppenborg would not launch into an extended critique of the historicity of the New Testament, however by dismissing these sources, Kloppenborg's conclusions are unnecessarily impoverished.

His hermeneutics of suspicion are not just theoretical or academic as he raises them throughout the book. In asking the question of whether early churches had membership lists, he answers that there is not enough evidence to make a conclusion. He acknowledges that in 1 Tim 5:9 that at least widows are enrolled on some type of list, but views the letter as a non-Pauline 2nd century writing. While accepting the authenticity of the Pastorals would not conclusively answer the question, Kloppenborg's

dismissal of it renders his final conclusion more ambiguous than the evidence would suggest. In his discussion of the demographics of the Thessalonian church, he discounts Luke's account that presents it as being mixed between Gentiles and Jews and as counting leading women of the city as members. Rather, Kloppenborg asserts that the church was homogenous both in ethnicity and gender as a church of Gentile males. He bases this reasoning off both the lack of references to the Old Testament and direct addresses to women in the Thessalonian letters. This leads Kloppenborg to assert that while some churches could be semi-diverse (Corinth and Philippi) there were also those which would very homogenous. Without discounting the possibility that some churches were homogenous, the evidence from Acts suggests a greater diversity among churches than Kloppenborg allows. Despite these reservations about the scope of acceptable data, it cannot be denied that Kloppenborg's work opens up new vistas for understanding the early church.

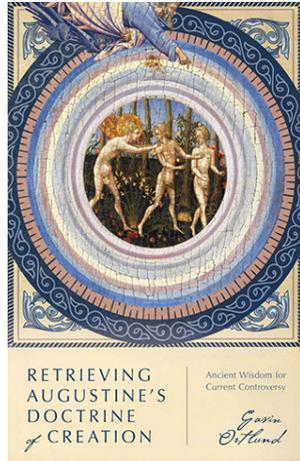
As for who might benefit most from these new vistas, it is clear that the book is aimed at fellow members of the academy. Prior understanding of Greco-Roman society is necessary to make sense of his arguments. Despite this, the conclusions drawn can still be profitable for the pastor or educated lay person. That being said, the reader has to wade through page after page of membership rosters, lists of patrons and their gifts to certain associations, and much more. It may be more fruitful however to skip these sections, and focus on the conclusions he draws from their cumulative weight.

At the current time we do not have data from either the New Testament occasional letters or Acts to make extensive conclusions one way or the other about how the early churches functioned on a practical level. By using careful comparison of Greco-Roman associations, Kloppenborg allows sets up reasonable parameters around what may have been, drawing us closer to an understanding of the lives of our earliest brothers and sisters.

Gavin R. Ortlund.
*Retrieving Augustine's Doctrine of
Creation:
Ancient Wisdom for Current
Controversy*

Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity
Press, 2020.
ISBN 978-0-8308-5324-3. ix +249
pgs. USD \$25.64.

Reviewed by Stephen M. Vantassel,
Tutor, King's Evangelical Divinity
School



Questions regarding the origin of the universe and rise of humanity continue to be argued within both the broader culture and Evangelicalism. Many Christian leaders believe that the discrepancies between “science” and Genesis cause many to question the validity of Christianity and scripture. Even within Evangelicalism, battle lines are drawn over whether one believes in a young-earth creationism or theistic evolution and whether Adam and Eve were historical figures.

It is in response to these disputes and controversies that Gavin Ortlund wrote *Retrieving Augustine's Doctrine of Creation*. In short, Ortlund contends that engaging Augustine's teaching on the doctrine of creation, contemporary Christians can view the controversies through a different perspective, one untainted by Darwinist, fundamentalist and modernist stances. Through that “dialogue”, Ortlund hopes that Christians on opposing sides of the debate could gain a humbler stance towards their own position coupled with a more generous spirit towards their opponents’.

In Chapter 1, Ortlund argues that Christians have neglected the

doctrine of creation, delegating it to a subordinate role to sin and redemption. He then launches into a somewhat academic discussion about the internal coherence of Augustine's thinking in his *Confessions*. The switch struck this reader as strange. However, readers should be patient as Ortlund eventually shows that the discussion is indeed relevant. In the end, Ortlund argues that Augustine connects personal piety with the doctrine of creation by noting that creatures find their origin and "rest" in their creator. Ortlund then reviews key tenets of Augustine's belief namely, God is prior to all; creation was established *ex nihilo*; creatures, therefore, are contingent and made to find their true happiness in God; evil is not just privation but a loss of being (p. 51); and finally, redemption must involve deification, not in the sense that we have divine nature, but in the sense that we become the sons of God, the source of being.

