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LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:31 (ESV), “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” The Gateway Journal of Theology contains articles which model and promote scholarship to the glory of God. This issue covers a variety of subjects on preaching, apologetics, biblical studies, church history, and theology; all of which intend to stimulate a deeper love for, and faithfulness to, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our prayer for you is that as you read, you would read to the glory of God. As you contemplate and engage the topics discussed, you would think and reason to the glory of God. As you take what has been learned and apply it to your ministry context, you would do so to the glory of God.

Christian scholarship, at the very least, means scholarship done to the best of one’s ability for God’s glory, in faithfulness to God’s Word. So defined, Christian scholarship builds up (i.e. edifies) the Church.

Gateway Seminary holds that Christianity is, in the words of the Baptist Faith and Message (2000), “the faith of enlightenment and intelligence.” Article XII on Education continues:

> All sound learning is, therefore, a part of our Christian heritage. The new birth opens all human faculties and creates a thirst for knowledge. Moreover, the cause of education in the Kingdom of Christ is co-ordinate with the causes of missions and general benevolence, and should receive along with these the liberal support of the churches. An adequate system of Christian education is necessary to a complete spiritual program for Christ’s people.

So understood, Christian scholarship and education for the glory of God is integral to both the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. Our prayer is that this journal would strengthen your faith, hope, and love in the Lord Jesus Christ and, through your faithful ministry, His Bride, the Church.

Adam Groza

President, Gateway Seminary

THE GATEWAY JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN BAPTIST PREACHING: SERMONIC THEOLOGY, FORM, AND PRACTICE FROM THE COLONIAL PERIOD TO THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Ryan Rippee

Ryan Rippee is pastor of Trinity Church of Benicia, California.

In the summer of 1775, as colonial America braced for armed conflict with Britain, Oliver Hart (1723–1795), pastor of First Baptist Church of Charleston, South Carolina, was called upon to persuade colonists to support the Patriot cause. For thirty years, Hart had mounted his pulpit in that city and preached with a consistency his eulogist Richard Furman (1755–1825) could summarize without exaggeration:

> Christ Jesus, and him crucified, in the perfection of his righteousness, the merit of his death, the prevalence of his intercession, and efficacy of his grace, was… the delightful theme of his preaching.[1]

What made Hart's pulpit ministry remarkable was not merely its content but its form. Converted under the preaching of Jenkin Jones at Pennepek Baptist Church and further shaped by George Whitefield, Hart absorbed the Puritan plain style in full.[2] From the colonial period through the early twenty-first century, American Baptist preaching has been governed (when it has been most characteristically itself) by this *plain style*: a tripartite method traceable to William Perkins's *The Arte of Prophecying* (1592) in which exposition, doctrinal derivation, and practical application form an organically unified act of proclamation.[3]

1 Richard Furman, G. William Foster, and Wood Furman, *Life and Works of Dr. Richard Furman, D.D.* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 2004), 337.

2 Richard Furman recorded that, of the Great Awakening preachers, Hart "has since professed to have received much benefit from their preaching, particularly from Mr. Whitefield's." Furman, *Life and Works of Dr. Richard Furman, D.D.*, 335.

3 William Perkins, *The Arte of Prophecying* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), originally published 1592/1606. For Perkins's tripartite structure and its transmission to American colonial preach-

This article argues that the *plain style* represents the normative Baptist homiletical paradigm, one that has proven uniquely suited to the Baptist conviction that, as the priesthood of believers implies, "God alone is Lord of the conscience."[4] Isaac Backus (1724–1806), the tradition's most persistent advocate for liberty of conscience, gave this conviction its clearest early formulation, grounding it in a direct accountability to God that admits no ecclesiastical intermediary.[5] Where preacher and congregation alike stand immediately under the authority of Scripture, the sermon's form and content must submit to the text's own governing shape rather than to the preferences of the preacher or the expectations of the audience.

Baptist preaching history reveals a recurring oscillation: periods of fidelity to the plain style norm, departures from it under theological and cultural pressure, and recovery movements that reassert the text's authority over the sermon's form. Three persistent tensions thread this narrative: doctrinal precision versus popular appeal, biblical authority versus cultural relevance, and prophetic declaration versus pastoral application.

This article traces seven historical periods, analyzing each through three interlocking categories: sermonic theology (the doctrinal content and hermeneutical commitments underlying the sermon), homiletic form (the structural relationship between text and sermon), and preaching practice (the mode of delivery and manner of application). The argument concludes that the twenty-first-century, text-driven, Christ-centered expository movement constitutes the most coherent historical recovery of the Baptist homiletical tradition to date.

Part I: The Plain Style Established and First Fractured (1592–1810)

Perkins and Hart: The Plain Style Received and Practiced

The foundational method of American Baptist preaching arrived in the New World via the English Puritan tradition, especially in Perkins's *The Arte of Prophecying*. In contrast to the Ciceronian style of homily that was popular in Anglican circles, Perkins articulated what would become the dominant homiletical method for the following two centuries: the preacher reads the biblical text, expounds its plain gram-

ing, see Eugene White, "Puritan Preaching and the Authority of God," in *Preaching in American History*, ed. DeWitt T. Holland (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1969), 36–73.

4 *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville, TN: Southern Baptist Convention, 2000), Article XVII, "Religious Liberty." The full statement reads: "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and He has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are contrary to His Word or not contained in it."

5 Isaac Backus developed this account of direct accountability across multiple pamphlets, locating the principle in Scripture's own authority over conscience. See Isaac Backus, *Government and Liberty Described* (Boston, MA: 1778), and *A Door Opened for Christian Liberty* (Boston, MA: 1783).

matical and logical sense, derives a doctrine inherent in the text, and applies that doctrine through specific *uses* (doctrinal, polemical, practical, and consolatory) to the congregation's actual circumstances.[6] The organizing was textual authority: whatever the preacher said must be shown to flow from what the biblical author meant.

English Particular Baptists like Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), John Gill (1697–1771), and Abraham Booth (1734–1806) inherited and practiced this Perkins-derived plain style structure as the grammar of their pulpit ministry.[7] The *Second London Confession of Faith* (1689), adapted in America as the *Philadelphia Confession* (1742), gave this homiletical inheritance its confessional spine and anchored the Baptist preacher's obligation to the text in a formal account of Scripture's authority and sufficiency.[8] When Baptists arrived in earnest in the American colonies, they brought this confessional-expository heritage with them.

Within this confessional and homiletical inheritance, Oliver Hart stands as a defining figure of early Southern Baptist ecclesial formation.[9] His biographer, Loulie Latimer Owens, wrote:

> South Carolina Baptists, and Southern Baptists, have no more important pioneer than Oliver Hart. It was he who furnished them with their first denominational structure when he introduced the pattern of the Philadelphia Association to the South.[10]

Hart founded the Charleston Baptist Association in 1751, traveled widely in South Carolina and Georgia promoting evangelistic preaching, and trained ministerial students in his home, linking this associational and educational work to a steady plain style pulpit in Charleston. On June 28, 1775, at the request of the South Carolina Provincial Congress, Hart preached a fast-day sermon from Isaiah 59:19 ("When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him"), "A Sermon Delivered on a Day Appointed for Fasting and Prayer."[11] Following Perkins's method, Hart (1) reads and explains the text in its immediate context, (2) states a governing doctrine: that God himself raises a standard against opposi-

6 Perkins, *The Arte of Prophecying*, 54–79. See also White, "Puritan Preaching," 36–73, and Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), 182–203.

7 For the English Particular Baptist adoption of Perkins's method, see Michael A. G. Haykin, "'Those Who Plead for Thee': Particular Baptist Preaching and the Plain Style in the Long Eighteenth Century," *Evangelical Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (2023): 299–311.

8 Ch. 1 ("Of the Holy Scriptures"), *The Second London Confession of Faith* (1689); *The Philadelphia Confession of Faith* (1742).

9 Loulie Latimer Owens, *Oliver Hart, 1723–1795: A Biography* (Greenville, SC: Southern Baptist Historical Collection, Furman University, 1966), 12–8.

10 Owens, *Oliver Hart*, 1.

11 Oliver Hart, *A Sermon, Delivered on a Day Appointed for Fasting and Prayer: Isaiah 59:19* (Charleston, SC: n.p., 1775).

tion to his church, often through Christ's mediatorial work, and (3) unfolds a series of uses tailored to his hearers' crisis, calling them to repentance for sin, earnest prayer, and confidence in God's sovereign defense amid the looming conflict with Britain. The sermon's architecture is recognizably Perkinsian, yet its tone and aims are thoroughly Baptist: the biblical text, not civil authority or ecclesiastical hierarchy, governs the exhortations laid upon a congregation of free consciences.

Roger Williams: The Prophetic Mode as Baptist Inheritance

Roger Williams (ca. 1603–1683) contributed to Baptist preaching less through sermonic method than through his foundational articulation of liberty of conscience and the limits of civil authority over religious life.[12] Educated at Cambridge and expelled from Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636 for his "dangerous opinions," Williams founded Providence Plantations on the principle of voluntary church membership and complete separation of civil and ecclesiastical authority.[13] His two major polemical works, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* (1644) and *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody* (1652), established the Baptist prophetic rhetorical mode: the preacher who stands outside established ecclesiastical order to declare the freedom of conscience before God alone.[14]

Williams's contribution to Baptist homiletics was theological rather than methodological: he established that the Baptist preacher's authority derived not from ecclesiastical ordination but from Scripture itself and the direct illumination of the Spirit, and therefore must be free to serve God according to Scripture and conscience. This prophetic standing outside ecclesial establishment would mark Baptist preaching in every subsequent period of crisis, from Isaac Backus's tax-resistance pamphlets to John Leland's First Amendment advocacy.

Backus and the Separate Baptists: The Plain Style in Revival and Liberty

The First Great Awakening's most significant fruit among Baptists was the Separate Baptist movement. Shubal Stearns (1706–1771) and Daniel Marshall (1706–1784), originally Congregationalist Separates who embraced believer's baptism under the influence of the Awakening, founded Sandy Creek Baptist Church in Randolph County,

12 Larry Witham, *A City Upon a Hill: How Sermons Changed the Course of American History* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 22–5.

13 Edwin S. Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991).

14 Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* (1644); Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody* (1652). Both reprinted in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, 7 vols. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963). Some modern citations update "Tenent" to "Tenet."

North Carolina, in 1755.[15] From Sandy Creek, the Separate Baptist movement spread rapidly through Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia, planting scores of churches within a generation. Stearns, along with many other Baptist preachers, absorbed Edwards's emphasis on affections and extended application, producing a preaching style marked by emotional urgency, warm evangelistic appeal, and direct address to the unconverted.[16]

Isaac Backus (1724–1806) bridged the Separate Baptist and Regular Baptist traditions in New England, by 1802 compiling a record of 918 trips totaling nearly 68,000 miles, and organizing Baptist churches in Massachusetts and Connecticut on a particular Baptist confessional basis.[17] His theology, as E. Brooks Holifield has noted, represented "a conservative Baptist appropriation of Edwardean themes" that highlighted heartfelt religion and evangelism.[18] His conviction that "true religion must at all times be a matter between God and individuals" was grounded in his reading of Scripture as the direct and sole authority over conscience.[19]

His 1778 discourse, "Government and Liberty Described; and Ecclesiastical Tyranny Exposed," exemplifies the plain style of Perkins deployed in the service of Baptist political distinctives.[20] The discourse moves from biblical exposition anchored in Amos 5:24 ("Let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream"), expounding the text through six numbered observations on the nature of true liberty, to the doctrinal proposition that true religion is a "voluntary obedience unto God" and therefore cannot be coerced by any civil authority.[21] From that doctrinal center, Backus presses pointed application against the New England practice of taxing Baptists to support Congregationalist ministers: such coercion, he argues from Matthew 15, Galatians 1:8–9, and 1 Samuel 2:16, violates the very nature of the gospel it claims to protect.[22]

15 Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A. G. Haykin, eds., *The Baptist Story: from English Sect to Global Movement* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2015), 78–81.

16 Aaron L. Lumpkin, "'Some Agreeable Conversation': Jonathan Edwards among Early American Baptists," *Perichoresis* 21, no. 2 (2023): 34–49.

17 Bruce L. Shelley, "Backus, Isaac," in *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*, ed. Timothy Larsen (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 43–4. See also William G. McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1967).

18 E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 282–83.

19 Isaac Backus, *Government and Liberty Described; and Ecclesiastical Tyranny Exposed* (Boston, 1778), in *Isaac Backus on Church, State, and Calvinism: Pamphlets, 1754–1789*, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), 351; Isaac Backus, *A Door Opened for Christian Liberty* (Boston, 1783), in McLoughlin, Pamphlets, 431.

20 Backus, *Government and Liberty Described,* in McLoughlin, *Pamphlets*, 345–66.

21 Backus, *Government and Liberty Described,* in McLoughlin, *Pamphlets*, 351.

22 Backus, *Government and Liberty Describe*d, in McLoughlin, *Pamphlets*, 362–65.

Thus, Backus demonstrates that the plain style is a hermeneutical commitment in which the text governs the sermon, Scripture governs conscience, and a governed conscience refuses every state encroachment on religious affairs. As J. Judd Owen has observed, "*Government and Liberty Described*" represents Backus's "most systematic presentation" of the case for religious liberty, one grounded not in natural rights but in the conviction that "allowing human government, which God set over temporal affairs, any hand in maintaining or regulating the church evidently tends to destroy the purity and life of religion."[23]

That the plain style was capable of reaching across confessional traditions, geographic frontiers, and social standing is confirmed by the ministry of George Liele (c. 1750–c. 1828), a Virginia-born slave converted through the Georgia Separate Baptist network and later the founder of the first Baptist congregation in Jamaica, whose pastoral practice, as documented in his own correspondence, reflected the identical pattern of Word ministry that Hart practiced in Charleston and Backus practiced across New England.[24]

John Leland and the First Fracture: Conscience Displaces Scripture

Yet the same Revolutionary era that produced Backus's disciplined plain style advocacy also exposed a structural vulnerability within Baptist preaching. The figure who most clearly reveals it is John Leland (1754–1841). Leland moved to Virginia in 1777 and became the most effective Baptist itinerant in the state, claiming more than 1,200 baptisms during his fifteen years of ministry there.[25]

His political advocacy was equally consequential. When the Virginia Baptist General Committee, led by Leland, voted unanimously on March 7, 1788, that the proposed federal Constitution made insufficient provision for religious liberty,

23 J. Judd Owen, *Making Religion Safe for Democracy: Transformation from Hobbes to Tocqueville* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 4–8. Owen notes that for Backus, liberty was not "self-determination" but "the flow of mercy and grace from God to men" *(Government and Liberty Described*, in McLoughlin, *Pamphlets*, 350), and that Backus supported disestablishment in order to remove human interference from the work of the Holy Spirit, not to vindicate natural rights.

24 George Liele, letter to Dr. John Rippon, and letter to the editor of the *English Baptist Annual Register*, both quoted in *George Liele's Life and Legacy: An Unsung Hero,* ed. David T. Shannon (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2013), 47–8. For Liele's conversion within the Georgia Separate Baptist network, see Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1921), 41–4. No extant sermon manuscripts permit analysis of Liele's rhetorical method; what the sources establish is the structural and doctrinal continuity of his ministry with the broader plain style Baptist pattern.

25 L. F. Greene, ed., *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland* (New York: G. W. Wood, 1845), 13–4; on his life, see *John Leland: A Jeffersonian Baptist in Early America,* Eric C. Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

Madison's ratification effort was in genuine peril.[26] The two men reportedly met near Leland's home in Orange County, where Madison pledged support for a bill of rights and Leland pledged his support for Madison's candidacy.[27] Virginia ratified the Constitution on June 25, 1788, and the religion clauses of the First Amendment followed in 1791.[28]

Leland demonstrates how the Baptist conviction that every man must give an account to God (and thus be free from ecclesiastical and civil coercion) produces a distinctive prophetic rhetorical mode.[29] Leland declared, "Every man must give an account of himself to God, and therefore every man ought to be at liberty to serve God in a way that he can best reconcile to his conscience."[30] This principle, applied to civil governance, authorized the Baptist preacher to speak truth to political power with an authority derived not from establishment ordination but from Scripture and conscience alone.

On its surface, this sounds like Backus. The difference lies beneath, and it is homiletically decisive. Where Backus grounded religious liberty in Scripture's sole authority over the conscience, Leland grounded it in the individual conscience's inherent freedom to reason toward truth, an epistemology shaped as much by Jeffersonian liberalism as by Baptist theology.[31] Nathan Hatch has described Leland and the Baptist populists of his generation as embodying a democratic challenge to "all human authority" over individual religious conscience. His posture was politically effective but carried a corresponding homiletical cost.[32]

This distinction surfaces directly in Leland's primary texts. His *Rights of Conscience Inalienable (1791) does not open by announcing and expounding a biblical text*. Instead, it proceeds through a series of philosophical propositions, marshaling Scripture as supporting evidence for conclusions already reached on other grounds. In other words, in Leland's political discourses, doctrine arrives first, and

26 Robert B. Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia,* rev. ed. G. W. Beale (Richmond, VA: Pitt and Dickinson, 1894), 73–4.

27 Joseph Spencer to James Madison, February 28, 1788, in *The Papers of James Madison,* vol. 10, eds. Robert A. Rutland et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 542–43.

28 Smith, *John Leland,* 75–83.

29 For John Leland's ministry and political theology, see Greene, *Writings of John Leland*.

30 John Leland, *The Rights of Conscience Inalienable* (1791), reprinted in Greene, *Writings of John Leland*, 179–92.

31 Mikael N. Broadway, "The Ways of Zion Mourned" (PhD diss., Duke University, 1993), 219–20, demonstrates that the *Rights of Conscience Inalienable* paraphrases approximately 200 words from Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*, confirming that its organizational logic is Jeffersonian rather than expository.

32 Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 97.

the text is recruited afterward. This structural inversion of the plain style itself is the homiletical logic that topical preaching would institutionalize in the nineteenth century. Thus, a preacher formed without confessional anchors, guided primarily by occasion and individual conscience, was already positioned for the world Charles Finney would make explicit: if the occasion governs the architecture and results validate the method, then whatever produces the desired response is, by definition, sound preaching. The New Measures would accelerate a logic the Revolutionary pulpit had already set in motion.

Part II: The Plain Style Contested: Departures and Partial Recoveries (1800–1930)

Finney and Knapp: New Measures Invert the Plain Style

Charles Finney (1792–1875) gave this logic its fullest expression in the Second Great Awakening. Finney did not dismiss doctrine. In fact, he insisted that "if he preaches no doctrine, he preaches no gospel," but he made doctrine a tactical instrument rather than a governing authority.[33] Where the Perkins-derived plain style required the preacher to derive doctrine from the text and let the text's own argument govern the sermon's structure, Finney required the preacher first to diagnose the congregation's "intrenchment" (the particular error, excuse, or resistance blocking a decision), and then to select whichever doctrines would dislodge it. He said, "Find out where sinners lie, and pour in truth upon them there, and start them out from their refuges of lies."[34]

The governing category of the sermon was always conversion; doctrine was recruited to serve that goal, and the biblical text was chosen afterward to carry the assigned persuasive weight. Finney's soteriology confirmed what his homiletics required: conversion is "the sinner's own act," and the preacher is therefore "a voluntary, responsible agent" whose primary obligation is not fidelity to a text but to producing a decision.[35] The result was a structural inversion of the plain style norm.

The figure who most clearly demonstrates the transfer of these methods into Baptist churches is Elder Jacob Knapp (1799–1874). Knapp was gnawed by a conviction that while the Presbyterians had Finney, "there was no one man who stood forth as the champion and exemplar of revival

33 Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (1835), ed. William G. McLoughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), 189.

34 Finney, *Lectures*, 195–96.

35 Finney, *Lectures*, 186, 188. On the sinner as "author of the change," Finney says: "The sinner actually changes, and is therefore himself, in the most proper sense, the author of the change."

measures" among the Baptists.[36] In 1833, he resigned his pastorate and took to the road. What emerged from his subsequent itinerant career was an explicit appropriation of Finney's New Measures specifically modified for the Baptist context, what Caleb Morell has aptly called, "Finney with a Twist."[37] Iain Murray, surveying this development, concludes that "Knapp's book certainly proves that he was among the first of the Baptist practitioners of what he called 'the new method of presenting the gospel.'"[38] Knapp introduced protracted meetings into Baptist churches, in which an itinerant preacher would "stay on the ground till the meeting is done," whether days or weeks.[39] The homiletical consequence was the severance of the sermon from any Scriptural context.

Francis Wayland (1796–1865), Baptist president of Brown University, offered the period's clearest theological diagnosis. Writing as "Roger Williams" in *The Examiner* (essays later collected in *Notes on the Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches*), Wayland looked back to an older Baptist generation whose preachers had been marked by "a simplicity of reliance on the power and grace of Christ to aid them, and render their work effectual, which have not been so apparent in later times."[40] What distinguished those earlier ministers, Wayland argued, was precisely their total dependence on the Spirit rather than on means; their successors, by contrast, had committed what he called the opposite error of substituting excitement and method for earnest prayer and doctrinal proclamation. For Wayland, the collapse was not merely stylistic but confessional: Baptists who professed sovereignty in regeneration had adopted a homiletical apparatus that implied conversion was the predictable product of sufficient human pressure. Yet Wayland's resistance went largely unheeded, and Knapp's model, not Wayland's, became the normative Baptist preaching paradigm for the following generation, carried westward through the tent revival culture of frontier expansion.

Finney's departure affects all three categories of theology, form, and practice: his *sermonic theology* reduced doctrine to a tactical instrument of decision; his *homi-*

36 Jacob Knapp, *Autobiography of Elder Jacob Knapp* (New York: Sheldon, 1868), 41.

37 Caleb Morell, "'Finney with a Twist': Elder Jacob Knapp and the Origins of Baptist Revivalism," *9Marks*, June 14, 2022, https://www.9marks.org/article/finney-with-a-twist-elder-jacob-knapp-and-the-origins-of-baptist-revivalism/. Morell's analysis of Knapp's two distinctly Baptist innovations—instantaneous baptisms and child baptisms—traces the polity consequences of the New Measures in Baptist church life, consequences that fall outside the homiletical scope of the present article but illuminate the breadth of Knapp's departures from established Baptist norms.

38 Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750–1858* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 312. For the broader transition of Baptists from the plain style to the topical method of the New Measures, see 301–28.

39 Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 221, 224; Knapp, *Autobiography*, 28.

40 Francis Wayland, *Notes on the Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman & Co., 1857), 22–3.

letic form inverted the plain style structure by making the anticipated response rather than the text govern the sermon's architecture; and his *preaching practice* detached the sermon from any fixed scriptural context, leaving only the preacher's diagnosis of the congregation's resistance as its governing logic.

Booth and Furman: The Slavery Crisis and the Cost of Proof-Texting

No single episode more starkly reveals the relationship between hermeneutical method and sermonic content than the Baptist controversy over slavery. Abraham Booth (1734–1806), English Calvinist Baptist pastor, preached *Commerce in the Human Species* on January 29, 1792, a sermon whose plain style biblical argument against the slave trade crossed the Atlantic to shape American Baptist antislavery thought.[41] Booth examined Old Testament texts about slavery with grammatical and contextual care, distinguishing between the regulated servitude of ancient Israel (time-limited, ethnically particular, hedged with humanitarian provisions) and the race-based chattel slavery of the modern Atlantic trade. His exposition was contextual: individual texts must be read within the moral logic of the whole canon.

Richard Furman (1755–1825), first president of the South Carolina Baptist State Convention, offered a starkly different hermeneutic. His 1822 address, *Exposition of the Views of the Baptists Relative to the Coloured Population of the United States* argued that the Scriptures sanctioned slavery on the basis of Old Testament precept (Leviticus 25) and New Testament silence.[42] Furman's hermeneutic was selective and proof-textual: individual texts were marshaled in service of a social conclusion rather than read within the moral arc of the whole canon.

The Francis Wayland–Richard Fuller exchange of 1844–1845, published as *Domestic Slavery Considered as a Scriptural Institution*, brought this hermeneutical conflict to denominational crisis.[43] Wayland argued from the principle of liberty inherent in the gospel, tracing a canonical argument from the law of love, the equal dignity of persons before God, and the moral arc of redemptive history. Fuller defended the institution

41 Abraham Booth, *Commerce in the Human Species* (London: n.p., 1792), reprinted in *The British Particular Baptists, 1638–1910*, vol. 2, ed. Michael A.G. Haykin (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2000), 187–221. Booth corresponded with Baptist ministers in Philadelphia on the question of American slavery, and Furman would later name him as a threat that his *Exposition* was written to answer. For Booth's direct engagement with American Baptist audiences, see "American Slavery, A Letter to the Rev. Dr. Rogers, of Philadelphia, from the Late Rev. Abraham Booth," *The Baptist Magazine* 31 (1839): 527–29.

42 Richard Furman, *Exposition of the Views of the Baptists Relative to the Coloured Population of the United States* (Charleston, SC: n.p., 1823), reprinted in *Richard Furman: Life and Legacy,* James A. Rogers (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), 274–86.

43 Francis Wayland and Richard Fuller, *Domestic Slavery Considered as a Scriptural Institution* (New York: Lewis Colby, 1845).

from specific, individually cited texts, employing the same proof-textual method Furman had modeled. The 1845 founding of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) was the institutional result of that unresolved dispute. What the slavery controversy reveals for Baptist homiletics is this: eisegesis is both a hermeneutical error and a homiletical one. The proof-texting topical method liberates the preacher to use the Bible rather than be governed by it.

John A. Broadus: The Plain Style Codified for Recovery

In 1870, five years after a war that had exposed the catastrophic cost of selective biblical interpretation, John A. Broadus (1827–1895) published what would become the most widely used preaching manual in American history.[44] Founding professor of New Testament and homiletics at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Broadus produced *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* under circumstances that were anything but auspicious: one student remained in his post-war homiletics class, and that student was blind.[45]

The *Treatise* was a sustained attempt to reanchor Baptist preaching in grammatical-historical exegesis, doctrinal content derived from the text, and application shaped by the text's own governing intention. Broadus grounded his homiletical method explicitly in both theology and rhetoric. In the introduction to the *Treatise*, he wrote:

> Homiletics may be called a branch of rhetoric, or a kindred art. Those fundamental principles which have their basis in human nature are of course the same in both cases, and this being so, it seems clear that we must regard homiletics as rhetoric applied to this particular kind of speaking. Still, preaching is properly very different from secular discourse, as to the primary source of its materials, as to the directness and simplicity of style which become the preacher, and the unworldly motives by which he ought to be influenced.[46]

His doctrine of Scripture completed the foundation. Broadus stated plainly:

> Wherever the Bible undertakes to teach, its teachings are true. It does not attempt to teach on all subjects. It uses popular language that must be interpreted accordingly. But whatever it intends to teach, that is paramount in authority.[47]

44 Eric C. Smith, *Between Worlds: John A. Broadus, The Southern Baptist Seminary, and the Prospects of the New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2026), 187; David S. Dockery, ed., *John A. Broadus: A Living Legacy* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2008), 5.

45 Smith, *Between Worlds,* 181–83.

46 John A. Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons,* ed. Edwin Charles Dargan, New (23d) ed. (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1898), 16.

47 John A. Broadus, *Catechism of Bible Teaching* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1891), 15.

When Crawford Toy, Broadus's colleague at Southern Seminary and its professor of Old Testament, embraced higher critical views that undermined the historical reliability of Scripture, Broadus advised James Petigru Boyce to require Toy's resignation, even at high personal cost.[48]

Two of Broadus's sermons, "He Ever Liveth to Intercede for Us" (Hebrews 7:25) and "Let Us Have Peace with God" (Romans 5:1), illustrate his method. In "He Ever Liveth," Broadus engaged the imagination with the wonder of Christ's intercession through Scripture alone, not "flowery or inflammatory language." In "Let Us Have Peace with God," he methodically expounded a single verse, explained justification, clarified the nature of faith through a homespun illustration, and drove the doctrine home in extended application.[49]

Yet the same honesty that requires acknowledging Broadus's homiletical achievement demands acknowledging its limits. Broadus was personally a slaveholder, served as a Confederate chaplain, and publicly defended slavery as a righteous institution, moral failures that were enabled by the selective proof-texting the plain style was designed to prevent.[50] That a preacher of Broadus's exegetical sophistication could practice grammatical-historical exposition on Romans 5 and Hebrews 7 while applying Furman's proof-textual method to texts about human dignity is the period's most sobering lesson: homiletical recovery, to fulfill its own logic, must be applied consistently across the whole canon.

B.H. Carroll: Canonical Preaching as Inerrantist Recovery

Benajah Harvey Carroll (B.H. Carroll, 1843–1914), founder of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and author of the seventeen-volume *An Interpretation of the English Bible*, represented the inerrantist-expository response to the advance of German higher criticism into American seminaries.[51] From the pulpit of First Baptist Church of Waco, where he served for twenty-eight years, Carroll's sermons were consumed with explanation of the biblical text, including its context, its language,

48 Dockery, *John A. Broadus,* 14; A. T. Robertson, *Life and Letters of John Albert Broadus* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1901), 298–305.

49 For analysis of Broadus's preaching, see Hershael W. York, "John Albert Broadus: Carefully Expositing the Authoritative Scriptures," in *A Legacy of Preaching, Volume Two: Enlightenment to the Present Day*, ed. Benjamin K. Forrest, Kevin L. King, Bill Curtis, and Dwayne Milioni (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 211–27.

50 Southern Baptist Theological Seminary released a 71-page report in 2018 documenting that its four founding faculty members (Boyce, Broadus, Basil Manly Jr., and Williams) together enslaved more than fifty persons, and that Broadus publicly defended slavery as a righteous institution. See *Report on Slavery and Racism in the History of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary* (Louisville, KY: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018).

51 B.H. Carroll, *An Interpretation of the English Bible*, 17 vols., ed. J.B. Cranfill (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press), 1948.

and its place within the whole counsel of Scripture.

What distinguishes Carroll's preaching from both the essay sermon and standard expository preaching is what Matz describes as "canonical preaching." Carroll's sermons bring the whole counsel of the canon to bear on the meaning of a single passage, tracing theological themes across the entire biblical narrative to provide what he believed was a complete understanding of a text's subject.[52] Rather than expounding a single passage in a linear fashion, he built what was essentially a sermon-length biblical theology on a text-derived theme (often through extended word studies), so that his "canonical" preaching operated as a doctrinally driven form of topical preaching.

Finally, Carroll's conclusions were typically brief and almost always took the form of a direct evangelistic appeal. As Matz observes, "The gospel stood as the culmination of his every sermon, while the invitation to respond to the gospel was always the sermon's proper application."[53] Through the preaching of his students at Southwestern, that pattern of ending doctrinally rich sermons with a succinct gospel invitation has become a recognizable feature of Southern Baptist preaching and has largely endured to the present.

Walter Rauschenbusch: The Social Gospel Displaces the Text

Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918) came to his convictions through eleven years of pastoral ministry at the Second German Baptist Church in Hell's Kitchen, in New York City. Here he faced the poverty, exploitation, and institutional indifference that industrialism had concentrated in Manhattan's most crowded precincts.[54] By the time he returned to Rochester as a professor in 1897, Rauschenbusch had determined that the church's primary failure was not doctrinal but social; that it had, as he argued in *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907), "uncoupled the religious and the social life" in defiance of Jesus's own purpose, which was nothing less than "a thorough regeneration and reconstitution of social life" through the establishment of the kingdom of God.[55] As Charles Howard Hopkins documented in his definitive history of the period, the social gospel's institutional penetration (from denominational boards to seminary curricula to the Federal Council of Churches) was comprehensive and rapid, reaching full organizational expression between 1900 and 1915.[56]

52 Robert Matz and Jerry Sutton, "B.H. Carroll: Preaching Sermons Saturated with Scripture," in *A Legacy of Preaching*, 268.

53 Matz and Sutton, "B.H. Carroll," 276.

54 Witham, *A City Upon a Hill*, 187–89.

55 Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 42.

56 Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism*, 1865–1915 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1940), 215–24.

Rauschenbusch did not challenge the plain style so much as quietly displace it. This displacement is visible in the architecture of *Christianity and the Social Crisis* itself, which functions as the period's representative sermon-essay. The book opens with a social diagnosis: "Western civilization is passing through a social revolution unparalleled in history for scope and power."[57] From that opening, Rauschenbusch moves through the Hebrew prophets, the social aims of Jesus, the failure of the institutional church, and the demands of the present crisis, with each chapter governed by the social question it is designed to answer rather than by the biblical material it draws on. Scripture appears throughout, but always in a secondary, illustrative capacity: the prophets are marshaled as proto-social reformers, Jesus's teaching is translated into a program for social reconstruction, and the kingdom of God is redefined as the social order to be built through human cooperation with divine purposes.

Dare We Be Christians? (1914), Rauschenbusch's most explicitly sermonic work, confirms the pattern. Built nominally on 1 Corinthians 13, the book uses Paul's chapter on love as a launching pad for an extended essay on social solidarity. Rauschenbusch reads Paul's demand for love not as a theological claim about the nature of divine charity poured into the human heart by the Holy Spirit, but as a demand for "the social instinct, the power of social coherence, the *sine qua non* of human society."[58] The exegetical argument is minimal; the social application is total. Paul's categories are evacuated of their theological content and refilled with the categories of Progressive Era sociology. What results is formally a sermon on 1 Corinthians 13, and structurally an essay on the social demands of the present moment.

This is the essay-sermon format that Harry Emerson Fosdick explicitly theorized in his celebrated 1928 *Harper's* essay, "What Is the Matter with Preaching?" Fosdick declared that the conventional expository method—in which the preacher "takes a passage from Scripture and, proceeding on the assumption that people attending church that morning are deeply concerned about what the passage means," spends his time on "historical and exegetical material"—had "long since lost its influence over intelligent people."[59] In its place Fosdick proposed the "project method": the preacher starts with "a live issue, a real problem—personal or social, perplexing to the mind or disturbing to the conscience," faces it squarely, and "throws such light on it from the spirit of Christ that the people will go out able to think more clearly and live more nobly."[60]

57 Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 1.

58 Walter Rauschenbusch, *Dare We Be Christians?* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1914), 14.

59 Harry Emerson Fosdick, "What Is the Matter with Preaching?" *Harper's Magazine* 157 (July 1928): 133–34.

60 Fosdick, "What Is the Matter with Preaching?" 135.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, the Baptist pulpit was divided between two departures: 1) the revivalist expediency that Carroll's inerrantist recovery had partially arrested in Southern Baptist churches, and 2) the social gospel topicalism that had colonized the Northern Baptist mainstream. Rauschenbusch's homiletical legacy proved remarkably durable: the essay sermon format he exemplified became the default mode of the educated Protestant pulpit for the better part of a century, and its structural logic (issue determines text, application precedes exposition, the congregation's social condition governs the sermon's shape) has never fully left the Baptist tradition.

Part III: The Plain Style Renovated and Recovered (1930–2021)

Lee and Hobbs: Inerrancy Confessed, Plain Style Abandoned

By the second quarter of the twentieth century, the Baptist pulpit had inherited two generations of departure from the plain style norm. The revivalist expediency that Carroll had partially arrested and the social gospel topicalism that had colonized the Northern Baptist mainstream had, between them, established the audience-centered sermon as the de facto homiletical form. Among conservative Southern Baptists, inerrancy was affirmed with conviction, but the pulpit method had not kept pace.

R.G. Lee (1886–1978), pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis and three-term SBC president, is illustrative of this trend. His sermon "Payday Someday" was preached over 1,000 times and is arguably the most celebrated Southern Baptist sermon of the century.[61] It was a rhetorically brilliant and narratively vivid declaration of divine judgment on Ahab and Jezebel, but "Payday Someday" derived its power not from grammatical-historical exposition but from narrative reconstruction, rhetorical amplification, and Lee's own formidable oratorical gifts.[62] The plain style norm was honored in its confessional commitments; it was not practiced in its structural method. Lee represented the median Southern Baptist pulpit: evangelistic, orthodox, warm in pastoral application, but structurally topical-applicatory rather than text-driven. The governing question of the sermon had shifted, almost imperceptibly, from "What does this text mean?" to "What does this congregation need?"

Though Fosdick's theology was liberal, his homiletical logic mirrored what conservative Baptist revivalism had already institutionalized: occasion-governed form, audience-dictated content, and text deployed for authority rather than obeyed as structure.[63]

61 Robert G. Lee, *Pay, Day—Someday and Other Sermons* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1957).

62 Charles A. Fowler, "R.G. Lee: Rhetorical Artistry in the Pulpit," in *A Legacy of Preaching*, 381–94.

63 Billy Graham (1918–2018) represented the fullest global expression of this paradigm. His sermon-

W.A. Criswell: The Grassroots Recovery of the Plain Style

W.A. Criswell (1909–2002) illustrates how the mid-century recovery of the plain style arose as much from pastoral discovery as from institutional design. Criswell arrived at First Baptist Church of Dallas in 1944 as a topical preacher in the mid-century mold, inherited the library and sermon notes of his predecessor A.N. Hall, and found that Hall had preached through virtually the whole Bible, text by text. Criswell asked:

> Why should I struggle to think up topics for my sermons…when I could let inspiring and informative texts speak for themselves?…Suddenly, I found myself really proclaiming the Word, book by book, text by text, cover to cover from Genesis to Revelation. I felt new power.[64]

Criswell's subsequent preaching through the entire Bible over seventeen years (1952–1969) offered a widely imitated model of text-driven exposition for a generation of Southern Baptist ministers.[65] His Christ-centered approach also retrieved a distinctive feature of earlier generations:

> There is one great theme of the Word of God. The theme is constant from beginning to end. That theme is Jesus. He is on every page, in every event, in every type, in every book. Someone once asked the famed Charles Haddon Spurgeon of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, "Why do all of your sermons sound alike?" Spurgeon replied, "Because I take a text and make a beeline to the cross." The entire Bible presents Jesus, and the man who wants to proclaim Christ must do so by preaching from all the Word of God.[66]

This Christocentric expository method (text-driven in structure, cross-centered in content) planted the seeds that the text-driven movement would later cultivate into a full hermeneutical principle. Criswell's expository conversion gave the recovery its first institutional foothold: the largest Southern Baptist congregation in the world was now pastored by an expositor, and within a generation that model would become the denominational aspiration.

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ic theology was firmly inerrantist; his homiletic form was decision-oriented and application-first; his preaching practice was shaped by the conviction that his calling was that of evangelist, not expositor, a calling he saw as "neglected and even denigrated during much of the church's history." Billy Graham, *Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 687.

64 W.A. Criswell, *Standing on the Promises: The Autobiography of W.A. Criswell* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 153.

65 David L. Allen, "W. A. Criswell: Expositing the Whole Counsel of God—From Genesis to Revelation," in *A Legacy of Preaching*, 409–27.

66 Hochul Song, "A Critical Examination of W. A. Criswell's Sermons from Acts in Comparison with his Theology of Preaching" (PhD diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011), 68.

Inerrancy in the Pulpit: The Rise of Christ-Centered, Text-Driven, Expository Preaching

That consolidation came through the Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention, launched in 1979. The Resurgence is most often described as a battle over inerrancy. Still, its most enduring legacy may be homiletical: inerrancy, once recovered as a confessional commitment, was now being pressed as a hermeneutical practice. Adrian Rogers (1931–2005), pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis and three-time SBC president, represented the theological and homiletical vision of the Resurgence most fully. His sermon series through Romans, Ephesians, and Revelation modeled consecutive expository preaching for a generation of Southern Baptist pastors formed in topical-applicatory methods. Rogers articulated the grounding plainly:

> For a preacher to be powerful, he must be authoritative, and he cannot be authoritative unless there is a sure word from God. There was a time when preachers would stand in the pulpit, hold up the Word of God, and say, "The Bible says." Then they started saying, "The church says." Now they just scratch their heads and say, "Well, it seems to me."
>
> The inerrancy of the Bible equips the preacher with authority in the pulpit, for it supplies the preacher with the right to stand up and declare, "Thus saith the Lord." When the Bible speaks, God speaks. That puts a ring of authority into what the preacher has to say. The preacher is not a demagogue, he is not an authoritarian, but there is no stutter, no stammer, no apology. There is no backing away from preaching the Word. He should never be guilty of testing the temperature of the water. What the Bible says, he must say.[67]

Rather than a stylistic preference, expositional preaching carries a theological obligation flowing from the nature of Scripture itself.

What Rogers represented in the pulpit, the Resurgence institutionalized in the seminaries. R. Albert Mohler Jr., appointed president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1993, rebuilt the institution around confessional commitment to inerrancy and reformed its homiletics curriculum toward a text-driven method.

The methodological codification followed. Jerry Vines (b. 1937), two-time SBC president and longtime pastor of First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, joined with Jim Shaddix, then a rising homiletics professor who would serve as professor of preaching at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and later occupy the W. A. Criswell Chair of

67 Joyce Rogers, *Love Worth Finding: The Life of Adrian Rogers and His Philosophy of Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2005), 167. For an in-depth evaluation of Rogers's preaching, see Johnny Derrick Yelton, "The Evangelistic Emphasis in the Pastoral Preaching of Adrian P. Rogers" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013).

Expository Preaching at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, to publish *Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Sermons* in 1999.[68] Their five-step process gave readers a codified, reproducible method that seminaries could teach and pastors could practice. By the close of the twentieth century, expository preaching was the stated ideal across SBC seminaries, even where practice lagged, but a question remained: what governed the content of an expository sermon? The text now determined the structure. Toward what end?

The plain style, as Perkins defined it and Hart practiced it, was always more than a structural method. Its governing purpose was the exposition of Christ from every text. The Puritans did not want to explain what the text merely said, but to show how it pointed to and was fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ.[69] The twentieth-century recovery had restored the method; the twenty-first-century movement restored the content.

At Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Danny Akin's 2007 commitment to text-driven, Christ-centered exposition represented the convergence of the Conservative Resurgence's confessional gains with the recovery of an expositional homiletical program.[70] That commitment was codified in *Text-Driven Preaching: God's Word at the Heart of Every Sermon* (2010), co-edited by David L. Allen and Ned Mathews. Text-driven preaching, as the volume defines it, attends to three dimensions of the biblical text: its *substance* (what the text says), its *structure* (how the text says it), and its *spirit* (the tone and emotional register in which the text communicates). The sermon must replicate all three. Thus, the text's own literary form is itself communicative, and the preacher who renders a lament as a doctrinal outline or flattens a narrative into a list of propositions has failed to preach the text even while explaining its content.[71]

The Baptist preacher formed by the text-driven method returns to the discipline Hart and Broadus practiced: the sermon's structure submits to the text's own governing shape. However, the history of American Baptist preaching has raised a question that structural recovery alone

68 Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Sermons* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1999, rev. 2017). Shaddix also held an adjunct teaching role at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary (now Gateway) between 2006 and 2012.

69 For the Christ-centeredness of the Puritans, see Joel R. Beeke, "The Preaching of the Word," in *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching*, ed. Don Kistler (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2002).

70 Daniel L. Akin, "Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Text-Driven Preaching," *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 4, no. 2 (2007): 88–95.

71 David L. Allen, Daniel L. Akin, and Ned L. Mathews, eds., *Text-Driven Preaching: God's Word at the Heart of Every Sermon* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010). The emphasis on genre-sensitivity (that the sermon should replicate the text's literary form) distinguishes text-driven preaching from Haddon Robinson's "Big Idea" method, which abstracts a single propositional idea from the text regardless of genre. See *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 3rd ed., Haddon W. Robinson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).

cannot answer. The plain style's original purpose was theological and formative. Its governing aim, as the Puritans practiced it and the Baptist tradition received it, was always the exposition of Christ from every text. Form without that content and method without that theology leaves the Baptist pulpit with a disciplined structure pointing nowhere in particular.

Conclusion: The Norm, the Departures, and the Ongoing Call

When William Perkins insisted that "the sum of the whole Bible is Christ," he was naming its governing purpose. The Baptist preachers who received that tradition (Hart, Backus, Broadus, Carroll, Criswell, Rogers) understood, however inconsistently they practiced it, that faithful exposition is not merely explanation of a text but proclamation of the one to whom the text ultimately bears witness.

Christ-centered expository preaching, as this history demands it be defined, begins with the conviction that divine revelation is progressive, and its goal is the revelation found in Jesus Christ. Because he is the theme and goal of all Scripture, the preacher's exegetical obligation is not merely to establish what the text says but to show how the text stands in relation to Christ: his righteousness, his cross, his intercession, his all-sufficient provision for the people of God. As Bryan Chapell has observed, this is "not merely an interpretive method; it is an exegetical obligation with necessary implications for the saving and sanctifying messages we preach."[72] A sermon that explains the text but never arrives at the Savior may not fail methodologically, but it does theologically.

This is why the departures documented in this survey are, finally, theological failures. When Finney subordinated the text to the revival decision, he displaced the sufficiency of Christ with the sufficiency of method. When Rauschenbusch subordinated Scripture to social diagnosis, he displaced the supremacy of Christ with the urgency of the moment. The congregation, in each case, was left without the only help adequate to the human condition.

The twenty-first-century text-driven movement has recovered the plain style's structural architecture. What remains is the ongoing call that has sounded across every Baptist recovery: to preach Christ from every text, in the power of the Spirit, for the glory of the Father, so that the church is not merely informed but delivered, comforted, and transformed. May it be said that "Christ is his own attraction" in every faithful Baptist pulpit.

72 Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 311.

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AN UNCOMMON UNION: INTERPRETING JONATHAN AND SARAH EDWARDS

NATHAN A. FINN

Nathan A. Finn is Executive Director of the Institute for Faith and Culture and Professor of Faith and Culture at North Greenville University

Introduction

Jonathan Edwards was dying. It was the spring of 1758, and Jonathan had recently become the new president of the College of New Jersey, now known as Princeton University. Shortly after taking up his new post, Jonathan was inoculated against smallpox. Unfortunately, as sometimes happened with eighteenth-century inoculations against the dread disease, he developed a full-blown case of smallpox and his health declined rapidly. As he lay dying, Jonathan wrote the following in a letter to his daughter Lucy:

> Dear Lucy, It seems to me to be the will of God, that I must shortly leave you; therefore give my kindest love to my dear wife, and tell her, that the uncommon union, which has so long subsisted between us, has been of such a nature, as I trust is spiritual, and therefore will continue forever: and I hope she will be supported under so great a trial, and submit cheerfully to the will of God. And as to my children, you are now like to be left fatherless; which I hope will be an inducement to you all, to seek a father who will never fail you.[1]

Seven months later, Sarah followed her husband into the next life when she died of dysentery. If Jonathan was right about their "uncommon union" being spiritual and enduring into eternity, then their

* This paper was originally delivered as the Jonathan Edwards Center Lecture, Gateway Seminary, February 3, 2025.

1 S. E. Dwight, *The Life of President Edwards* (New York: C. & G. & H. Carvill, 1830), 578.

matrimony is now but one aspect of the "world of love" that comprises the heaven of Jonathan's theological vision.

Recent decades have witnessed ongoing interest in Jonathan Edwards by scholars and among pastors and other ministry leaders. Many of the former, and most of the latter, are evangelicals. With every passing year, there are new monographs, dissertations, book chapters, journal articles, and reprints of primary sources. There is also a constant stream of online content related to Edwards, ranging from the edifying to the thoughtful to the scholarly. As a general rule, much of the attention Edwards has received from scholars and the most thoughtful popular writers relates to four broad topics: 1) Edwards's biography; 2) his thought (including theology, philosophy, ethics, and exegesis); 3) his role in interpreting and promoting revival; and 4) his theological legacies throughout the English-speaking world and beyond. In this essay, I will reference all four, though I will especially focus upon biography.

Both scholarly and popular authors have periodically given attention to Jonathan's family life, and especially his marriage to Sarah. I will survey treatments of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards's relationship by various interpreters who have written on this topic since World War II. My goal is not to offer a fresh reading that breaks new ground, but rather to survey the lay of the land in terms of how different scholars and popular writers have interpreted the Edwards marriage. At the conclusion, I will also offer some suggestions about further lines of research that could be pursued by graduate students and other interested scholars.

Interpretations

As a general rule, the Edwards marriage has been interpreted four different ways. Many historians and some popular writers have put forward biographical interpretations that focus on the historical details of Jonathan and Sarah's relationship. Others, mostly popular writers, offer exemplary readings of the Edwards marriage. A number of scholars and some biographers have advanced what might be called a spiritual interpretation of the uncommon union. Finally, at least one scholar has commended a theological account of Jonathan and Sarah's marriage. In addition to these interpretations of the marriage itself, an additional topic that attracted recent interest among scholars is Jonathan and Sarah's understanding of slavery, since it was related to their domestic life together. I will survey each of these interpretations in turn.

Biographical Interpretations

Although Ola Winslow wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning popular biography of Jonathan Edwards in 1940, Perry Miller's 1949 intellectual biography is often considered

to mark the beginning of sustained scholarly emphasis upon Edwards.[2] Beginning in 1953, Miller became the first general editor of the critical edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, published by Yale University Press in twenty-six hardcover volumes as well as another fifty-two online volumes.[3] Miller and subsequent scholarly biographers have included historical accounts of Jonathan and Sarah's marriage. As a general rule, they have treated Sarah as a secondary, though crucial character in their respective narratives of Jonathan's life and ministry.

Miller discusses Jonathan's first mention of Sarah in his "Apostrophe to Sarah Pierpont," written shortly before Jonathan became pastor of the Congregational Church in Bolton, CT in 1723.[4] They married four years later, shortly after Jonathan was called to serve with his grandfather Solomon Stoddard in Northampton, MA. Miller also mentions George Whitefield's glowing assessment of Sarah and her role in Jonathan's ministry following Whitefield's 1740 visit to Northampton.[5] That same year, in his *Personal Narrative*, Jonathan rehearsed his own spiritual biography and compared it with young Sarah Pierpont, whom he believed loved God and embodied authentic piety by the time he met her when she was thirteen.[6] Sarah experienced her own personal awakening under the preaching of Samuel Buell in 1742, which Jonathan recounted, without naming Sarah, in *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival of Religion* (1742).[7] Miller tells how Sarah learned of Jonathan's death in 1758 while the two were apart. As mentioned earlier, Jonathan was in Princeton while Sarah was still preparing to relocate the household from Massachusetts to their new home.[8] A few odds and ends of their marriage are also mentioned, though these facts seem of lesser concern to Miller.

In his 2003 Bancroft Prize-winning biography, George Marsden includes all the material referenced by Miller, but in almost every case expands the narrative. To give just one example, Marsden devotes an entire chapter to Sarah's spiritual awakening in 1742 and how contemporaries such as Jonathan, George Whitefield, and Samuel Hopkins interpreted her piety; the latter

2 Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards, 1703–1758: A Biography* (New York: McMillan, 1940); Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: William Sloane, 1949). For an argument that Miller inaugurated the modern renaissance in Edwards studies, see Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 641ff.

3 Electronic editions of all seventy-eight volumes are available online through the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University. See http://edwards.yale.edu/.

4 Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (1949; reprint, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 39–40.

5 Miller, *Jonathan Edwards,* 142.

6 Miller, *Jonathan Edwards,* 206–8.

7 Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, 196. Miller wrongly attributes Buell's visit to 1741.

8 Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, 202–3.

two considered her a model Christian wife and mother.[9] Marsden also adds further details to our portrait of the Edwardses' marriage. He notes that Jonathan and Sarah "reared eleven children and nurtured what became an American dynasty."[10] He also recounts in far greater detail the circumstances of Jonathan and Sarah's earliest interactions, Jonathan's thoughts on her youthful spirituality, his blossoming romantic feelings for Sarah, and their shared love of music.[11] Marsden also reflects upon the Edwardses' explicitly spiritual understanding of sexuality.[12]

Marsden focuses far more than Miller upon the everyday details of the Edwardses' marriage, including their settling into Northampton,[13] their family devotional practices,[14] Sarah's domestic responsibilities,[15] her sense of style and shopping habits,[16] and her relationship with household slaves.[17] He also mentions how others admired Sarah as a role model for how she handled suffering and death, including that of several children and ultimately Jonathan himself.[18] Marsden also regularly interweaves information about the births and exploits of the Edwardses' children into his narrative.

In 2008, Marsden wrote a second biography titled *A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards* as part of Eerdmans's Library of Religious Biography series. He added little new content in this latter work, though he does spend some time speculating about how Jonathan may have struggled with sexual desires toward Sarah during the years prior to their marriage. Marsden suggests, "Perhaps it was that the married state transformed his sexual desire from being a spiritually demoralizing distraction to a gift of God to celebrate."[19] Perhaps not surprisingly, this particular topic features far less prominently among Edwards's more popular and pastoral biographers.

Edwards's final scholarly biographer is Philip Gura, author of *Jonathan Edwards: America's Evangelical* (2005). Gura covers much the same ground as Marsden,

9 George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 239–52.

10 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 2.

11 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 93–95, 105–6.

12 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 111. In a footnote, Marsden attributes his interpretation to Ava Chamberlain. See Ava Chamberlain, "The Immaculate Ovum: Jonathan Edwards and the Construction of the Female Body," *William and Mary Quarterly* 57.2 (April 2000): 289–322.

13 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 123.

14 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 133, 144.

15 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 135.

16 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 163.

17 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 135, 255.

18 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 497–98.

19 George M. Marsden, *A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards*, Library of Religious Biography (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 30–34. The quote is from page 34.

recounting the narrative of Jonathan and Sarah's courtship leading up to their marriage. Also like Marsden, Gura notes that spirituality and sexuality were related in Jonathan's developing feelings toward Sarah.[20] Gura also includes a lengthy section dedicated to Samuel Buell's influence upon Sarah and her struggles with measuring Jonathan's ministry effectiveness against that of Buell and notes Jonathan's subsequent acceptance of Sarah's spiritual awakening under Buell and inclusion of her testimony in *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival of Religion*.[21]

Exemplary Interpretations

Following in the line of some of Edwards's contemporaries such as Whitefield and Hopkins, several authors have advanced exemplary readings of the Edwardses' marriage, often focusing upon Sarah's piety in particular. The Edwardses thus function as role models for modern Christians, and Sarah in particular demonstrates what it means to be a godly wife. References to Sarah's godliness and its role in Jonathan's ministry can be found in dozens of books about topics such as biblical womanhood, faith-based parenting, Christian leadership, and even American exceptionalism. Some authors put forward exemplary readings in greater detail.

In his 1987 popular biography, Ian Murray focuses upon the affection between Jonathan and Sarah, their devotion to Jesus Christ, and their partnership in ministry.[22] He frequently draws upon sympathetic voices from past centuries to frame his own interpretations of the Edwardses. For example, he quotes Samuel Miller, a nineteenth-century biographer: "Perhaps no event of Mr Edwards' life had a more close connexion with his subsequent comfort and usefulness that this marriage."[23] Not surprisingly, Murray's lengthiest discussion of Sarah focuses upon her personal spirituality, especially in the wake of Buell's preaching in Northampton. In his telling, Murray relies on sympathetic contemporary accounts of Sarah's piety.[24] Murray does provide some details that are lacking in the more scholarly biographies such as Sarah's role in advocating for a higher salary for her husband[25] and her

20 Philip F. Gura, *Jonathan Edwards: America's Evangelical* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 43–45.

21 Gura, *Jonathan Edwards*, 105–8, 125. In addition to these book-length biographies, Ethel Wallace offered one of the earliest short biographical introductions to Sarah in 1950 journal article, focusing on her role in Jonathan's ministry. See Ethel Wallace, "A Colonial Parson's Wife, Sarah Pierrepont Edwards, 1710–1758, 'And a Very Eminent Christian,'" *Review and Expositor* 47 (January 1950): 41–56.

22 Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1987). I have chosen to not include Murray's biography in the previous section because of his desire to edify believers more than contribute to the field of Edwardsean Studies.

23 Murray, *Jonathan Edwards,* 91. Murray does not document this quote.

24 Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 193–99.

25 Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 278.

nursing a dying uncle.[26] He also includes as an appendix a 1750 letter from Sarah to Northampton officials wherein she defends he husband's integrity in the wake of the communion controversy that resulted in Jonathan's termination from his Northampton pastorate.[27]

More recently, Nöel Piper, who is married to retired pastor and popular Reformed theologian John Piper, authored a chapter that focuses upon Sarah's role as Jonathan's wife and ministry partner. Piper recounts the courtship of Jonathan and Sarah, covering familiar ground in terms of the general historical narrative. She also confesses her indebtedness to Elizabeth Dodds's work, which will be discussed next.[28] Piper, like her more famous husband, is a strong advocate for a complementarian understanding of gender roles. As such, she highlights the way Sarah's personal godliness and faithful execution of her domestic responsibilities, including often bearing the brunt of the parenting load, freed Jonathan to focus on pastoral ministry and his work as a theologian.[29] As Piper notes, "life in the Edwards house was shaped to a large degree by Jonathan's calling."[30] Piper also discusses the role Sarah played as a spiritually minded hostess whose domestic gifts also blessed visitors and lodgers who found their way to the Edwards home.[31] Piper closes with an admonition for modern evangelical women to follow Sarah's example as a godly wife, mother, and individual believer.[32] Much of Piper's chapter was subsequently reworked into the first chapter of her 2005 book *Faithful Women and Their Extraordinary God*.[33]

As mentioned above, Piper's interpretation of the Edwards marriage is in many ways a more overtly theological application of Elizabeth Dodd's 1971 partly fictionalized biography of Sarah, titled *Marriage to a Difficult Man: The Uncommon Union of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards*.[34] If Google is any indication of such things, Dodd's book has become something of a modern classic, and remains especially popular among conservative evangelical women. Dodd focuses on the role that Sarah played

26 Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 313.

27 "Letter of Sarah Edwards, 1950," appendix three in Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 485–87.

28 Nöel Piper, "Sarah Edwards: Jonathan's Home and Haven," in *A God Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, eds. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 57.

29 Piper, "Sarah Edwards," 60–61, 63–65.

30 Piper, "Sarah Edwards," 61.

31 Piper, "Sarah Edwards," 65–67.

32 Piper, "Sarah Edwards," 74–76. Another shorter example of this approach is found in William Peterson's chapter on Jonathan and Sarah in a largely forgotten 1983 book on famous Christian marriages. See William L. Peterson, *Martin Luther Had a Wife* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1983), 71–100.

33 Noel Piper, *Faithful Women and Their Extraordinary God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 15–38.

34 Elizabeth D. Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man: The Uncommon Union of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1971).

in managing the Edwards household and supporting Jonathan's ministry, though, as the title indicates, Dodd also suggests this was a sacrificial service that came at times with great psychological cost to Sarah. Dodd draws upon what is known about the Edwards marriage from the few available sources and supplements it with her own imagination, as evidenced in her speculations about Sarah's mental health during seasons of the marriage. On the whole, Dodd portrays Jonathan and Sarah as loving and tender toward each other, in regular need of each other's personal and spiritual encouragement. They were intentional partners in Jonathan's ministry to the people of Northampton and later Stockbridge.

Another lesser-known historical novel is Edna Gerstner's 1995 book *Jonathan and Sarah: An Uncommon Union*.[35] Gerstner was the wife of the Reformed theologian John Gerstner, a scholar of Jonathan's thought who, along with Banner of Truth publishers, helped introduce a generation of evangelicals to Jonathan Edwards between the early 1960s and early 1990s. This interest in Edwards paved the way for more widely discussed emphasis on Reformed theology among many evangelicals in the English-speaking world since the turn of the century.[36] Edna's book was actually written in the mid-1960s, but was not published until 1995. She hits on the same themes as Dodd's work, but Gerstner is even more overtly pietistic in her interpretations. She focuses specifically on the period from 1750 to 1758, when the Edwards family lived in Stockbridge following Jonathan's dismissal from his Northampton pulpit. Theirs was a model of Christ-centered marriage, even during the most difficult season of their lives when they ministered on the frontier and dealt with a greater degree of sickness and death than they had to endure in earlier years. Naturally, Sarah in particular is a historical role model for contemporary evangelical women to emulate in terms of personal piety and wifely and motherly giftedness.

Spiritual Interpretations

As George Claghorn argues, "Popular writers have … [created] a romantic, idealized picture of the relationship between Jonathan and Sarah, often picking up on his description of their marriage as an 'uncommon union.' Yet the importance of his relationship to Sarah was always its spiritual nature."[37] Many scholars agree, contend-

35 Edna Gerstner, *Jonathan and Sarah: An Uncommon Union* (Orlando, FL: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995).

36 D. G. Hart, "Before the Young, Restless, and Reformed: Edwards's Appeal to Post-World War II Evangelicals," in *After Jonathan Edwards: The Courses of the New England Theology*, eds. Oliver D. Crisp and Douglas A. Sweeney (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 237–53. For more on the recent interested in Reformed theology, see Brad Vermulen, *Reformed Resurgence: The New Calvinist Movement and the Battle Over American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

37 Jonathan Edwards, *Letters and Personal Writings*, WJE 16, ed. George S. Claghorn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 746.

ing that Sarah (as well as David Brainerd) became models for Edwardsean piety as Jonathan sought to commend his version of revival-friendly Calvinistic evangelicalism to his contemporaries. For example, Doug Sweeney argues:

> Sarah stood out clearly among the Christians of her day as an evangelical role model, a woman of vital faith. . . . Edwards often used females as examples of genuine piety, most prominently in his well-known *Faithful Narrative* (1737). But none of the women whom he heralded for the beauty of their faith proved to him as emblematic of earnest, evangelical holiness, or nearly as influential on the evangelical movement, as his own wife Sarah.[38]

Several authors develop this theme in some detail.

In her 1980 book *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor: Religion and Society in Eighteenth-Century Northampton*, Patricia Tracy discusses two key texts also highlighted by most biographers: Jonathan's 1723 apostrophe on Sarah and his recollection of her awakening in 1742's *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival of Religion*. She suggests that, to Jonathan, Sarah was "an exemplar of the purest piety" and that Jonathan "use[d] Sarah's experiences as a model of the conversions toward which he was trying to lead all of New England."[39] In *Some Thoughts*, Jonathan ends his description of what Tracy calls Sarah's "remarkable holiness" with a heartfelt desire for all people to experience the same spiritual awakening as his wife.[40] Sharon James covers much the same ground, albeit in a more pietistic tone, in a 2003 book chapter dedicated to Sarah's spirituality and its validation of Jonathan's spiritual vision.[41]

In a 1992 book chapter, Amanda Porterfield focuses on the Puritan context of Sarah's spirituality and how it was reshaped through the emphases arising within the nascent evangelical movement. According to Porterfield, "The religious experiences of Sarah Edwards, as interpreted through the psychology of her husband Jonathan, may be seen as illustrating the vitality of Puritan spirituality at the moment of its culmination and transformation in the religious enthusiasms of the Great Awakening."[42] Porterfield especially highlights the bridal language so common within Puritan spirituality and echoed in Sarah's own recollections of her spiritual experiences. Spirituality and sexuality were closely related, at least at the level of terminology. "For

38 Douglas A. Sweeney, *Jonathan Edwards and the Ministry of the Word: A Model of Faith and Thought* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 68.