After outlining the major themes of Augustine's theology of creation, Chapter 2 pivots to Augustine's theological and moral attitude. In this fascinating chapter, Ortlund details how Augustine avoided arrogant dogmatism and open-headed liberalism when interpreting the creation narratives. Augustine's approach flowed from a pastoral concern that Christians hurt the cause of Christ by speaking on topics they knew little about. Not only would this result in pagan ridicule of Christianity but also would give the impression that ignorant statements were doctrines of the Christian faith.

Chapter 3 discusses Augustine's view of the days of creation. Ortlund dutifully shows how Augustine could hold a "literal" view in tension with an allegorical or typological view. It should be noted that literal here does not mean Augustine held to a 6-day young earth creationism. Rather it means that Augustine believed that the Bible was relating something that had a historical reality. Ultimately, Ortlund is using Augustine to help loosen contemporary Christians from their dogmatism, while simultaneously showing that loosening does not necessarily involve a jettisoning biblical teaching.

Chapter 4 reviews Augustine's belief that animal death occurred before the Fall. Contrary to some creationists, Augustine did not believe that the pre-fall world was "perfect" nor had to be perfect. The pre-fall world was good, but there was pain, predation, insects and death. The difference was that human death only came after the Fall. Augustine, arguing against the Manicheans, said that those who think that predation and pain are evil, suffer from self-referential judgement. In other words, they use their limited perspective to pronounce judgement on the whole, of which they are ignorant. I found this chapter to be quite helpful as it supported the argument made in *Dominion over Wildlife? An Environmental-Theology of Human-Wildlife Relations* against the claims of the Andrew Linzey and his theology of Christian Animal Rights. I was puzzled, however, as to why Ortlund did not connect Augustine's theology to Genesis 1:26-8 with how Adam and Eve should have expressed dominion, perhaps lethal dominion, over the serpent for its blasphemy.

The final chapter addresses the status of Adam and Eve. Interestingly, Adam and Eve were understood by Augustine to be both historical and figurative. Ortlund, in discussing the views of Scot McNight and Peter Enns, believes that Augustine would have asked them why not see Adam and Eve as both historical and figurative too? Why prioritize one over the other? Though some may want to interpret Augustine's *rationes seminales* in light of biological evolution, Ortlund believes it would be improper to draw too hard of a line to connect the ideas.

This reviewer is not qualified to comment on the accuracy of Ortlund's description of Augustine's views. So, my comments will focus on other areas. The text does make a strong case for Evangelicals to lower the debate temperature regarding questions pertaining to human origins. Ortlund does not make this claim out of a belief that these questions are not important. He does so because he does not believe these questions are essential to orthodoxy. While

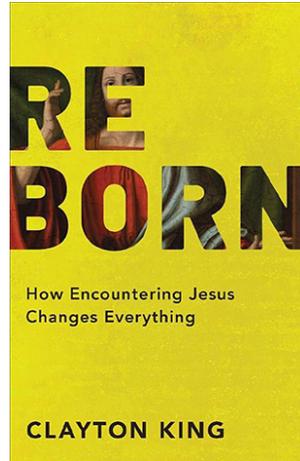
not fully convinced of Ortlund's contention, there is no doubt that his admonition to humility is an important one. Every interpreter should check his/her attitude and avoid speaking beyond the biblical evidence. In this regard, this conversation with Augustine is extremely helpful and could be useful material for hermeneutics teachers to incorporate into their courses.

However, at times, Ortlund in holding up Augustine as an example of humility, seemed to forget that Augustine did not know Hebrew. It makes sense that Augustine should have been humble as his knowledge was limited. Modern biblical scholars know far more about linguistics, comparative literature etc. than Augustine did. So, would it stand to reason that contemporary scholars could be more "dogmatic" than Augustine and justifiably so? In addition, Ortlund should have pointed out that science is no more "objective" than biblical interpretation. Too often, science is treated as a monolith when a closer look reveals far more diversity and "doubt" than the atheistic apologists admit. Granted Ortlund does recognize this in the text but his most of his criticism was directed more toward arrogant theologians than arrogant scientists.