39 Patricia J. Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor: Religion and Society in Eighteenth-Century Northampton* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 62.

40 Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor,* 140.

41 Sharon James, *In Trouble and in Joy: Four Women Who Lived for God—With Selections from Their Writings* (Auburn, MA: Evangelical Press, 2003), 67–113.

42 Amanda Porterfield, *Female Piety in Puritan New England: The Emergence of Religious Humanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 20–21.

Jonathan Edwards, as for earlier Puritans, religious love not only drew individuals to God, it drew couples together in love affairs that partook of the beauty of the universe. In such love affairs two become one in a union that mirrored and celebrated the nature of God."[43] James McClendon also develops this theme in his theological account of the Edwardses' marriage, to be discussed below.

In a recent dissertation, Elizabeth Friend examines Sarah's spiritual biography in detail, comparing her with the sixteenth-century Catholic mystic Theresa of Avilla. Friend argues that Sarah's "spiritual narrative offers a portrait of Puritan spirituality and the experiences of revival that occurred in New England during the second [*sic*] Great Awakening."[44] Friend contextualizes Sarah's spiritual narrative in the context of the Puritan discipline of writing spiritual autobiographies and, like most other interpreters, she argues that Sarah served as a model for Jonathan's understanding of authentic religious affections. Sarah's spirituality embodied many of the emphases found within earlier Puritan spiritual autobiographies, but it also evidenced many of the qualities of the emerging evangelical spirituality that was becoming prominent in the eighteenth century, especially a clear sense of assurance of salvation.[45] Sarah was thus a transitional figure in the realm of female spiritual autobiographies. Friend emphasizes that Jonathan and Sarah collaborated in crafting Sarah's testimony included in *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival of Religion*, with some portions of the original manuscript written in Sarah's hand and others reflecting Jonathan's handwriting.[46]

Friend also measures Sarah's autobiography through the lens of Jonathan's *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746). Sarah exhibited some of the negative signs identified by Jonathan that do not confirm an authentic work of God, but she also exhibited several of the positive signs that attested to true spirituality. Sarah practiced what Jonathan preached.[47] More recently, three scholars affiliated with the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University published an article that serves as a critical reception history of Sarah's testimony. They show how the document was edited in stages by Jonathan and Sereno Edwards Dwight, Jonathan's great-grandson and editor of a widely used nineteenth-century edition of Edwards's works. Sarah's revivalistic spirituality was actually quite radical and even subversive of the gender hierarchy in New England. Jonathan and Dwight took steps to ensure the narrative would

43 Porterfield, *Female Piety in Puritan New England*, 43.

44 Elizabeth Ford Friend, "The Writing Life: Narrative, Metaphor, and Emotion in the Spiritual Autobiographies of Theresa of Avilla and Sarah Edwards," (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2012), 132.

45 Friend, "The Writing Life," 139.

46 Friend, "The Writing Life," 143.

47 Friend, "The Writing Life," 150–54.

be interpreted as edifying rather than controversial.[48]

William Shea takes a somewhat different approach in an essay about the relationship between the Edwardses' family life and Jonathan's theology. Shea argues that Jonathan and Sarah's love for each other, as well as their love for their children, shaped Jonathan's thought, including his spiritual life, his ecclesiology, his understanding of pastoral ministry, and his vision for Puritan New England.[49] For Shea, Sarah's spirituality shaped Jonathan's piety. Jonathan not only held Sarah up as a model for Edwardsean spirituality, as is commonly suggested, but Sarah also functioned as a model of authentic Christian piety to Jonathan himself.[50] Jonathan's love for Sarah and his esteem of her spiritual vitality never waned but rather grew over time. Her testimony, including her spiritual awakening of 1742, only confirmed Jonathan's earliest intimations of Sarah. She was, for Jonathan, and he hoped for other New England Puritans, "a fulfillment of the old Puritan type of sainthood" as well as "an example of his new definition of true religion."[51] In another brief essay, Perry Beam offers a similar interpretation of Jonathan's "Apostrophe to Sarah Pierpont," which Beam suggests is really a work about Jonathan's own spirituality rather than Sarah's.[52]

A Theological Interpretation

In 1986, theologian James William McClendon wrote the first entry in what would become a three-volume systematic theology from a postliberal Baptist perspective. McClendon titled his first volume *Ethics*, and following the path he blazed in his earlier book *Biography as Theology*, McClendon frames his theological vision around the lives of individuals who exemplified his emphases.[53] Similar to Porterfield, McClendon focuses upon the "embodied life" and "erotic friendship" shared by Jonathan and Sarah.[54] He argues that their sexual and spiritual attraction to each other were both quite real, and reinforced each other, coloring how both Jonathan and Sarah interpreted Sarah's spirituality, which functioned as a test case for Jonathan's

48 Kenneth P. Minkema, Catherine A. Brekus, and Harry S. Stout, "Agitations, Convulsions, Leaping, and Loud Talking: The 'Experiences' of Sarah Pierpont Edwards," *William and Mary Quarterly* 78.3 (July 2021): 491–536.

49 William M. Shea, "Jonathan Edwards and Sarah Pierpont: An Uncommon Union," in *Foundations of Religious Literary*, ed. John V. Apczynski (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 113.

50 Shea, "Jonathan Edwards and Sarah Pierpont," 114–15.

51 Shea, "Jonathan Edwards and Sarah Pierpont," 118.

52 Perry Beam, "'Sarah Pierrepont' and the Gentle Side of Jonathan Edwards," Pleiades 10 (Winter 1990): 38–42.

53 See James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1974).

54 James Wm. McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, Volume 1, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002), 120.

own thought. McClendon recounts all the familiar parts of the Edwardses' narrative, interpreting them through the lens of love toward God and one another.

For McClendon, spiritual love, whether directed upward toward God or sideways toward Sarah, functioned as the link that held Jonathan's life and thought together.[55] Love was even at the root of Jonathan's hellfire preaching in "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" and his controversial membership policy that all church members should be visible saints who could testify to being personally converted. McClendon also argues that Jonathan's organizing principle of "love understood as cordial and general consent to being" animated his theological agenda during the Stockbridge years when he wrote his great theological and philosophical works.[56] This view of love was central to Jonathan's two dissertations, assumed in his treatise on free will, transgressed in his work on original sin, and would have colored his entire theological program had he been able to revise *The History of the Work of Redemption* into a comprehensive body of divinity like he had planned before his untimely death.[57] For McClendon, Jonathan was an eighteenth-century narrative theologian whose love for God and love for his wife mutually reinforced one another and, in turn, mutually informed his entire theological program.

The Edwardses and Slavery

In recent years, scholars have devoted increased attention to Jonathan Edwards and slavery.[58] Most scholars focus on Jonathan's justification of human enslavement, his opposition to the transatlantic slave trade, and his possible influence upon later Edwardsean pastors who adopted abolitionism, most notably Jonathan Edwards Jr.[59] However, several works since the turn of the century give attention to how Jonathan and Sarah were both active in actually enslaving at least eight individuals, beginning with a fourteen-year-old girl named Venus (or perhaps Leah), whom they purchased in 1731.[60] Slavery was part of the fabric of the Edwards family, though

55 McClendon, *Ethics*, 134.

56 McClendon, *Ethics*, 136.

57 McClendon, *Ethics*, 137–38.

58 For a recent discussion of Jonathan Edwards and slavery that summarizes recent scholarship, see Richard Anderson, "Jonathan Edwards Sr.," Princeton & Slavery, available online: https://slavery.princeton.edu/stories/jonathan-edwards. According to its website, The Princeton & Slavery Project is "An exploration of Princeton University's historical ties to the institution of slavery." See https://slavery.princeton.edu/.

59 Kenneth P. Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54.4 (October 1997): 823–34; Kenneth P. Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards's Defense of Slavery," *New England Historical Review* 4 (2002): 23–59.

60 "Receipt for Slave Venus," in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, eds. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 296–97. John Lowe mentions the

their ownership of slaves was an indication of their elevated social class rather than any racial animus toward individuals of African descent.

In his monograph *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England*, Richard Bailey notes several times in the 1740s and 1750s that Jonathan mentioned to various correspondents that Sarah was interested in acquiring household slaves to help with domestic duties.[61] While Bailey only mentions the Edwardses together in passing, Sean McGever gives greater attention to this issue in his recent book *Ownership: The Evangelical Legacy of Slavery in Edwards, Wesley, and Whitefield*.[62] McGever notes that both Jonathan and Sarah "had grown up in houses and among extended family that enslaved Black people."[63] McGever discusses the same correspondence as Bailey, suggesting that the move to Stockbridge gave a greater sense of urgency to Sarah's desire for more slaves to help keep the house in order.[64] In a much-cited article titled "Jonathan Edwards's Defense of Slavery," Kenneth Minkema argues "Sarah, who was regulator of the domestic sphere was probably more directly concerned in the daily oversight of the family slaves than Jonathan, aggressively searched out potential slaves, which shows that women could take an active hand in the slave market."[65]

Whatever Sarah's personal views—and the sources are limited—Jonathan was certainly no pro-slavery advocate during the latter years of his life. Chris Chun has argued that the overall trajectory of Jonathan's views was away from affirmation of slavery, even if he never took the final step—which would have been highly unusual in his context—of freeing all his slaves and speaking out against the institution. Chun writes,

> Edwards was, indeed, a slaveholder in pre-revolutionary America, but he was on a journey on the issue. He grew up defending slavery and owning slaves, but as he aged, he came to denounce the slave trade. His son, and most significant protégé, Samuel Hopkins, became leaders in the nascent abolitionist movement built, in large measure, on theological foundations they had been schooled in and inherited from Edwards Sr.[66]

eight (maybe nine) slaves that we can be certain the Edwardses owned. See John Thomas Lowe, "'The Practice that Prevails': Jonathan Edwards, Slavery, and Race" (PhD thesis, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2022), 111.

61 Richard A. Bailey, *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 70–71.

62 Sean McGever, *Ownership: The Evangelical Legacy of Slavery in Edwards, Wesley, and Whitefield* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2024), 98.

63 McGever, *Ownership*, 98.

64 McGever, *Ownership*, 106–7.

65 Minkema, "Jonathan Edwards's Defense of Slavery," 43.

66 Chris Chun, "Jonathan Edwards and Slavery: A Timeline of His Life and Legacy," 20. I am grateful

John Lowe, who has written the most recent major work on Edwards and slavery, takes a similar view. According to Lowe, "Edwards represents a transitional—and yet pivotal—moment in the narrative of New England antislavery in the way he denounced the trade while remaining an enslaver himself."[67]

Slavery was part of and parcel of the eighteenth century, and there was no formal anti-slavery movement in the American colonies until the latter half of Jonathan Edwards's life. Owning slaves was consistent with Jonathan and Sarah's family heritage, their theological convictions, and their ascending station in life. Their slaves were just as much a part of their household as their children. Jonathan believed in the spiritual equality of his slaves, which remained in tension with their social station. As uncomfortable as this is for us today, one of the ways that Jonathan demonstrated his love for Sarah was by seeking slaves to ease her burden of managing their household. Thus, their views on enslavement, while by no means unique to their time and place, should nevertheless be taken into account when interpreting their marriage. Though perhaps exemplary in most ways, not all of Jonathan and Sarah's marital priorities and practices should be embraced by modern evangelicals. Though counterfactual history is tricky business, it is at least reasonable to hope that, had Jonathan and Sarah lived two decades longer, their views on this matter would have aligned with younger men such as Samuel Hopkins and their own son, Jonathan Edwards Jr., both of whom exemplified Edwardsean opposition to human enslavement.

Conclusion

In closing, we might ask the question, "Will the real Jonathan and Sarah Edwards please stand up?" Were they simply a leading evangelical pastor and wife who were caught up in, and key contributors to, the forces that were causing the older Puritanism to evolve into the newer evangelicalism? Or, should we also move from exposition to application and hold their marriage up as an exemplary model of partnership for modern ministry couples? Should we focus upon how Jonathan understood Sarah's religious experiences and used them to advance his own spiritual agenda for New England? Or, was his love for Sarah near the heart of his theology, second only to his love for God? It seems there is some truth in each of these interpretations. It also seems none of them alone provides an adequate account of the Edwardses' uncommon union. And what are we to make of their commitment to human en-

to Chun for making a copy of this unpublished paper available.

67 John T. Lowe, *Benevolence and Bondage: Jonathan Edwards, Slavery, Race, and the Paradox of Spiritual Bondage* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2026), 76. I am grateful to Lowe for making a pre-publication copy of his monograph available.

slavement during nearly the entirety of their marriage?

I would suggest that the time is ripe for some intrepid doctoral student to devote a dissertation to a fresh take on Jonathan and Sarah's marriage. How were they illustrative of other ministerial marriages among New England Puritans? What about the wider transatlantic Reformed tradition? Other than Jonathan being an intellectual polymath and writing rapturous short treatises about his wife, was anything else unique about their marriage? Did their marriage influence other marriages among writers in the Edwardsean tradition as it evolved into the New Divinity and New Haven traditions?

For those interested more in a good seminar paper than a dissertation topic, some related topics that might not be fully worthy of a dissertation include fresh studies on Jonathan and Sarah's approach to parenting and how they conceived of their household. Perhaps this essay will inspire grist for some budding historian's mill. For now, I think we can say with certainty that, somewhat unlike Jonathan's contemporaries Whitefield and John Wesley, but more like Martin and Katie Luther from an earlier generation, the Edwardses' marriage was filled with deep affections—both of the romantic kind and the spiritual, dare I say, even Edwardsean variety. And in that way, at least, they are worth emulating.

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IN THE ABSENCE OF EVIDENCE: MILL AND JAMES AGAINST HUME'S "OF MIRACLES" IN CONVERSATION WITH ANCIENT VOICES AND SACRED TEXT

ADAM GROZA

Adam Groza is president of Gateway Seminary in Ontario, CA..

Introduction

In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, David Hume argued against the rationality of belief in miracles on the basis of empiricism. According to Hume, a miracle would constitute a violation of human experience (for example, a violation of the laws of nature). Hume argues that it is never wise (or justified) to believe in miracles on the basis of evidence. In the 237 years since its publication, philosophers and theologians have responded to Hume's work in a variety of ways. Roy Holland has suggested that Hume's definition of miracle begs the question.[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein offered a phenomenological approach to understanding the reasonableness of miracles, in which divine actions are inferred due to their significance.[2] Others, such as Bishop Charles M'llvaine, the late nineteenth century chaplain of the United States Senate and professor of ethics at West Point, claimed that belief in miracles is not based on the veracity of human experience as Hume had suggested, but, rather, upon the omnipotence of God *qua* God.[3]

1 R. F. Holland, "The Miraculous," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2, no. [1] (1965): 43–51. See also J. Houston, *Reported Miracles: A Critique of Hume* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958). See also Peter Winch, "Asking Too Many Questions," in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, author/editor. Claremont Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 200-14,

3 Daniel Wilson, Lecture Four: "Response to David Hume," in *The Evidences of Christianity: Stated in a Popular and Practical Manner, in a Course of Lectures*, 6th ed. (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1844).

John Stuart Mill, William James, and David Hume

Contrary to these responses to Hume, one finds in both John Stuart Mill and William James unique responses that echo ancient sentiments regarding the rationality of belief in the absence of evidence, or in the absence of what would seem reasonable to someone committed to Humean skepticism.[4]

In *Three Essays on Religion*, written between 1850–1870, Mill attempts to construct a utilitarian argument for the reasonableness of faith.[5] Given the significance of religion and the intellectual impact of Hume's *Enquiry*, Mill addresses Hume directly when he says, "[T]here are thinkers who regard it as a truth of reason that miracles are impossible."[6] Mill objects to Hume for "giving *a priori* validity to the conclusions of an *a posteriori* philosophy."[7] While Hume's skepticism about miracles is rooted in his commitment to empiricism, which leads him to reject miracles on the basis of reason or observation, Mill seeks to show the individual and social utility of religion.[8] Mill says: "The essence of religion is the strong and earnest direction of the emotions and desires towards an ideal object, recognized as of the highest excellence, and as rightfully paramount over all selfish objects of desire."[9]

Mill is not interested in religion as mere wish fulfillment apart from reason or evidence.[10] He does not concede to the demand for faith apart from reason or to the suspension of evidence in regard to religion. Religion is inseparably linked to properly directed belief. The utility of religion is the betterment of mankind, the expansion of happiness and human flourishing.[11]

4 Robert Carr has described Mill as a "reluctant skeptic": "The Religious Thought of John Stuart Mill: A Study in Reluctant Skepticism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 23, no. 4 (1962): 475–95.

5 John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1874). Published by his stepdaughter the year after his death, the essays demonstrate that Mill was not dismissive of religion, as had previously been assumed.

6 John Stuart Mill, "Essays on Ethics, Religion, and Society," *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 10, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 458. Accessed online at https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/241/Mill_0223-10_EBk_v6.0.pdf.

7 Mill, *Collected Works*, 458.

8 Mill, *Collected Works*, 413.

9 Mill, *Collected Works*, 426.

10 Mill, *Collected Works*, 411. Mill says, "The wish to believe does not arise only from selfish but often from the most disinterested feelings; and though it cannot produce the unwavering and perfect reliance which once existed, it fences round all that remains of the impressions of early education; it often causes direct misgivings to fade away by disuse; and above all, it induces people to continue laying out their lives according to doctrines which have lost part of their hold on the mind, and to maintain towards the world the same, or a rather more demonstrative attitude of belief, than they thought it necessary to exhibit when their personal conviction was more complete."

11 Julie C. Van Camp, "Review of *Three Essays on Religion*," *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*,

Mill is not only favorable to the idea of religion in general, but of religious faith based upon miraculous events. It would be wrong therefore to conclude that Mill is deistic.[12] While Mill is skeptical in private correspondence about "spiritualists" who lie about their "pretend experiences,"[13] he nevertheless leaves room for the possibility of miracles, saying:

> What can be said with truth on the side of miracles amounts only to this: ... there is nothing so inherently impossible or absolutely incredible in this supposition [that there is some evidence of the reality of a Creator] as to preclude any one from hoping that it may perhaps be true.[14]

In the absence of evidence, and given that there is no reason to assume that miracles are impossible (contra Hume), Mill sees that theism in general, and monotheism in particular, are the best grounds for the betterment of society as an expression of "wants of the human mind" that religion supplies."[15] Mill relates religion and poetry to expressions of what would be called imago Dei in biblical anthropology.

Mill calls religious belief the "indulgence to hope."[16] He argues that this is a rational indulgence and proper use of imagination because it brings "power for increasing the happiness of life and giving elevation to the character."[17] In his reflection on religious hope and imagination, he observes that "the principles which ought to govern the cultivation and regulation of the imagination. . . are a subject which has never yet engaged serious consideration of philosophers."[18]

The concept of "indulgence to hope" can be illustrated in the writing of Japanese poet Kobayashi Issa (1763–1827):

> This world of dew
> is a world of dew,
> and yet, and yet.[19]

September 24, 2009, https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/three-essays-on-religion/.

12 John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic* (London: John W. Parker, 1843), bk. 3, chap. 25. It remains unclear how Mill evolved in his views on miracles from the time he advocated for the improbability of miracles as a violation of natural law.

13 Mill, *Collected Works*, 473.

14 Mill, *Collected Works*, 481.

15 Mill, *Three Essays*, 100.

16 Mill, *Three Essays*, 248-49.

17 Mill, *Three Essays*, 248.

18 Mill, *Three Essays*, 248–49. In "On Liberty," Mill makes a similar argument from indulgence in regard to liberty. His concern in regard to liberty, as with religion, is the commission of de lunico, a reference to a 19th century legal term (de lunatico inquirendo) meaning that a person is of unsound mind (e.g. a lunatic). In regard to liberty, as with religion, Mill is laying out criteria for rational speculation versus irrational speculation. The rationality of speculation corresponds to likely outcomes.

19 From the Japanese: "tsuyu no yo wa, tsuyu no yo nagara, sari nagara."

Issa is commonly interpreted to be reflecting upon the meaninglessness of life given its transiency. The world of dew represents fragility and impermanence. This perspective is a common reflection of Issa's practice of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism. Everything is passing, "and yet, and yet." This final line contains what Mill might call "indulgence to hope."

Issa's hope ("and yet, and yet") is an existential necessity. Nietzsche wrote in *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* (i.e. *The Gay Science*, 1882) that the absence of God is an unbearable weight.[20] Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) would later describe this as an existential crisis.[21]

Mill is postulating religious belief as rational hope; the efficacy of which is not only societal but existential (i.e., character). In his book *John Stuart Mill: A Secular Life* (2015), Timothy Larsen writes about Mill's belief in God as a very probable hypothesis.[22] Mill was a committed rationalist, but in his posthumously published essay "Theism," he made the case for belief in God and in Christ. Larsen argues that Mill was not as secular as many would believe, or some would wish. Mill's religious belief resulted in criticism from his own disciple, John Morley, who wrote in *The Fortnightly Review* that Mill's religion and rationalism were "profoundly irreconcilable."[23]

In the absence of evidence, Mill concludes that miracles are not only possible but necessary to the metaphysical reality of monotheism and the corresponding human desire for religion, what Mircea Eliade called *homo religiosus* in his influential book *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1957). Eliade argued that man is not only a thinking being (*homo sapien*) but a religious being (*homo religiosus*):

> Whatever the historical context in which he is placed, homo religiosus always believes that there is an absolute reality, the sacred, which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it real.[24]

The evidence which Mill puts forth is both the internal evidence of desire and the corresponding benefits of religion for society. Utility, for Mill, proves the point of theism in a way that is consistent with his commitment to empiricism.

A similar approach is taken by William James, who in 1896 published *The Will to Believe*. James says that the essence of religion is twofold. First, religion says that the best things are eternal. Second, religion

20 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), sec. 125.

21 Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949), 11.

22 Timothy Larsen, *John Stuart Mill: A Secular Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 14.

23 Timothy Larsen, "A Surprisingly Religious John Stuart Mill," Oxford University Press Blog, December 7, 2018, https://blog.oup.com/2018/12/surprisingly-religious-john-stuart.

24 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1957), 202.

says that we are better off in our temporary lives if we believe in eternal things.[25] The kind of belief which James, like Mill, has in mind is consistent with reason and the evidence of utility.

One significant reason why religion has utility is that it gives meaning to life. Starting in section thirty-two of *The Will to Believe*, James asks the question which Camus will raise in the opening paragraph of *The Myth of Sisyphus*: Is life worth living? Both men answer in the affirmative, but for very different reasons.[26] For Camus, the choice to live in the face of meaninglessness is the essence of life. He finds no inherent hope, as does Issa ("and yet, and yet"). Unlike Camus, James believes that life is worth living because religion helps to awaken the human spirit from pessimism, which he calls "a nightmare view of life."[27]

Religion awakes a person from the nightmare of pessimism and from the existential crisis which Camus tried earnestly (though perhaps unsuccessfully) to help his reader avert. To be awake from the nightmare of a life without God is "complete and joyous, and it corresponds to the freer exercise of religious trust and fancy."[28] Waiting for evidence in order to believe, what James calls "agnostic positivism," is unreasonable because "neutrality is not only inwardly difficult, it is also outwardly unrealizable, where our relations to an alternative are practical and vital."[29]

James therefore advocates for reasonable belief in the absence of evidence when the following conditions are met. First, when there is not enough evidence to settle the matter. Second, when a person must choose. Third, when both choices are "live options" and not merely theoretical (as in the case of agnostic positivism). Fourth, when one's choice will have significant consequences. In such cases, belief is reasonable.

Both Mill and James connect the benefits of aspirational belief in regard to religion to morality and the societal benefits of morality grounded in theism. James identifies two tendencies of humanity, one called the "easy-going mood" and the other the "strenuous mood." When in an easy-going mood, a person shrinks back from hardship in order to experience immediate pleasure. By contrast, the strenuous mood enables a person to embrace hardship or discomfort in order to obtain a greater good. Religion, according to James, moves a person from an easy-going mood to a strenuous mood. Since according to James

25 William James, *The Will to Believe* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1897), sec. 41.

26 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955). Camus posits the question of suicide as the ultimate philosophical question and James says that one is comforted knowing that "you may end it when you will." Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955); William James, "Is Life Worth Living?," *in The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897), 38

27 James, *The Will to Believe*, sec. 41.

28 James, *The Will to Believe*, sec. 40.

29 James, *The Will to Believe*, sec. 55.

this is the "deepest difference, practically" to religion, a society lacking religious motivation for virtue will cultivate an easy-going population, morally speaking; a dilemma C.S. Lewis identified as "men without chests" in *The Abolition of Man*. For these reasons, James advocates belief in God and in miracles apart from evidence.[30]

Mill's concept of the "indulgence of hope" and James' *Will to Believe* have drawn parallels to Pascal's Wager. James mercilessly anticipates the comparison and dismisses the wager as "a last desperate snatch at a weapon against the hardness of the unbelieving heart," saying "when religious faith expresses itself thus (i.e., in the language of games) it is put to its last trumps."[31] But James misunderstands the Wager, the force of which is intended for a homogenous religious context where the question at hand is whether or not to believe in a *particular* God. It is not intended to be a means to adjudicate *which* God one will choose to believe.[32]

These differences aside, it seems that there is a great deal in common between Mill, James, and Pascal in regard to the relationship between faith and evidence. All three are concerned with the practical application of faith for social good. All three see evidence and reason alone as being insufficient to settle the matter of religious belief. All three disagree with skepticism in regard to the reasonableness of faith where miracles are involved. All three understand that hope, volition, and choice play a defining role in religious experience.

Hope and Epistemology

The language of hope, volition, and choice can be understood as appealing to epistemic posture. Where evidence is intended to force a person's hand in regard to religious faith, argument, appealing to epistemic posture only intends to incline a person towards religious faith. If evidence does not settle the matter of religious faith, then a person must choose; in doing so, why would a person choose a universe in which there is no God? Certainly Mill, James, and Pascal see the clear implications, as do Nietzsche and Camus, albeit in reaching different conclusions.

30 James, *The Will to Believe*, sec. 80.

31 James, *The Will to Believe*, sec. 6.

32 For discussion on the "many Gods objection" to Pascal's Wager and the utility of the Wager: "Anyone who accepts this matrix (and supposes non-zero probabilities) will conclude that Muslim belief, like Christian belief, has infinite expected utility. Thus, this wager fails to single out Christian belief as uniquely rational. However, although this wager cannot discriminate between Christian and Muslim belief, it can convict the non-theist of prudential irrationality, since non-theism has only finite expected utility." Craig Duncan, "The Many-Gods Objection to Pascal's Wager: A Defeat, then a Resurrection," in *Pascal's Wager*, ed. Paul Bartha and Lawrence Pasternack (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 162.

Pragmatic arguments for the reasonableness of religious belief in the absence of evidence have ancient precedence. One finds in both Plato (*Laws*) and Aristotle (*Physics*) inferences from concrete particulars to abstract (and eternal) realities. In both cases, these realities are closely linked to the coherence of the system (i.e., that it works) and to the moral implications (i.e., the common good). Augustine, as well, presents faith as rational, practical, and preceding knowledge.[33] In *City of God*, he argues for truth both by *thesis* and *antithesis*.[34] The Epicurean arguments for a person to consult their happiness, in relation to actions, are similarly pragmatic although the nature of their belief system is perhaps not religious in a traditional sense.

Pragmatic arguments exist in Western, Eastern, and Native American religious traditions. Philosopher Scott L. Pratt writes in his book *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy* (2002) that while pragmatism is generally regarded to be an American approach to philosophy independent from European confines of tradition, it can be found before the nineteenth century in Native American religion and philosophy.[35] In Native tradition, pragmatic argumentation is evident in regard to the concept of place. Existing in a certain place, for Native Americans, corresponded to well-being and often was rooted in creation myths. Creation myth led to concepts of sacredness of land and wellbeing. Together, these became the foundation of all other religious sentiments.[36]

Early Christian writers such as Athenagoras of Athens made arguments for the goodness, truth, and beauty of Christianity. While modern apologetics focuses on truth (i.e. validity), premodern apologists appealed to goodness and beauty as well as truth. In his book *Embassy for the Christian*, Athenagoras argues that societal outcomes are better given the Christian faith than in polytheistic alternatives.

These arguments do not agree on the substance of belief but on the form of appeal. Pascal, for instance, is not generous in his comments about Islam (as a religion), but his kind of pragmatic argument for belief has a rich tradition within Islam. M. Shahid Alam has argued that The Qur'an includes a version of the Wager which, similar to that of Pascal, "satisfies all the conditions set out by William James for such a wager to have force."[37] The arguments in the Qur'an (as

33 Mark J. Boone, "Augustine and William James on the Rationality of Faith," *The Heythrop Journal* 61, no. 4 (2020): 648–59, https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.13123.

34 Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans,* trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11.18.

35 Scott L. Pratt, *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

36 Vine Deloria Jr., "Worshiping the Golden Calf: Freedom of Religion in Scalia's America," in *For This Land: Writings on Religion in America*, ed. James Treat (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 212.

37 M. Shahid Alam, *Pragmatic Arguments in the Qur'an for Belief* (manuscript, Northeastern Uni-

with Pascal, Mill, and James) are pragmatic because they make utility (in the absence of evidence) "the criterion for forming beliefs."[38] One such Qur'anic Wager identified by Alam is in Surah 41 (*Fussilat*), in which pagans, such as Âd and Thamûd (41:13) are seen as paying the price of their unbelief.

In response to the skeptics, he poses the following question: "Imagine if this Qur'an is truly from Allah and you deny it?"[39]

> Implicit in this question is the same wager that is set up by Pascal: Either the Qur'an is from God, or it is not. If the Qur'an is from God, there is afterlife, there is an eternity in Hell for disbelievers, etc. The converse holds if the Qur'an is not from God. These are your only options: and you have to choose one or the other. You have chosen to reject the Qur'an, together with its belief in an afterlife. You are cocky about your choice: you think that afterlife is a lie and, therefore, you have nothing to fear from death.[40]

The Bible also utilizes pragmatic arguments that appeal to self-interest, consequences, and social implications of belief. The biblical character Gamaliel, for instance, argues before the Sanhedrin that if the Christian movement is from God, no one will be able to stop it, and if it is not from God, then it will come to nothing. In effect, he is saying "We don't know" and in the absence of evidence, effectively asking, "Are you sure you want to risk opposing God?"[41]

Of course, both the Bible and Qua'ran appeal to evidence for belief in God; notably by appealing to creation and omnipotence.[42] This suggests, as Jeff Jordan has observed, that the kind of pragmatic argument one can trace from these ancient sources through Pascal to Mill and James are not opposed to evidence in regard to faith. It is not the case that evidence plays no part in faith, but rather that evidence does not settle the matter apart from belief.[43]

Moreover, both the Bible and Qur'an teach that people will be without excuse when they stand before God. Sūrat al-'Arāf 7:172 says:

> [Prophet], when your Lord took out the offspring from the loins of the Children of Adam and made them bear witness about themselves, He said, "Am I not your Lord?" and they replied, "Yes, we bear witness." So you cannot say on the Day of Resurrection, "We were not aware of this."

versity, July 27, 2011), accessed online at https://philarchive.org/archive/ALAPAI-2, 2.

38 Alam, *Pragmatic Arguments in the Qur'an for Belief*, 3.

39 See Surah 41:52, accessed online at https://quran.com/41.

40 Alam, *Pragmatic Arguments in the Qur'an for Belief*, 4.

41 See Acts 5:33-42.

42 See Surah 7:54 and Psalm 19:1.

43 To see the role of evidence in Scripture, for instance, see Acts 1:1 and the reference to the resurrection and πολλοῖς τεκμηρίοις ("many signs or proofs").

Similarly, the Apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20 that unbelievers are without excuse (ἀναπολογήτους).[44] Elsewhere the Psalmist says, "The fool has said in his heart there is no God."[45] Similarly in al-Baqarah, unbelievers are fools but do not know that they are fools.[46] Both the Bible and the Qur'an situate pragmatic arguments for belief in the context of what should be overwhelming evidence, the impact of which is affected by sin.[47] There is evidence, but unbelievers are unable or unwilling to see the evidence properly.[48]

This gap between unbelief, evidence, and volition is handled differently by theologians and philosophers and can be, among the everyday faithful, a source of great controversy. In terms of those discussed in this paper, Pascal advises that those who want to believe but are unable to essentially "fake it till you make it": act faithfully in the hopes that God would reveal himself and impart saving faith. In essence, do the things that believers do in the hope that in so doing you will become a believer. For Mill, belief in God as "a probable hypothesis" is an act of hope for the sake of what the proposition of theism means, by inference, for explaining the universe in accordance with the principle of utility.[49]

James saw the idea of materialist determinism, with no room for God, the soul, etc. to be the great failing of his generation:

> And this systematic denial on science's part of personality as a condition of events, this rigorous belief that in its own essential and innermost nature our world is a strictly impersonal world, may, conceivably, as the whirligig of time goes round, prove to be the very defect that our descendants will be most surprised at in our own boasted science, the omission that to their eyes will most tend to make it look perspectiveless (sic) and short.[50]

As a result, James emphasizes the humanity of volition and of choice in a way that (perhaps surprisingly) echoes Nietzsche and Camus. Religion, for James, is not an enemy of the will, but that which invites a person to activate their will and choose to believe in a universe with a greater good: *And yet, and yet*.

44 1 Peter 3:15; Romans 1:20. The believer is called to make a defense of the Christian faith (απολογήτους) while the unbeliever is without defense (ἀναπολογήτους).

45 Psalm 14:1; Psalm 53:1.

46 See Surah 2:13.

47 See Surah 2:17–18 and Ephesians 2:1.

48 It should be noted that there are corresponding evidential arguments in Christianity that are lacking in Islam. For instance, Paul before Agrippa in Acts 26 refers to the death and resurrection of Christ as public events and thus verifiable (i.e. "these things have not been done in a corner"). In contrast to the publicly verifiable miracles of Christianity, Islam's founding miracles are private (e.g. Mohammed's vision of Gabriel in the cave of Hira as read in the Sahih al-Bukhari 4953).

49 Mill's approach, in this regard, seems similar to that of Plato in regard to the Forms.

50 James, *The Will to Believe,* section 327.

Ironically, while it would appear that Hume's metaphysical skepticism and empiricism would naturally lead to atheism or agnosticism, he was likely a believer. The traditional claim that Hume was an atheist or agnostic is a conclusion made by such accomplished philosophers as Anthony Flew, John Price, and A. J. Ayer. This conclusion appears to be the majority position in what Timothy Yoder calls "the conventional story" in his 2005 doctoral which seeks to challenge this interpretation of Hume.[51]

However, it may likely be the case that Hume engaged in strategic ambiguity in regard to his own beliefs.[52] Yoder has presented compelling arguments to the effect that Hume believed in "genuine theism" and "true religion," the substance of which is outside the purview of this paper. What is clear is that Hume critiqued the negative social impact of superstitious religion and, for someone who apparently didn't believe in religion, was seemingly unable to stop writing about it.[53]

Yoder argues that Hume's intention is not only to critique the shortcomings of religion, but also to identify what was right and true in religion.[54] Hume is clearly a religious nonconformist, but passages in the essay "Of Superstitions and Enthusiasm" and in the *Natural History of Religion* and *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* reveal Hume to be a theist.[55]

Hume's theism appears to be based, in part, on the fact that belief in God is innate, universal, certain, and self-evident.[56] Yoder observes that for Hume, the proper perspective on-God "is a fideistic one, in which the otherness of God is emphasized, and the likeness of God to human beings is severely minimized."[57]

Hume does not seem to be very far from Pascal, who is routinely identified as a fideistic philosopher.[58] However, Pascal's most profound religious epiphany was in a turn from the God of the philosophers (reason) to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (reve-

51 Timothy S. Yoder, "Hume's Conclusions on the Existence and Nature of God" (PhD diss., Marquette University, 2005), https://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations/AAI3184687; later published as *Hume on God: Irony, Deism, and Genuine Theism* (London: Continuum, 2009).

52 Yoder calls this strategic ambiguity the "puzzlement factor" to Hume in regard to religious belief 8-11.

53 Yoder, "Hume's Conclusions on the Existence and Nature of God," 168.

54 Yoder, "Hume's Conclusions on the Existence and Nature of God." Yoder notes that is right and true in religion is called "genuine theism" by Hume, 169, c.f. 180n290.

55 In the Introduction of *Natural History of Religion,* Hume argues like Eliade that religion is a universal innate propensity in humans which is a "stamp," according to Hume, which God (the "Divine Workman") has set upon mankind and which is a source of human dignity. (NHR 15:4–6, R 75), as quoted by Yoder, 203.

56 David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 2.1.

57 Yoder, "Hume's Conclusions on the Existence and Nature of God," 213.

58 Richard Amesbury, "Fideism," in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward N. Zalta (and Uri Nodelman as co-principal editor since recent updates), substantive revision February 5, 2022, accessed [your access date, e.g., March 20, 2026], https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/fideism/.

lation). Hume's project is to emphasize the importance of philosophy to genuine religion, quoting Francis Bacon: "A little philosophy makes men atheists: A great deal reconciles them to religion."[59] Hume wanted to encourage skepticism against the human tendency towards excessive firmness of conviction and in so doing to point the reader to common sense experience. He says that "almost all reasoning is there reduced to experience; and to the belief, which attends experience."[60]

Conclusion

Pragmatic argumentation for God's existence and for belief attempts to bypass abstract reasoning and argumentation by appealing to the practical implications of faith for both the individual and society. Such arguments take different forms and have a rich history in philosophy, the Bible, and the Qur'an. In rejecting miracles on the basis of empiricism, Hume is attempting to encourage a philosophical revival of belief (i.e., genuine religion) not based in superstition but in experience, which is where, as we have seen, pragmatic arguments tend to draw their greatest force.

Pragmatic arguments need not imply subjectivism. Arguing from subjective experience does not imply that reality, or truth, are subjective. William James, in section 6 of *The Will to Believe*, does not doubt that objective reality exists (in regard to religious truth) but only that humans can access such truth by reason and intellect. In place of evidential arguments, pragmatic arguments appeal to experience, benefits, and outcomes. Because these things can be verified through observation, both the Christian and Islamic task of persuasion is compatible with such pragmatic argumentation.[61]

Hume's arguments against miracles and the responses from Mill and James find psychological, pragmatic, and utilitarian reasons to justify the rationality of religious belief. The responses of Mill and James have an ancient and diverse precedent as well as a contemporary appeal. Here is one place where Islamic and Christian philosophers can come together and unite in opposing arguments against the supernatural. Both Islamic and Christian theistic (as opposed to deistic) worldviews promote a God who actively and consistently intervenes in the world. This intervention, an intervention into a world that Christians and Muslims believe God created to be worked within the cause-and-effect system, is defined as a "miracle." While it admittedly takes faith to believe in miracles, it is in miracles that both the Islamic and Christian faiths make their exclusivist claims.

59 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5.2.

60 David Hume, *An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature, 1740*, ed. J. M. Keynes and P. Sraffa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 27, quoted in Yoder, "Hume's Conclusions on the Existence and Nature of God," 46–47.

61 For the task of persuasion in Christianity, see persuasion (peithó) in such passages of the Bible as Acts 19:8 and Acts 26:26–28. For the task of persuasion in Islam, see the Koran (2:256): "Let there be no compulsion in religion, for the truth stands out clearly from falsehood."

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ONTOLOGY, REVELATION, AND CHRISTOLOGY: SLIPPING CHRIST'S DEITY IN THROUGH THE BACK DOOR WITH ISAAK DORNER

ROBB TORSETH

Robb Torseth is Public Services Librarian & Adjunct Professor at Gateway Seminary.

Introduction

Ordered Christology: Three Approaches

The main thesis of the present paper is to argue the importance for the centrality of the ontological *a priori* to theological construction, with special regard to Christology. Christology is thus the destination of the paper, but the journey is one that will happen through both methodology and ontology, paying close attention to how significant theological *a priori* are constructed, and leading in to Christology as a fundamentally distributed doctrine. In reality, this paper is one that takes a step back from first order Christological construction and begins with the question of second order methodological and dogmatic antecedents: when and where do we consider Christology within the realm of revealed theology, and how do we get there? In simpler terms, where is the theological "position" of Christology? The question is nothing new, and considerations of Christology as dominated by philosophical and theological assumptions can be seen as primary modes even in the early Nicaean and Chalcedonian debates. Here Donald Fairbairn has done great legwork in his *Grace and Christology in the Early Church*, mapping out what is essentially a Christology "from above" in the Nicene tradition, versus one "from below" in the Arian and Nestorian traditions, the latter of which neglected the important preconsiderations of sin and grace to the incarnate mission of the Son.[1] According to Fairbairn,

1 Donald Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

the centrality of the assumption of a three-act scheme of salvation—creation, fall, and redemption—led necessarily to the delineation of orthodox Christology, as opposed to a two-act scheme, which held to creation and glorification.[2] This, again, could fit nicely with the more recent language inaugurated by Wolfhart Pannenberg of a "Christology from above" versus a "Christology from below": was Christ's mission anthrocentric, to exult and deify human nature, or was it theocentric, to redeem humanity to a glorified personal relationship with its creator?[3]

Underlying the conversation is the assumption of certain theological dualisms and the need to resolve them. A few of the unaddressed questions in early debates that may have led to speaking past one another may have included: what sin is; whether it is equivalent to or distinguished from mere finitude; and the relationship between the goodness of God and creation. Overcoming the presupposed disparity between God and the world, between Creator and creation, was of particular import to the lifelong theological project of John Bainbridge Webster (1955–2016), who was devoted to better articulating a "theological theology."[4] In his 2015 article, "Christology, Theology, Economy," Webster acknowledges the difficulty of dualisms in approaching theological integration of the person and work of Christ. He noted that it "straddles the two subject-domains of systematic theology," i.e. theology proper and economy, stating that "Christology is a distributed doctrine." Webster gives a four-point Christological sketch: 1. "Christology is a division of the doctrine of the Trinity"; 2. "as a division of the doctrine of the Trinity, Christology is concerned with both theology and economy theology first, economy by derivation"; 3. it is a distributed doctrine, "not restricted to particular locus of a system of Christian teaching"; and 4. "Christology is not in and of itself the starting point or centre of Christian teaching, but one indispensable element of a complex whole."[5] For Webster, then, consideration of God *in se* must hold a priority in any Christological formulation, and further, the causal priority

2006), 28, 39, 103, 114-5.