The book is well written and has helpful summaries both at the end of each chapter and the book as a whole. Those looking for a comprehensible way to enter the theology of Augustine should find this work valuable. In the end, biblical interpreters should read this text if for nothing more than to check their own arrogance. Ortlund has used Augustine to properly remind us that not everything in scripture is as plain as we might believe. For that, we should thank Augustine and Ortlund for this.

Clayton King.
*Reborn: How Encountering Jesus
Changes Everything*
Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI,
2020.
pp. 211, £11.99. ISBN: 978-
0801019609.

Reviewed by Matthew Wong, King's
Evangelical Divinity School



The biblical and contemporary examples compiled by King in *Reborn* are witness to the transformative power of Christ.

King writes passionately, advocating a genuine encounter with the risen Christ as the only authentic answer to man's spiritual needs. In an age where immediate and superficial 'fixes' to life's problems are readily espoused, King eschews any attempt at effecting positive, lasting change apart from a genuine salvific encounter with Jesus. This is his clarion call and the beating heart of the book.

As a teaching pastor and evangelist, King has produced a practical and heart-felt exhortation to trust in Christ and to experience His power and mercy. King's work, though highly readable and non-technical, is replete with biblical and personal insights, challenging applications, and acute observations on mankind's fallen human nature. In writing the book, King acknowledges an indebtedness to numerous scholars who have "inspired and educated him on the person of Jesus and the culture in which he lived" (p. 211). Examples include conservative evangelical scholars F.F. Bruce and D.A. Carson, alongside 'Emerging church' proponent Eugene Peterson (author of 'The Message') and others who may be sympathetic to the movement. In keeping with the book's accessible style, no literature citations or references are included.

Every chapter, except chapter thirteen, features a New Testament figure who encountered Christ and is thematically linked to contemporary testimonies of God's intervention and sovereign grace, thus demonstrating His immutable nature. For both the biblical and contemporary characters, King provides some background information on the person's life prior to meeting Christ, explains how life changed following the encounter, and presents a central message that is applicable to modern-day lives. The book's focus on salvation and its lucid writing style would suit non-Christians as well as recent converts seeking encouragement that God is still working mightily in people's lives today. The book, however, is not an apology for the Christian faith, and though it is an uplifting and encouraging read, hardened sceptics may require more reasoned argumentation in support of key doctrinal tenets to engender biblical faith.

A brief summary of each chapter's message is as follow: [1] Nicodemus (God can save even the most 'unlikely' people) [2] the woman at the well (no one is beyond God's saving grace) [3] the feeding of the five thousand (God accepts even our pitiable offerings when surrendered in faith) [4] the woman caught in the act of adultery (as God forgave the woman, grace must be shown towards others) [5] Zacchaeus (God is patient and pursues the unsaved with the Gospel) [6] the woman with the issue of blood (God is able to heal miraculously) [7] the thief on the cross (it is never too late to receive God's forgiveness) [8] Judas (an exhortation to be reborn, and not to shy away from evangelism) [9] Lazarus (God has authority over death) [10] Jesus' Emmaus road appearance ('the benefit of doubt') [11] the martyrdom of Stephen (the cost of wholehearted discipleship) [12] Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet (God is pleased when His children give sacrificially/generously) [13] God is able to deliver people from occultism and bring about reconciliation between family members.

In demonstrating how people today are still encountering God in powerful and transformative ways, King is, at times, complicit in misappropriating the historical-grammatical context when pairing biblical/New Testament examples with contemporary parallels. For

example, King couples the boy's role in the feeding of the five thousand with the committing to the Lord of a drug addict who had 'little to offer' (p. 53). Whilst faith might pose a common bond, King is equating the boy's willingness to offer up his food to Christ (Jn. 6:9-11) with the spiritual regeneration of a friend battling drug addiction. This is problematic as the miracle focuses on what Jesus did with the meagre provisions (Jn. 6:12f), not on the boy's act of 'selflessly' offering his food, thereby weakening the spiritual similarities between the characters in the accounts. A more accurate comparison would focus on God's ability to use what little is brought to Him in faith, vis-à-vis the five barley loaves and two fish and the (ex-)drug addict whose life was transformed by Christ.