2 Fairbairn, 17-8.

3 See the analysis by Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 21-5.

4 Webster, "Theological Theology," *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (New York: T&T Clark, 2016), 11-31; cf. "What Makes Theology Theological?" *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: T&T Clark, 2016), 1:213-24, hereafter *GWM*; esp. the survey by Michael Allen, "Theological Theology: Webster's Theological Project," *A Companion to the Theology of John Webster*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2021), 21-44. The phrase may have been inspired by Eberhard Jüngel, the subject of Webster's doctoral dissertation, who so adamantly advocated for a return to "theological theology, if this phrase be allowed" (Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, trans. Darrell L. Guder [Reprint, New York: T&T Clark, 2014], 4).

5 Webster, *GWM*, 1:48.

of Christ's deity and his freedom as Logos must be observed. Webster provides what could be considered a touchstone for how to approach Christology, carefully ordering Christological considerations within the dogmatic account of the Triune God's nature and economy. As such, it is unsurprising that Webster's account largely resonates with the tradition stemming from Cyril and reaching through Aquinas. His method also finds company with the latest volume from Stephen Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism,* which advocates similarly that the dual natures of the one person of Christ must be considered both compatible and ordered causally toward deity first. In Duby's account, it is not improper to call Christ's flesh an "instrument" (*organon*) if one considers the relation of the incarnation to the Son's mission to reveal the Father on the one hand, and the compatibility of created realities to the facility of the Creator on the other.[6]

A response to this would be the recent Christological formulation of Bruce McCormack, in his 2021 work *The Humility of the Eternal Son*. There, McCormack intentionally fronts Christology as the first of a three-volume project, his goal being to, in his own words, "repair Chalcedon." According to McCormack, there is an "aporia at the heart of the Definition," which he states this way: "Jesus of Nazareth contributes nothing to the constitution of the 'person.' He has no constitutive role to play in the composition of the 'person' in which two natures are said to 'subsist' … he stands in no real relation to the Logos."[7] McCormack would undoubtedly disagree with Webster and Duby concerning the causal inferiority of the flesh of Christ in theological estimation—indeed, this seems to be a primary point of contention, i.e. that mere economic suffering or experience is no experience at all.[8] Thus, in critiquing the writings of Cyril, McCormack is quick to show "the fundamental asymmetry" of the church father's account of Jesus's experiences, which he does not believe to be theologically satisfying: Christ's humanity is merely instrumentalized under the ownership of the single subject, where it would seem the Word alone is the active nature, leaving the door open to Nestorianism.[9] For McCormack, this is due to certain considerations on the level of theology proper that make the mutuality between the two natures of Christ fundamentally incompatible. McCormack self-avowedly desires to strike certain attributes like simplicity and impassibility from the record. Instead, and with a heuristic aim to fix Chalcedon, McCormack endorses what he styles "a Reformed version of kenotic

6 Steven Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism: Biblical Christology in Light of the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 157, 183.

7 Bruce McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 31. Hereafter, *Humility*.

8 McCormack, *Humility,* 47.

9 McCormack, *Humility,* 48.

Christology," capitalizing on the hotly-debated *kenosis* concept and, subsequently, advocating what he calls "ontological receptivity." Based on predetermination and the eternal generation of the Son, there was never a Logos *asarkos*, a "Word without flesh": there was always the ontological receptivity of the Logos to become flesh. To this McCormack adds the concept of "absorption," where the experience of the biological death of Jesus is "absorbed' into the divine life eternal.

McCormack does not wish to jettison Chalcedon entirely, striving to retain significant *theologia* like hypostasis, substance, and nature, although his final chapter, where he proffers what he calls a "repair" of Chalcedon, reads as a salvage. He attempts to avoid Schleiermacher's reduction and rejection of Chalcedonian categories, while simultaneously ignoring the components underlying those categories, e.g. nature of Creator and creation. Schleiermacher's Christology is a muffled voice beneath the fabric of McCormack's argument: McCormack, who could be considered both a Barthian and Neo-Kantian, does not wish to endorse a view of Christ's nature that is dogmatically reductive on the level of Schleiermacher, and certainly does not wish to present Christ as mere perfected God-consciousness.

Yet Schleiermacher's Christology should not be approached in a reductive fashion either, and this study must gravitate to him. For Schleiermacher, Christ as Redeemer is the foundation and centerpoint of the Christian faith. On the level of his structural dogmatic, then, he considers the centrality of Christ to the founding of the Christian faith within his earliest discussions on redemption in section 11. For Schleiermacher, the Christian community is one that becomes conscious of its origin in the redemption provided by its founder, Jesus of Nazareth. Thus "redemption is effected by Christ and comes to consciousness within the Christian communion," this redemption being "the central point of religion." Importantly, what Schleiermacher means by redemption is not a forensic reality, but rather, "kindling the God-consciousness" of humanity, the need for this being apparent in humanity's falling away from a perfected God-consciousness, what he calls "God-forgetfulness."[10] This is consistent with Schleiermacher's later consideration of sin, which he views as a disparity between God-consciousness and our active dependence on God.[11] When he finally arrives at the person of Christ in section 93, the focus is thus on Christ's impeccability as ground for his work as Redeemer: Christ demonstrates the perfect God-consciousness, and in this sense he is both the same as every human, yet different. This is all a bit dense, and if we are to take a page from Karl Barth, we can look at Schleiermacher's sermons for elucidation here: in an 1810 sermon, "Concerning the Union of

10 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith,* eds. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (London: T&T Clark, 1999), s. 11. Hereafter, TCF.

11 Schleiermacher, *TCF*, s. 66.

What is Human and What is Divine in the Redeemer," Schleiermacher considers the growth in Christ's consciousness of the divine, and casts his divinity in terms of the continual awareness of God that Christ exemplifies for those of faith, the paradigm of what it means to be perfectly human. Christ is the image of the divine and the savior of the world in the sense that he exemplifies this perfect model of spiritual growth in dependence on God, without the sin of interrupted God-consciousness.[12] Considering this recasting of theological concepts in the person and work of Christ, it is unsurprising to return to his work *The Christian Faith* and find him segueing immediately into a discussion of keygmatic formulations of Christological concepts, choosing to jettison the classical *theologia* of nature and person as self-contradictory and abstruse.[13] Although Schleiermacher does not want to part entirely from Chalcedonian concepts—he seems to be attempting to retrieve a degree of Chalcedonianism in s. 97, for example—he aggressively outlines seven attacks on Chalcedonian Christology in s. 96, and his positive articulation of the person of Christ is nonetheless one in which union of the divine and human natures is only such in the unique perfection of Christ's humanity.[14] As such, Schleiermacher's Christ is one that Troy Stefano terms "a humanist par excellence."[15]

This discussion of three key approaches—two contemporary ones in Webster and McCormack, and one historical in Friedrich Schleiermacher, with all three representing divergent positions along a spectrum—leads us to the doorstep of Isaak Dorner. In fact, these three theologians are not themselves incidental to Dorner: John Webster often praises Dorner's dogmatic in his own writings, referring to him as "without equal" in mediating theology, and Bruce McCormack analyzes him in the context of 19th century kenoticism, referring to him as "the finest German theologian in the period between Schleiermacher and Hegel on the one hand and Karl Barth on the other."[16] Indeed, Schleiermacher was an important influence on Dorner's project at large: Dorner similarly started with faith and moved out to construct a theological vision of the world. At the same time, Dorner's dogmatic differs profoundly from Schleiermacher: as a me-

12 See Friedrich Schleiermacher, "Concerning the Union of What is Human and What is Divine in the Redeemer," in *Christmas Sermons: Displays of Development in a Theology of Christian Faith and Life (1790–1833)*, trans. Edwina G. Lawler, ed. Terrence N. Tice (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019).

13 Schleiermacher, *TCF*, s. 96.

14 "The main point of Schleiermacher's dogmatic critique is that Jesus is homoousios with us, and that means that he must have a truly human personality and a fully human self-consciousness. Jesus' peculiar relation to God can only be considered after that fact. For Schleiermacher, this means the end of Chalcedon, Constantinople III, and ultimately, Nicaea" (Troy A. Stefano, "Christology from Lessing to Schleiermacher," in *Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. Francesca Aran Murphy [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015]).

15 Stefano, "Christology from Lessing to Schleiermacher," *Oxford Handbook of Christology*.

16 Webster, *GWM*, 1:54; McCormack, *Humility*, 79.

diating theologian, he sought to recover orthodoxy with one hand while reaching out to philosophical trends with the other. In fact, it is Dorner's conviction that Schleiermacher himself is inconsistent in his own application of his method, and that he should have come to different conclusions, conclusions Dorner himself reaches. This will be the subject of the next section of this paper, considering Dorner's dogmatic and certain indications on the level of theology proper, ontology, and the doctrine of revelation that feed into language concerning the deity of the Son from the perspective of perfected humanhood. It will further be considered how Dorner's own consideration of the centrality of the ontological *a priori* could provide a theological "anchor" for theologies that tend to construct their Christology "from below," a sort of theologically-sneaky move of slipping Christ's deity in through the back door of his humanity. In other words, perhaps Dorner's indications could provide a sort of corrective for liberal theologians like Schleiermacher and others, helping to avoid styling Jesus as "a humanist par excellence" and thus avoiding Ebionism and more closely approximating the Chalcedonian concept.[17]

Dorner in Three Acts

Dorner's dogmatic demonstrates a remarkable and sometimes surprising homogeneity. One of the so-called mediating theologians, Dorner's project attempted to build on Schleiermacher's foundations while still arriving at orthodox and confessional conclusions for the church. A fusion of Hegel and Schleiermacher, Dorner sought to approach a constructive theology from the subjective element, beginning with faith or what he termed "pisteology," yet working out his conclusions toward the received dogma of the church. At the risk of sounding reductive, this latter element sets him apart from Schleiermacher and provides the concept of a mediating (or sometimes phrased, "conciliatory") theology.[18] In this sense, Dorner's theology is a fascinating exercise in dogmatic method: holding to most of the same *loci* as what could be considered a classical theology, he builds off Schleiermacher's method, yet arrives at many seemingly orthodox and confessional conclusions. In particular, his Christocentricity is paramount to understanding his dogmatic motives, where Dorner seeks to drive toward the centrality of the divine-human personality of Christ. Although he seems to be overshadowed by the innovations of Albrecht Ritschl, his successor as professor of theology at the University of Göttingen, Dorner himself was broadly influential, his thought impacting the Princeton school, along with

17 Stefano, "Christology from Lessing to Schleiermacher," *Oxford Handbook of Christology*.

18 "Mediation" within this movement is admittedly broader than that between fideism and confessionalism: other pairings include revelation and experience, religion and science, and speculations and history (Annette G. Aubert, "Nineteenth-Century Mediating Theology," in *The German Roots of Nineteenth-Century American Theology*, [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013], 90).

figures like Herman Bavinck, Karl Barth, and John Webster.[19] Nonetheless, the only English translation of his four-volume work, *A System of Christian Doctrine,* is the 1897 edition by Edinburgh T&T Clark used here, and perhaps there is room for a fresh translation of his work.

The first element within Dorner's ordered thought is the centrality he places on ontological considerations of the nature and essence of God. Self-avowedly speculative, Dorner desires to construct, from the correlates of faith, a picture of God that is holistic and germane to assumed categories of deity. In his section on arguments for God's existence, Dorner reasons that "The Absolute so coincides with the roots of rational thought, with its possibility, that without it that which is one's own mentality … must cease."[20] In essence, such ontological reasoning is not a mere argument, but a central element of accurately conceiving the nature and being of God; without it, other arguments and even dogmatic ordering of posterior theological concepts collapse.

The reception of an ontological argument for God's existence notably declined into the 19th century, particularly in the era post-Kant.[21] In its classical, Anselmian form, the ontological argument for God's existence stated that, since God is a being above which no greater can be conceived, it violates this definition for the subject to not then extend this existence into the subject's own conception of reality. In essence, so essential is the concept of God's existence that it cannot be logically denied.[22] Other forms of this argument began to arise into the Enlightenment period, as it appealed to certain rationalist sensibilities. For example, Rene Descartes's form of the argument appealed strongly to a conception of God present in the mind that was irreducible, a being whose existence was so immense as to not be possible of synthetic fabrication from experience: in other words, God must be conceived to exist because the idea of his nature is so above the limits of human reasoning that it must have been implanted by God himself, prior even to the conception of the self.[23] German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz felt Descartes's formulation should have included the concept of necessity as a central facet of this reasoning, devising the following formula: A) a necessary being exists; B) God, by definition, is such a being; therefore, C) God exists.[24] After Leib-

19 See Aubert, "Nineteenth Century Mediating Theology," 90.

20 Isaak Dorner, *A System of Christian Doctrine*, 4 vols., trans. Alfred Cave and S.J. Banks (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1897), 1:227. Hereafter, *SCD*.

21 A point made by Louis Berkhoff, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1953), 27-8.

22 Anselm of Canterbury, "Proslogion," s. 2, in *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies, trans. G.R. Evans (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

23 See René Descartes, "Third Meditation," in *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, trans. Desmond M. Clarke (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

24 G.W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters: A Selection*, ed. Leroy E. Loemker (Dordrecht,

nitz, Christian Wolff attempted to devise an ontological argument from cogency of thought, advocating a philosophical ontology called ontological possiblism: if something can reasonably said to exist, it must exist in reality, the same being true of God. To risk putting it into a somewhat trite axiom: possibility implies existence. Things are known to exist in reality, and thus God, conceived to exist in the highest form of existence, must exist.[25]

Immanuel Kant implemented Wolff's argument, and after Kant the popular evaluation of the ontological argument takes a significant turn. Indeed, even today, the merits of the ontological argument are often ridiculed as insufficient, logical nonsense, or even idolatrous, as though God himself were generated by the mind. In fact, in a nutshell, Kant's own consideration of the ontological argument is more an argument against Wolff's form of the argument: simply put, existence is not a predicate. One either exists or does not exist, and this is not an attribute or quality, merely a binary reality.[26] Schleiermacher's theology, then, attempts to construct God's existence from the feeling of dependence. Similar to Kant, who reasoned that God's existence is a logical inference from moral freedom as purposive, Schleiermacher holds that God's existence is the immediate referent of our sense of dependence, God being conceived in this fashion as "that which is wholly other." The ontological argument, in the classical Anselmian or rationalist sense, falls out of favor in 19th century dogmatics, which tended to favor either empirical deduction or a subjective formulation from moral and ethical nature *as per* Kant or feeling of dependence *as per* Schleiermacher.

Perhaps this is due to the shift from dogmatics to apologetics that happens in theological emphases of the 19th century, a reality lamented by, for example, Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck.[27] Indeed, conceiving the ontological *a priori* as, in fact, an *argument* may be missing the boat entirely. Lydia Schumacher, in her 2011 article, "The Lost Legacy of Anselm's Ontological Argument," has pointed out that Anselm's assumption and basis for reasoning is within a noetic reality that exists after the divine dissipation of the smoke of sin, in chapter one of the *Proslogion*. As such, Anselm's reasoning is one that exists within and from the presence of faith: it believes that there is such a thing as the divine, and—importantly—such a thing as the noetic effects of sin, which places Anselm firmly outside the realm of a natural or ra-

NL: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 386.

25 Christian Wolff, *Theologiae Naturalis: Methodo Scientifica Pertractata* (Frankfurt & Leipzig: Prostat in Officina Libraria Rengeriana, 1736), 2.1.11-13, 20, 22.

26 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IA: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996), A 598 / B 626. Note that Kant uses the word Sein, which roughly corresponds to the concepts of *esse* or *being*.

27 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:54-6, 515-7.

tionalist theology. For Anselm, the ontological cogency of God's nature and being, so indispensable to faith, is less of an argument and more of a theological exercise in redeemed intellect, homogenous with his famous dictum of "fides quaerens intellectum" (faith seeking understanding).

No less is true of Dorner, who places such ontological reasoning in a centrifugal position in his dogmatic. Dorner cites Hegel's idea that *a posteriori* proofs for God's existence will always fail without the necessary *a priori* groundwork in rightly conceiving the divine essence and nature, writing, "... all other arguments ... [are] untrue forms of the Ontological..."[28] In his direct exposition of the ontological argument, which he calls instead "the Ontological moment," Dorner holds that the unity of the divine idea must either be central to human thought, or abandoned.[29] Yet abandoning the divine essence is not an option: "It is not open, therefore, we say, to the rational thinker to avow an Absolute or not—he *must* avow it. The Absolute so coincides with the roots of rational thought, with its possibility, that without it that which is one's own mentality ... must cease." This "Ontological moment," for Dorner, is thus much more than an argument: it is structurally foundational to all human and rational thought, hanging on the conception of the united essence of God as Absolute. In an interesting turn, he invokes Kant, noting that "Without this principle of unity, all falls to pieces," and going on to state that, "We regard this necessity of the thought of absolute Being as the ultimate unity in relation to thought and existence, to the world of volition and to knowledge."[30] Such thoughts are the direct foundation of the construction of deity, and are in some sense originally divine, as without them we could not conceive God: "We think God through God; with our actual thought of Him He proves Himself as actually existing."[31] This primal conception of the irreducible unity of God's being provides a foundation both dogmatic and epistemic for Dorner to then branch into what he calls "consequences": considering forms of error, Dorner believes that "Dualism (and its softened form of Deism) is directly excluded by the Absolute ... But, on the other hand, acosmistic Pantheism does *not* follow from the fact that God originally embraces all things in Himself..."[32] In other words, both errors—Dualism and Deism on the one hand, and Pantheism on the other—are avoided by a proper *a priori* conception that the absoluteness and unity of God's being is central to human thought and reason. From this ontologi-

28 Dorner, *SCD*, 1:225.

29 The impact of a "moment" as a theological term should not be undervalued. It features significantly in Kierkegaard's theology as an existential bridge between ontology and epistemology (*Philosophical Fragments* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952], 15), and is featured heavily in the systematic theology of Norwegian theologian Gisle Johnson (*Grundrids af den Systematisk Theology* [Kristiana: Jacob Dybwads, 1897], §14, 33, etc.).

30 Dorner, SCD, 1:227.

31 Dorner, SCD, 1:229.

32 Dorner, SCD, 1:234.

cal *a priori,* Dorner even constructs divine simplicity, infinity, omnipresence, and eternity.[33] Later, in his work on theology proper in volume two, Dorner will consider God as "all-sufficient in Himself," and thus in need of no extrinsic object. In consistency with classical articulations of theological ordering, Dorner emphasizes the fact that God must first be conceived of in himself, and secondarily toward us, even in an ethical sense: although God is pure love, this love must not be seen as necessitating the existence of a secondary object, i.e. the world, but must be seen defined first in relation to God.[34] Importantly, and as a final note to this first component, all of these considerations are articulations of what Dorner has earlier called "the Fundamental Doctrine" in three divisions: 1. "Doctrine of God"; 2. "The Doctrine of the Creature, especially Man"; and 3. "The doctrine of the communion or union of God and man by means of the divine self-revelation…"[35]

A second component of Dorner's road to a divine Christology is his doctrine of revelation and divine self-disclosure, the third division of Dorner's fundamental doctrine. In this, Dorner represents the shift toward revelation as bearing a certain epistemic weight in theological construction.[36] Nonetheless, Dorner's conception of revelation is one that finds itself firmly rooted in the divine ontology and the concept of divine communicability, i.e. the concept that God's ability to reveal himself is rooted in his very nature: the world is both separate from and freely created by God, yet designed "for complete participation in His eternal life and Spirit."[37] As creatures, we are made divinely receptive to God's love, yet not necessitating it. In a somewhat memorable phrase, Dorner refers to humanity as "New homes of love," where God's ethical character as love was already full and fecund in himself. Humanity, as such, was destined for a self-communication of God's love through capability and design, but not through necessity, and this Dorner feels is adequate for articulating without collapsing the Creator-creation communion-in-distinction. Revelation is thus posterior to divine self-communication, itself rooted in that certain ontological *a priori* related to the divine nature, and this comes to the forefront in his construal of revelation as original, continual, positive, and gradual. Once again, Dorner wishes to emphasize the fact that nature has been designed with what he calls "unlimited receptiveness," "an incalculable degree of elasticity" for conference with the divine, and this is the grounds for revelation

33 Dorner, *SCD,* 1:235-47.

34 Dorner, *SCD,* 2:15.

35 Dorner, *SCD,* 1:183.

36 See John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 12.

37 Dorner, *SCD,* 2:18.

and divine self-communication, as well as, more specifically, miracles.[38]

Of utmost importance for the purposes of this study is Dorner's conception of the *content* of revelation: hedging away from mere intellectual or noetic approaches, Dorner insists that the proper content of revelation is God himself, and its end is communion and fellowship with the creator. Here more ontological reasoning comes to the forefront: "Its content is God as regards the different elements of His idea; therefore God as regards His omnipotence, God as the principle of measure, order, beauty, holiness and right, of wisdom and love."[39] Here his work as a careful dogmatician is apparent, in that he rightly discerns the intellectual apprehension of this content to be not so much revelation externally-considered, but *illumination*.

Here the road leads to Dorner's Christology, the third and final act of this paper. Much has been said about Dorner's conception of a progressive Christology, i.e. one where the incarnation of Christ's divinity is a progressive event, not accomplished in full at the conception, and great attention is often given to his large opus, *History of the Development of the Doctrine of the Person of Christ*.[40] Here, however, the discussion of the divine incarnation, or what Dorner calls "Godmanhood," within his broader dogmatic in the *System of Christian Doctrine*, is particularly theologically valuable. Indeed, it is here that Dorner considers the ontological predicates necessary of God in his divine self-disclosure as coming to fulfillment: if God is who he is conceived of in himself, "all-sufficient," and if divine self-disclosure is that free act of his own communicability, then this is manifest more fully in the great act of incarnation. "neither the form nor the content of Revelation … attains its perfection and the goal which revelation cannot but propose in itself, until it has passed into Incarnation."[41] In other words, self-disclosure is not full self-disclosure unless it is actual, personal divine presentation in creation, which incarnation accomplishes. Here Dorner follows a sort of train of thought that one could call "from below." First of all, natural revelation—what we would call general revelation—is inferior to special revelation: "For whereas Nature is impersonal, an inspired man is a far more adequate organ of revelation, both as regards receptiveness for it, and the work of guarding and cultivating it." Yet this, too, is inadequate for the fulfillment of divine self-disclosure: "The most perfect organ of revelation can only be the man who, from the first moment of his existence, in his entire person lives in a sphere of being pertaining to revelation and never separated from God." Dorner finds this reality—of a perfect human form for divine revelation and the subject of the divine presence, that an adequate vessel

38 Dorner, *SCD,* 2:175.

39 Dorner, *SCD,* 2:200.

40 See Aubert, "Nineteenth Century Mediating Theology," 92-3; McCormack, *Humility,* 79-81.

41 Dorner, *SCD,* 2:206.

for divine self-disclosure, and it is here that the study comes to a head:

> It assumes a shape that embodies and manifests the divine life in human form, and is therefore divine-human. In the God-man the inner spiritual miracle is so united with the outer world-reality, that the union of the divine and human like, implied in the idea of inspiration without measure, forms a man who in the midst of the world is a personal miracle—the God-man who, possessed of absolute worth in himself, fully answers to the communicated will of divine love, and is withal destined both in himself to give perfect expression to human nature, and outside himself to consummate human nature.[42]

Dorner then goes on to describe this reality in which God himself desires to live and dwell with us, where *logos* is the very "principle of revelation."[43]

There is quite a lot to unpack here, which must be taken along two coterminous lines of thought. First, Dorner's primary assumptions are rooted in theology proper: given what can logically be assumed of God on the ontological level, the concept of revelation could only be perfected if it were God himself. Dorner's secondary line of thought is along the lines of perfected humanhood: the most adequate form of revelation must be personal, and thus must be constituted by a human who lives in the sphere of revelation in complete and unbroken communion with God. It is here that we hear the voice of Schleiermacher: Jesus Christ is, for Schleiermacher, the perfected God-consciousness, who lived his life with no break in the dependence of his being upon God. Yet Dorner desires to bring these two strands together: such a human, a personal being, would have to necessarily be also divine. To put it another way: only a personal manifestation of God as a human could account for pure human communion with God.

In his own way, then, Dorner approximates language that allows for the communion of the two natures of Christ in one person, holding on to Chalcedonian categories while still conceding a methodological element to Schleiermacher. In essence, Dorner is saying that Schleiermacher's humanist conception of Christ as the demonstration of the perfect God consciousness isn't wrong for what it says, but for what it doesn't say. Elsewhere, in his work on divine immutability, he comments on Schleiermacher's *On the Glaubenslehre,* similarly critiquing Schleiermacher for an error of inconsistency: Schleiermacher incorrectly applies the principles outlined in the First Part into the Second, and thus ends with an impersonal account of deity and God's perfective love. Dorner even extends to critiquing Schleiermacher's account of Christology: for Dorner, there is a profound detachment of the person and work of Christ from the divine will and being in Schleiermacher's theology, to the extent that the concept of deity in Schleiermach-

42 Dorner, *SCD,* 2:206-07.

43 Dorner, *SCD,* 2:207.

er's theology proper is moot to any Christological consideration. In his work *Divine Immutability: A Critical Reconsideration,* Dorner writes, "...the relation of everything to Christ does not require such a universal will. Moreover, if no special divine act, but merely the development of humanity were all that is necessary, then humanity would have redeemed itself."[44] If Schleiermacher were consistent in applying his own principles of divine causality, says Dorner, he would allow for divine self-communication in a way that did not collapse distinctions between "the redeemer and the redeemed."[45] For Dorner, then, the primary assumption of God's transcendent causality, and his self-revelation in the world, becomes paramount for articulating a Christology that is not merely an elevated anthropology.

The point here is not so much whether or not we agree with Dorner or with his method—indeed, the present author tends to think that Dorner concedes far too much to Schleiermacher, both in content and in message. Nonetheless, Dorner demonstrates the importance of applying a consistent ontological *a priori* in Christological formulation: constructing Christ from a Christology of God-consciousness on par with redeemed God-consciousness in the human community risks confusing redeemer with redeemed, the next question being, "Whence is Christ?" Instead, Dorner demonstrates that the assumption of an absolute deity in essence and being would naturally lead to perfected personal revelation in humanity, which would demand divine incarnation. Dorner's Christ is one that is compatible with Chalcedon, although perhaps articulatable as "fully man and fully God," instead of vice versa. To put it more simply: Dorner slips Christ deity in through the back door of his humanity, and does so using these fundamental ontological considerations.

Let us consider some further lessons that can be gleaned from the function of the ontological *a priori* in Dorner's dogmatic. For Dorner's theology as a whole, the ontological *a priori* functions as a control: ordered first in his thought, it provides a foundation from which other significant and essential Christian *loci* can be considered. Because Schleiermacher does not do this, he says much less theologically than what needs to be said. One could argue that Schleiermacher's anthropology becomes de-divinized as well. Schleiermacher self-consciously jettisoned the image of God language in a way that Dorner did not. Because Dorner fronts an epistemology that bears respect to the sufficiency of God's *sui generis* ontology, his dogmatic avoids such theological reduction, and leads him into more soundly orthodox theological waters. To put this in more basic terms: theologians run a strong dogmatic risk by jettisoning the ontological *a priori* from its primacy. At the risk of over-clarification: this is different from holding to the apologetical value of the ontological argument, which is not what Dorner is doing here. Instead,

44 Dorner, *Divine Immutability: A Critical Reconsideration* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 129.

45 Dorner, *Divine Immutability,* 129.

what is being advocated is a theological and dogmatic value to the ontological *a priori,* constructed from faith, as in the case of Anselm. There is thus a presuppositionality to the distinction of creator from creation, the transcendent from the immanent, that must be respected on this properly basic level if one is to adequately construct a body of Christian doctrine. In fact, it could be said that this ontological *a priori* is fronted in Scripture itself, with its bold and presumptive proclamation of "In the beginning, God." This profound assumption of the Absolute, in Dorner's terms, utterly distinct and self-sufficient, is the ground from which other doctrines are worked out.

How is this different from simply considering theology proper as dogmatically antecedent to other *loci*? For Dorner, the concept of God's sufficient ontology stands as a sort of epistemic foundation that catalyzes posterior theological considerations, not simply as an antecedent locus. In other words, it is properly basic to the task of theology. Recall that Dorner has described this ontological primacy as "the roots of rational thought, with its possibility, that without it that which is one's own mentality … must cease," even stating that "We think God through God."[46] As such, there is a concept of self-revelation implanted in and under human ratiocination that Dorner desires to draw out, and in this sense it resonates strongly with Carl F.H. Henry's "theological transcendent *a priori*," a "preformative" view of humanity's design to both assume God and receive his revelation as being in his image, which Henry drew from Augustine, Luther, and Calvin.[47] It is, in a word, the first datum of how the knowledge of God and all things in relation to God is constructed.

To further illustrate by way of conclusion, a return to Webster and McCormack is warranted. Webster's method respects an ordering toward theology proper: like Dorner, whom he draws from, Webster is willing to front and prioritize a conception of God as God first, and largely desires to retain ontological and economic distinctions based on this assumption. Again, Webster's larger project was one of articulating a "theological theology" *pro se*. McCormack does not do this: fundamentally, his project desires to consider Christology itself as a dogmatic antecedent, and the ontological *a priori* in conceiving the nature and being of God is missing. Not only on the level of dogmatic ordering, but on the level of basic creator/creature distinctions and assumptions, McCormack's project strives to shoehorn theology proper, and thus the deity of Christ, into a preconceived Christology, which is thus laden with the dualisms Dorner and the later Webster noted and strove to avoid. What McCormack ends up with is a Christ very different from that of Dorner, which he himself admits: where Dorner sees creation and anthropology as designed with "unlimited receptiveness" to the divine self-revelation,

46 Dorner, *SCD,* 1:229.

47 Carl F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority,* 6 vols. (Reprint, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 1:323-243.

McCormack has instead construed Logos as "ontologically receptive," further clarifying a break down in ontological/economic conceptions by asserting that "...the Bible knows nothing of an independent Logos *asarkos* (without flesh)"; "...the preexistent Logos as such is a pure postulate, a human invention, alleged to be complete in itself without regard for its activity ad extra. It is an 'idol' by any other name."[48] Concordantly, when McCormack proclaims at the end of his volume, "The promise announced by my title has been kept. The integrity of God and human in their uniting in Christ has been preserved," one gets the impression that he has only resolved a problem of his own devising.[49]

Conclusion

Dorner's *System of Christian Doctrine,* although not without its flaws, is an example of a concentrated dogmatic that carefully orders its knowledge of God toward the assumption of the Absoluteness of God as God. While conceding much to Schleiermacher, Dorner avoids humanistic conceptions of Christ by fronting a robust theology of the divine self-revelation rooted in fundamental assumptions of God's self-sufficiency and absoluteness, i.e. the ontological *a priori*. This is how Dorner, while still approaching a Christian dogmatic from the method of correlates of faith, manages to slip Christ's deity in through the back door of a realized humanity that could only be fully divine, a sort of maneuvered argument for the deity of Christ "from below" that swoops down "from above." This demonstrates for theologians today that an adequately-defined ontological *a priori* is dogmatically valuable in avoiding the dualistic pitfalls of Ebionitism or Docetism on the level of Christology, and more importantly avoids the temptation of a reductive or revisionist theology proper and cosmology. Theologians should thus weigh the dogmatic risks before jettisoning the merits of such ontological reasoning, and should consider how, on a basic level, the adoption of such reasoning might lead to holistic biblical and theological conclusions.

48 Dorner, *SCD,* 2:175; McCormack, *Humility,* 255.

49 McCormack, *Humility,* 293.

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AN AMERICAN EVANGELICAL RESPONSE TO THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN'S MANDATE FOR FEMALES TO WEAR TRADITIONAL MUSLIM CLOTHING – THE MANTEAU AND ROUSARI

PHILIP O. HOPKINS

Philip O. Hopkins is Chair of the Missions Department and Professor of Missions at Gateway Seminary

Introduction[1]

In 1909 American Presbyterian missionary to Iran, Howard Baskerville, resigned his teaching post in Tabriz, Iran to fight for Iranians warring against governmental troops during the Constitutional Revolution.[2] He died at 24 years old. His death proved impactful for Christianity in Iran and Iranian/American relations. In 1975, in a paper presented for the Bicentennial Celebrations of American Independence at Pahlavi University in Shiraz, Iran, politician Ali Pasha Saleh praised American missionaries and called the United States the hero of freedom in Iran. Saleh connected the Constitutional Revolution with the American Revolution and described Baskerville as the "Lafayette of Iran."[3] As late as 2005, in Tabriz, the Islamic Republic of Iran, with then President

1 There are three Iranian periods addressed in this paper: the Qajar Era (1789-1925), Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979), and Islamic Republic (1979-present).

2 The Constitutional Revolution of Iran took place in the early 1900s. It marked the beginning of modern Iran. Iran developed a constitution and parliament as a result. For more information see: Ali M. Ansari, ed., *Iran's Constitutional Revolution of 1906 and Narratives of the Enlightenment* (London: Gingko, 2017).

3 Ali Pasha Saleh, "Cultural Ties Between Iran and the United States," 15-16 Sept 1975, transcript of typewritten report, Special Collections, Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Historical Society. Marquis de Lafayette was a French officer who helped George Washington against the British in the American Revolution. For a brief synopsis on him see: "Marquis de Lafayette," Colonial Williamsburg, https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/explore/nation-builders/marquis-de-lafayette/.

Mohammed Khatami presiding, unveiled a bust of Baskerville.[4] Over 100 years and two regime changes later, Iranians still love Baskerville. Baskerville serves as an example of a Christian who fought against the repressive and unbiblical policies of a government. Baskerville's actions illuminate a question faced by many American evangelical Christians: when is there the biblical, moral, and ethical responsibility to violate a country's laws?

While Baskerville is admired by Iranians for his sacrifice–including by Iranian Muslims today–this paper will argue that even though there is a biblical directive to disobey laws under certain circumstances, with regard to the current situation in Iran–specifically the mandate for females to wear the traditional Islamic dress, the manteau [knee length jacket] and rousari [headscarf]–Christians, including Iranian Christians in Iran, Christian missionaries to Iran, and American evangelicals, should not illegally protest or incite rebellion against the Iranian administration. Rebelling against the Iranian government in this case is not only unwise, but also unbiblical. Christians have given up their rights for the cause of Christ. Furthermore, foreign interference will only damage Christianity in Iran.

The Current Situation in Iran

Iran became an Islamic Republic in 1979 during a democratic (and largely bloodless) revolution that ushered out the Western-leaning, secular Islamic government of Mohammad Reza Shah and the Pahlavi Dynasty. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned from exile in Europe to form a religious Islamic administration founded on a strict interpretation of the principles of Shiism–the ongoing state religion of Iran from roughly the time of the Reformation–a type of Islam whose adherents include less than 20 percent of Muslims worldwide but comprise about 90 percent of Muslims in Iran.[5]

4 Cyrus Farivar, "Century-Old Groundwork Fuels Internet Interest in Iran Today," Public Broadcasting Society, http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2009/08/century-old-groundwork-fuels-internet-interest-in-iran-today215.

5 "Strait of Hormuz," Strauss Center, https://www.strausscenter.org/strait-of-hormuz-religion-in-iran/#:~:text=Sunni%20and%20Shi'i%20are,Middle%20East%20are%20predominantly%20Sunni; "2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran," U.S. Department of State, https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iran/; Mehrzad Boroujerdi, "Sunnis in Iran: Protesting Against Decades of Discrimination and Repression," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 21 Nov 2022, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sunnis-iran-protesting-against-decades-discrimination-and-repression; and Shabnam von Hein, "Iran's Sunni Muslims Face Discrimination Amid Eid al-Fitr," Deutsche Welle, 8 April 2024, https://www.dw.com/en/irans-sunni-muslims-face-discrimination-amid-eid-al-fitr/a-68744118; "Sunni and Shia Muslims ," Pew Research Center, 27 Jan 2011, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/01/27/future-of-the-global-muslim-population-sunni-and-shia/; "Sunnis and Shia: Islam's Ancient Schism," BBC News, 4 Jan 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16047709.

Aside from political reasons–a relatively new declassified Central Intelligence Agency document reveals that Ayatollah Khomeini understood the need for American involvement in Iran as early as 1963[6]–there were moral and religious motives for the revolution. Concerning female dress, the (in)famous phrase during Mohammad Reza Shah's time that the "miniskirts in Tehran were shorter than the miniskirts in Paris"[7] was something that Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers wanted to change; they saw this type of dress as sexually exploitive and degrading to women. Years before during the 1930s, under Reza Shah Pahlavi, Mohammad Reza Shah's father enacted laws that prohibited women from wearing the traditional Islamic head covering.[8] With the 1979 revolution, laws were introduced that revisited the dress code. At first, the *manteau* and *rousari* were required only for state business. A couple of years later, females were required to wear the traditional dress in all public places.[9]

The dress code has provoked ongoing debate. Not all Iranian leaders believed these changes were healthy. Even as late as 2012, the media adviser to then President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Ali Akbar Javanfekrone, was sentenced to jail for supporting the lessening of restrictions on female dress (as reported by the government-sponsored *Mehr News Agency*).[10] Indeed, as the title of one article suggests, at least with the head covering, "headcovers have always been political in Iran–for women on all sides."[11]

6 "Islam in Iran," Central Intelligence Agency, 31 Aug 1979, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP81B00401R000400110013-5.pdf. Note: the section specifically related to this has now been blacked out in the CIA. For the quotation, see Kambiz Fattahi, "Two Weeks in January: America's Secret Engagement with Khomeini," BBC News, 3 June 2016, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-36431160.

7 Kim Hjelmgaard, "Inside Iran," *USA Today*, 28 Dec 2019, https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/world/inside-iran/2018/08/29/iran-trump-reimposes-sanctions-tensions-countries-enemies-nuclear-deal/886692002/.

8 Sivan Balslev, *Iranian Masculinities: Gender and Sexuality in Late Qajar and Early Pahlavi Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Houchang E. Chehabi, "Staging the Emperor's New Clothes: Dress Codes and Nation Building Under Reza Shah," *Iranian Studies* vol. 26, nos. 3-4 (1993): 209-229; Maryam Sinaiee, "Eighty Five Years On, The Shah's Ban On Hijab Still Divides," Iran International, 1 July 2022, https://www.iranintl.com/en/202201070683; and Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood and Joanne B. Eicher, eds., *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion*, Volume 5: Central and Southwest Asia (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010), 257-312. "Iranian Women - Before and After the Islamic Revolution," *BBC News*, 19 Feb 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47032829, presents an interesting pictorial of females dressing in Iran before 1979.

9 Ali Alfoneh, "The End of Mandatory Hijab in Iran?," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 28 Feb 2024, https://agsiw.org/the-end-of-mandatory-hijab-in-iran/#:~:text=Khomeini%20and%20the%20Cabinet's%20directives,1996%20revision%20of%20the%20law; Nasser Karimi and Jon Gambrell, "As More Women Defy Hijab Laws, Iran's Government Pushes Back," Public Broadcasting Network, 10 May 2023, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/as-more-women-defy-hijab-laws-irans-government-pushes-back.

10 *Mehr News Agency*, "Ahmadinejad Advisor Receives Prison Sentence," Mehr News Agency, 16 Jan 2012, https://en.mehrnews.com/news/49606/Ahmadinejad-advisor-receives-prison-sentence

11 Eliz Sanasarian, "Headcovers Have Always Been Political in Iran–For Women on All Sides," Uni-

Submission to Government

Romans 13 is a main text used when addressing submission to government. Using Romans 13 as his base, American pastor and theologian John Piper, in a four-part series titled, "Subjection to God and Subjection to the State," explains that all regimes are selected by God and must be obeyed, including administrations that are evil. Piper uses Jeroboam in 1 Kings 12.15, Nebuchadnezzar in Jeremiah 27.6, and Pilate in John 19.10 as examples. In each case, the Lord was the one who put and kept the ruler in power.[12] Piper gives four reasons from Romans 13 that a Christian should submit to government:

1. All authority is ordained by God who ultimately is in control.

2. Government is for the good of the people.

3. Refusal to obey laws often means punishment.

4. Failure to submit to government can mean violating the moral law of God.[13]

Paul, the author of Romans, whose emperor was Nero, a man not the kindest to Christians, stated bluntly that Christians should obey the laws of the land. Indeed, Jesus Christ in Matthew 5.38-48 states that one should love and pray for his enemies and not resist evil.[14]

That does not mean the Bible does not provide exceptions and support the breaking of laws. Daniel prayed to God after an official governmental edict that stated one could only pray to the king (Daniel 6.6-10); Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not bow to an idol (Daniel 3:9-18); the midwives did not kill the Hebrew newborn babies as commanded by Pharoah (Exodus 1:15-20); Queen Esther approached the king without permission to save her people (Esther 3-5); [15]the Maji did not tell King Herod where the baby Jesus was located (Matthew 2:1-12); and Jesus and the disciples picked grain on the sabbath (Mark 2:23-28).[16] These are some examples of where the Bible commends noncompliance against government. These citations do not include the multiple times where

versity of Southern California, 10 Oct 2022, https://dornsife.usc.edu/news/stories/headcovers-have-always-been-political/.

12 John Piper, "Subjection to God and Subjection to the State, Part 1," Desiring God Ministries, 12 June 2005, https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/subjection-to-god-and-subjection-to-the-state-part-1.