Such tenuous comparisons are seen elsewhere, for example, in the discussion on Jesus' forgiveness of the woman caught in adultery (Jn. 8:1-11) which is preceded by an account of a black woman who came to the aid of a KKK activist at a violent rally (pp. 67-70). King's reductive pairing of the two accounts overlooks the central message of John 8:1-11, namely Jesus' sharp rebuke of religious hypocrisy/self-righteousness (v. 7) and His willingness to forgive the penitent sinner (v. 11). Whilst grace and forgiveness feature prominently in both accounts, King divorces these qualities from the historical-grammatical context of the scribes and Pharisees' religious hypocrisy, resulting in an artificial link being constructed between the biblical and contemporary accounts. The farfetchedness of other contemporary parallels stems from King's decision to re-couch the biblical examples in more familiar 21st century settings, inevitably leading to imperfect analogies/contemporary 'equivalents.' That said, despite some contextual discrepancies, King's central message in each chapter is largely authentic, discernible and scripturally rooted, though many comments and insights are applicable to the life of faith and discipleship, not solely to the act of regeneration/salvation as the book's title would imply.

In his discussion on the 'benefit of doubt' (pp. 159-174) in chapter ten, King would be wise to define the type of doubt he is referring to. Is he

referring to doubt as sincere questioning, double-mindedness, or ardent scepticism? Whilst doubt certainly afflicts all Christians in varying measure and at various times, nowhere in Scripture is doubt, unless manifesting as frankness in pouring out one's heart to God, presented as a positive quality to be embraced (Jas. 1:6). In a book aimed primarily at unbelievers (note the sinner's prayer on p. 210), extolling the 'benefit of [undefined] doubt' appears a little unwise. Further grounds for misunderstanding are provided by King's exhortation to do "something extravagant for Jesus ... [to] go for it. Give big. Hold nothing back. Lose your cool, embarrass yourself, break the rules, and worship!" (p. 204). Building on the example of how Mary anointed Jesus' feet with nard (Jn. 12:3) and the actions of a Kenyan Christian who selflessly gave her last meal to King on a missionary trip (pp. 200-4), such an exhortation risks inciting new believers to engage in spiritual grandstanding. Scripture reminds us that giving should be done secretly and with a willing heart (Matt. 6:4; 2 Cor. 9:6-8).

Reborn, however, is a timely reminder that in today's sin scourged world, God is all-powerful, sovereign and transforming fallen human natures. By pairing New Testament 'Christ encounters' with contemporary retellings of Christian 'rebirths', some salvific links are tenuous, laboured and contextually strained. That aside, King provides much in the way of encouragement for believers and in emphasising the limitless depth of God's grace and forgiveness may well draw unbelievers to the cross in faith. However, by appealing to both believers and unbelievers, the book runs the risk of failing to maximise its evangelical capital whilst also lacking theological depth to fully enrich a broad Christian readership.

Whilst recent years have witnessed a proliferation in the number of popular books detailing remarkable testimonies of God's miraculous power, a key distinctive of *Reborn* is King's decision to anchor contemporary testimony in the biblical witness. By interweaving personal and recorded testimony with biblical examples of Christ's work, the reader is encouraged to gain a biblical perspective on salvation and the ensuing life of faith. Whilst King presents little fresh theological content, *Reborn*

is a useful and encouraging devotional read for new Christians. King is to be commended for asserting the pre-eminence of biblical salvation, or what he would term being ‘reborn’, over fleeting religious experience and superficial spirituality. He does so powerfully and convincingly, leaving the reader once again in awe of God’s grace, love and mercy.

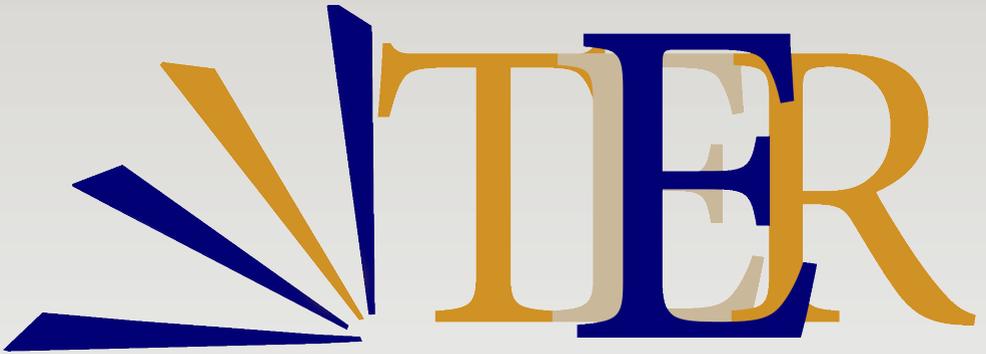
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