13 John Piper, "Subjection to God and Subjection to the State, Part 2," Desiring God Ministries, 3 July 2005, https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/subjection-to-god-and-subjection-to-the-state-part-2.

14 John Piper, "Subjection to God and Subjection to the State, Part 3," Desiring God Ministries, 10 July 2005, https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/subjection-to-god-and-subjection-to-the-state-part-3.

15 Piper, "Subjection to God and Subjection to the State, Part 3."

16 Ironically, most of the examples cited are from present-day Iran.

Scripture outright endorses the proclamation of the gospel over the edicts of the state. Indeed, biblical support for Christians disobeying government in some ways seems conventional.

The biblical citations mentioned above are examples of peaceful and non-violent actions against the laws of a country. This is often called "civil disobedience." A natural outflow of civil disobedience is "just war." Though not as clearly mandated in Scripture, just war theory has a long and storied heritage in the Western world, going back to writers such as Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, and Hugo Grotius. Usually referred to when addressing two independent states, the criterion for just war could be applied in a broader sense, internally to Iranian Christians in Iran, externally to American missionaries to Iran and to American evangelicals in general. Several criteria of just war theory are relevant. The first is "just cause": there must be a specific reason for going to war. A second criterion is "last resort": all other nonviolent options must be pursued, such as civil disobedience. This implies also that all diplomatic efforts should continue to settle the grievances through negotiation rather than military or violent conflict. A third criterion is one of "right intention": the intention must be to secure peace and civil order for all parties involved. This principle rules out conflicts for economic exploitation, or of national, religious, or ethnic cleansing. Finally, one should consider carefully the consequences that may flow from any intervention or violent acts. This concern is reflected in the criteria of probability of success and proportionality of projected results. Under these criteria, a war is not waged justly unless victory is likely and the good in achieving victory must be greater than the cost to achieve it. In the case of fighting for more relaxed female attire in Iran, non-peaceful actions internally or externally would not produce a clear or permanent triumph, especially since there have been variations of the dress code in Iran over the last one hundred years, and the dress code seems to be a political issue almost as much as if not more so than a civil rights one. Whatever victory was produced, it would not be greater than the cost to achieve it.[17] Indeed, although Iran treats females differently than the West, and although Iran's rhetoric and actions are sometimes considered aggressive, this does not provide just cause for illegal or outside intervention. The governmental requirement of dress for females does not meet any of these just war criteria.

17 Some of this paragraph was taken from Philip O. Hopkins and Bruce R. Ashford, "On Why the United States Should Not Attack Iran: A Conservative, Evangelical Christian Response," *The Quarterly Journal of Political Studies of Islamic World* vol. 1, no.1 [Imam Khomeini International University Qazvin, Iran] (Spring 2012): 21-33.

God's Gifts, the Great Commission and Great Commandment, and Idolatry

A point to remember when addressing the current situation in Iran and the requirement for females to wear the *manteau* and *rousari* is that whatever liberties Christians have–whether they be in Iran, America, or elsewhere–come first and foremost from God. They are gifts, not rights. God's gifts do not need to be given. In God's eyes, no one is entitled to them. Christians recognize that apart from God's special grace – his gift of salvation – they are God haters, condemned to spend eternity in hell paying for their sins. God's gifts are for his purposes – namely, to spread his glory through Christ by the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) and the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40). Christians' time, money, and effort are (or should be) spent on deepening their relationships with Christ and making the gospel known to people from all tribes, languages, and nations (Revelation 5:9 and 7:9), not fighting governmental policies about attire.

When Christians pursue God's gifts over God himself, they make his gifts into idols. As late American pastor Tim Keller explains, an idol is "anything more important to you than God … If I have that [whatever 'that' may be] I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure."[18] When a "political or social cause [of] making progress and ascending in influence or power" gives life meaning, Keller writes, the goodness of helping and/or persuading others becomes an idol.[19] When Christians feel so strongly about God's gifts that they take the place in their hearts of where only God should be–if God's gifts give meaning to life or give one hope outside of God's grace alone, intentionally or unintentionally–they become idols. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous invitation comes to mind: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him [to] come and die."[20] Famous early church father Tertullian's reported words arise as well: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."[21] More importantly, Scripture states that being a Christian means one will suffer. Second Timothy 3:12 asserts that "Everyone who wants to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." First Peter 4:16 declares that Christians should not be ashamed to suffer for Christ. Philippians 1:29 indicates that suffering for Christ is a gift of God.[22] Even if the *manteau* and *rousari* are restrictive towards women, in-

18 "Tim Keller's Definition of Idolatry from Counterfeit Gods," *Anchored in Christ*, 17 July 2013, https://www.kevinhalloran.net/tim-kellers-definition-of-idolatry/.

19 "20 Idol Crushing Questions by Tim Keller," J. A. Medders, 24 April 2013, https://medium.com/@jamedders/20-idol-crushing questions-by-tim-keller-fa37c4e2f27b.

20 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 89.

21 Rudolph Arbesmann, Sister Emily, Joseph Daly, and Edwin A. Quain, *Apologetical Works; Octavius* (Catholic University of America Press, 1950), 125.

22 Philip O. Hopkins, "A Lesson American Evangelicals Can Learn from Iranian Christians Regarding Making Religious Liberty an Idol," *Academics Connecting Together*, 25 Sept 2018; Reprint: *Reformed*

cluding Christian women in Iran (and not all Christian women in Iran feel this way), could this be a cross they should bear joyfully, only dissent legally, and instead focus on other more harmful and unbiblical acts of government? Similarly, should not American missionaries to Iran and American evangelicals do the same?

The Complicated History of Christian Missionary Involvement in Iran

Western missionary activity in Iran has a convoluted story. Missionaries brought the gospel with them to Iran, but much more, especially with their governmental connections. Bishop H. B. Dehqani-Tafti–the Martin Luther of Iranian Christianity and the first Anglican bishop of Persian origin–who collaborated with Western missionaries and vigorously defended them, asserted that although the missionaries' connection with the Iranian administration during Pahlavi times allowed them to do good for Iranians, it brought a stigma of foreignness to Christianity. This stigma, he believes, hindered the growth of the Iranian church. If American missionaries depend on government, Dehqani-Tafti asked, how does the message of the gospel translate? Trusting in the state becomes a poor Christian witness.[23] Dehqani-Tafti is strong in his condemnation:

> Unfortunately not always have missionaries been able, even consciously, to completely separate themselves from the economic and political and sometimes military force of their own government. And this is sometimes almost impossible to do–because if you separate yourself artificially you become a hypocrite.
>
> But the message of Christianity is meekness and humility; it's giving your life for your enemy; if this is the core of the Christian message–and I believe it is–now how on earth can you present this in the shape of power? and influence? and money? and grandeur? This is the dilemma.
>
> So Christianity ought not to be packages of denominations or groups in a corner; it ought to be dissolved into society. We are part and parcel of our nation, it doesn't matter if we have identities or rights or boundaries or land or associations or organizations; what matters is whether Christian individuals have the spirit of Christ–the spirit of the cross–in them wherever they are.[24]

Perspectives Magazine 20:50, 9-15 Dec 2018, https://thirdmill.org/articles/phi_hopkins/phi_hopkins.iranianchristians.html, site editor, Third Millennial Ministries; Reprint: 'Idolizing Religious Liberty," *The Gateway Press*, Gateway Seminary, Ontario, California, 18 Feb 2022, https://thegateway.press/idolizing-religious-liberty/, site editor, Gateway Seminary.

23 H. B. Dehqani-Tafti, "My View of Christian Missions Among Muslims," transcript of typed speech, Special Collections, Richmond, VA: International Mission Board Archives, 1969.

24 H. B. Dehqani-Tafti, *The Hard Awakening: A Courageous Personal Testament of Love that*

Iranian Christian leader and academic Sasan Tavassoli, too, recognizes some of the disadvantages of Western missionaries in Iran during Pahlavi times. His quote of Isabel Stumpel-Hatami, an Iranian Muslim who addressed the Iranian Muslim perception of Christianity in Iran during the modern era, typifies the sentiment that Westernizing people often was confused with cross-cultural evangelism, the issue that Tavassoli seems to imply was a hindrance for Iranian interest in Christianity.[25] According to Tavassoli, Stumpel-Hatami states:

> Due to Western colonialists and missionary activities Christianity is thus identified with the Occident.... The manifold activities deployed by occidental missionaries through educational and medical assistance in schools, hospitals, summer camps, youth clubs, and bookstores and through the modern mass media did not prosper without provoking the deep concern and the protest of the religious class. The more the Christian mission was organized, the more it appeared to them like an ever-growing network of conspiracy.[26]

Among other Iranian Muslims, Jalal al-Ahmad's *Occidentosis*,[27] while not the most historically accurate piece, showed similar concerns Iranians had with Western missionaries. He believed that Muslims have been at war with Christians for over 1000 years and equated Christianity with colonialism, and saw Christians as servants of government, calling the missionaries the "vanguard of colonialism" and colonialism the "equivalent of Christianity." Similarly, Ayatollah Khomeini, in *Islam and Revolution*, condemned much of what he saw as the Shah's capitulation to Westernization, which was personified in the Shah's edict in 1964 that stated American governmental officials were immune from prosecution.[28]

To a degree both al-Ahmad and Ayatollah Khomeini are correct. As Protestant missions increased, colonialism among Protestant nations increased. This rise is particularly clear in the High Imperial Era, when governmental representatives praised the work of missionaries. A painting entitled *The Secret of England's Greatness,*[29] which depicts Queen Victoria giving a Bible to an African tribesman, suggests the connec-

Outlives Violence and Death (London: Sorab Books, 1981), 16-9.

25 Sasan Tavassoli, *Christian Encounters with Iran: Engaging Muslim Thinkers after the Revolution* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 54.

26 Isabel Stumpel-Hatami, "Christianity as Described by Persian Muslims," in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions, ed. by Jacques Waardenburg* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 227-39; in Tavassoli, *Christian Encounters with Iran*, 14.

27 Jalal al-Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, trans. R Campbell (Berkeley, 1984), 27-137.

28 Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: publisher, 1981), 16, 35, 51, 127, 151.

29 "The Secret of England's Greatness," National Portrait Gallery, http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/ portrait/mw00071/The-Secret-of-Englands-Greatness-Queen-Victoria-presenting-a-Bible-in-the-Audience-Chamber-at-Windsor, accessed 29 April 2015.

tion between government and religion. As late as the 1950s, the overt connection between Western missionaries and government was lauded.[30] It is not a coincidence that Christian missionaries' global influence grew with the rise of Western nations.[31]

Some Reminders[32]

Understanding these realities, and appreciating that Iranians have a "public face" and a "private face," are helpful for American Christians thinking about being involved in Iran's internal affairs. Recognizing this variation, and realizing that the two sometimes conflict, is one key to grasping Iranians and their culture. Hooman Majd, an Iranian-American journalist whose pieces on Iran appear in *GQ*, *The New Yorker, The New York Times,* and *The New York Observer,* surmises that leadership in the Islamic Republic is conscious of this difference. The Muslim, Iranian government (public face), democratically ushered into power over 40 years ago, prohibits (among other things) alcohol consumption, premarital sex, and dancing, though all these things happen inside Iranians' homes (private face).[33] Another example of the public/private interface is how Iranians view the United States. While many Iranian Muslim religious leaders do not like America because of the United States-engineered coup that overthrew the popularly elected leader Mohammad Mosaddeq and replaced him with the Shah in 1953,[34] many Iranians, when confronted personally (private face) about their feelings toward the United States, have a positive attitude even though they openly (public face) protest against America in the streets. Often, they have a problem with the American government (public face) and not necessarily with the American people (private face).[35]

Additionally, appreciating the concepts of *haq* and *ta'arouf,* two essential yet seemingly paradoxical traditions, are important. *Haq* is the idea of 'unalienable' rights, while *ta'arouf* is the idea of self-depreciation. Iranians believe they have certain *haq*; one of those is equality. Majd explains that Iranians desire to be treated as equals:

> The question of rights is fundamental to Shi'a Islam, the very founding of which was a struggle for rightfulness. And Shi'a

30 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 304.

31 Hopkins, *American Missionaries in Iran during the 1960s and 1970s*, 2.

32 Much of this section is taken from: Philip O. Hopkins, "Review of The Ayatollah Begs to Differ: The Paradox of Modern Iran, by Hooman Majd," *Iran and the Caucasus* vol.13, no. 1 (2009): 225-26.

33 Hooman Majd, *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ: The Paradox of Modern Iran* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 18, 57, 137, 181-84, 198.

34 Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2006), 111-29, discusses this in depth.

35 Majd, *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ*, 103-10, 234.

> Iran, with a history of centuries of perceived injustice towards its religion and sect, and the trampling of its sovereignty by foreign powers, cannot easily accept any attempt to deprive its people of their rights. The sense of rights and justice is so deeply ingrained in the Iranian psyche that when Iranians mourn Imams martyred fourteen hundred years ago, as they do during the month of Moharram, they are consumed by paroxysms of weeping, not necessarily for the dead, but for the cruel injustice perpetrated on their saints and, by extension, on them still today.[36]

At present, *haq* seems noticeable around the appropriate legal attire for Iranian women. In understanding *haq*, and the natural outflows of it, Christian missionaries to Iran and American evangelicals should understand why the question of dress is an internal matter to Iranians.

Ta'arouf, or extreme southern United States hospitality, also pervades Iranian culture. It is an attempt at self-depreciation in which the person who humbles himself the most gains an advantage; it is "passive-aggressive behavior with a peculiarly Persian hue."[37] *Ta'arouf* occurs throughout Iranian life. Often, what one says is not what one means; one is just being respectful. For example, in a business transaction, the seller might tell the buyer the item is for free or is not worth much, though obviously (or not so obviously) the seller does not mean this. In fact, the exact opposite may be the truth. It is the seller's way of allowing both parties to save face and come to an agreed upon price. Being able to save face, especially in public, is important in Iranian culture.

Ta'arouf does not occur only among Iranians in their own culture; Iranians practice it internationally. A vivid example of *ta'arouf* is the interpretation of Majd's friend, Faud, a Jewish-Iranian from Los Angeles, of former Iranian President Ahmadinejad's rejection of the Jewish Holocaust. Majd describes Faud's reasoning for Ahmadinejad's denial: Ahmadinejad (sarcastically) is saying that he could not believe that Europeans, with their "great" and "mighty" civilization, could act in such a barbaric manner. In questioning the need for the creation of Israel, Ahmadinejad was implying that Europeans (Germans specifically) were capable of another genocide, though, ironically, Europeans (and Americans) were accusing Ahmadinejad and the leadership of the Islamic Republic of the very same thing with the very same people.[38] Regarding female dress and the protests in Iran, something similar with *ta'arouf* might be thought. Evangelicals from the United States whose "Christian" government in the past has promoted civil rights abuses and racial inequality then taking moral high ground regarding Iran's laws about female clothing seems a bit ironic.

36 Majd, *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ*, 118-19.

37 Majd, *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ*, 106.

38 Majd, *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ*, 42, 43.

The Iranian government has not been able to find a solution that pleases everyone inside Iran regarding the *manteau* and *rousari*, which has led to some extreme acts. Understanding how *haq* and *ta'arouf* permeate Iranian culture should help American evangelicals and missionaries to Iran grasp a simple fact. Depending on the circumstance, Iranians filter their thoughts and actions through different grids in their minds, which – from an outsider's view, particularly a Westerner's – seem inconsistent and contradictory. Therefore, caution should be advised when commenting on Iran's edicts surrounding dress.

Conclusion

The relationship between Iranian governments and Iranian Christians has vacillated between tension and comfort. When outside forces arrive or a major threat occurs, there is a disruption in the arrangement between Iranian Christians and the ruling Iranian governments, for better and for worse. Contemporary Iranian policies may be illuminated by examining the effects of outside forces on historical Iranian governments, and such governments' reactions to those threats in terms of providing and withdrawing freedoms. The leaders of the Islamic Republic hope to promote the success of their country, and because the West, in general, and the United States, in particular, are considered to be Christian and have a history of meddling in Iran's internal affairs,

Iran's current hostility to any deviation from the limitations placed upon Christians in Iran (and society in general), while inappropriate, is understandable.

Indeed, Iranian Christians are now not only considered apostates, but threats to national security.[39] From the perspective of the Islamic Republic authorities, there is something insurgent about Iranian Christians who do not follow the restrictions placed upon them, because they are thereby rejecting the ideology of the Islamic Republic. Theologian Marcin Rzepka addresses this rationale:

> When discussing their [Iranian Christian converts from Muslim backgrounds] motivations for conversion, the converts emphasize their disappointment with Islam. Thus, they try to escape from politicized Islam, or from radical interpretations of it made by Khomeini and his followers. In this sense, Islam becomes something inauthentic and at the same time oppressive in the converts' eyes, which strongly contrasts with Christianity, which insists on the imperative of love, even for one's enemies.[40]

However, Christian acts of love are not always apparent. Sometimes Christians behave like non-Christians. Mahatma Gand-

39 "Christian Converts to Iran," Finnish Immigration Service, 21 Aug 2015, https://migri.fi/documents/5202425/5914056/62318_Suuntausraportti_Kristityt_kaannynnaiset_IranissaFINALFINAL160915_2_.pdf/5d13ea14-9aa8-4896-a737-7bcd5a8d4c24.

40 Marcin Rzepka, *Prayer and Protest: The Protestant Communities in Revolutionary Iran* (Krakow: Unum Press, 2017), 190.

hi reportedly stated he would have been a Christian if it were not for Christians.[41] Christians' ultimate authority–the Bible–commands in Ephesians 4:15 that Christians speak the truth in love. While more challenging in certain environments, an atmosphere that fosters speech which reflects the truths of Scripture, in the spirit of Jesus Christ, understands the nuances of different viewpoints, and acts justly with sympathy when discussing them allows the opportunity for issues to be addressed in a truthful, peaceful, and accurate manner. Being thankful for the gifts God has given is honoring and admirable; making God's gifts into idols and coveting gifts God has not given are not. Therefore, American evangelicals and Christian missionaries to Iran getting involved in what the Iranian administration allows females to wear, including making 'innocuous' posts on social media, seem to fuel the negative and (sometimes) incorrect perceptions Iranians already have of Christianity and Americans, and thus prove to be a hinderance to the gospel.

The question is not whether Iranian females should have the freedom of choice to wear whatever they want. The question also is not whether Christians in Iran or Christian missionaries to Iran should be able to protest, or even if American evangelicals should get involved in Iran's internal affairs. Rather, the question concerns at what point does noncompliance against the state become biblically warranted. The Iranian government not giving females the choice to wear or not to wear the *manteau* and *rousari* is not sin.

Though it is generally agreed among Christians that 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 was cultural for the time, Scripture itself has supported head coverings for females. Other biblical passages such as Deuteronomy 22:5, 1 Timothy 2:9-10, and 1 Peter 3:3-5 also stress that females should dress modestly. For Christians then to state the Iranian government is acting unbiblically when it requires women to wear the *manteau* and *rousari* seems insincere.

Scripture does not provide a defined set of instructions as to when noncompliance against the state is permitted. The seriousness, magnitude, and degree of the offense, combined with the ability for transparent and real change, should be considered before any acts are committed. When Christians contravene laws, they must do so out of love–love even for the opposition–and the desire for justice to be accomplished as much as possible in a non-violent and peaceful manner.[42]

Currently, one can look to Iranian Christians as an example of what can be done with a government that opposes Christ and restricts choices. Iranian Christianity is one without religious liberty, but it has flourished. The example of Christians in Iran indicates that relying on government or other forces outside of God himself to

41 "Mahatma Gandhi Says He Believes in Christ But Not Christianity," *The Harvard Crimson*, 11 Jan 1927, https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1927/1/11/mahatma-gandhi-says-he-believes-in/.

42 Piper, "Subjection to God and Subjection to the State, Part 3."

sustain and protect Christianity and the freedoms that come with it is not wise. Regarding the *manteau* and *rousari*, American evangelicals should remember their own country's failings, and not illegally try to change or influence non-antibiblical laws of another country – like Iran's dress code for women.

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GREAT TREES, KINGDOMS, AND IMPOSTERS: THE ABIMELECH NARRATIVE AS FOIL TO THE ABRAHAMIC PROMISE

JOSHUA CALEB HUTCHENS

Joshua Caleb Hutchens is is a biblical theologian serving as the Associate Pastor of Discipleship and Missions at Overland Church in Fort Collins, Colorado, and Associate Professor of New Testament Studies and Director of the Rocky Mountain Campus at Gateway Seminary.

For four centuries, biblical scholars have diligently unlearned how to read the Bible, training themselves to see the trees but never the forest. In Old Testament studies especially, critical scholars rejected not only the Divine authorship of Scripture, but almost every traditional attribution of human authorship in favor of the Documentary Hypothesis. The Documentary Hypothesis atomized the books of the Old Testament into isolated fragments and envisioned ancient editors who stitched mysterious sources together like an analog cut-and-paste project. Many Evangelical scholars clung to biblical authority, but nevertheless followed some of the same methods of interpretation, showing little appreciation for the unity of the biblical books, their literary brilliance, or the reliance of later authors upon earlier authors. Biblical interpretation resembled dissection rather than reading. Each tree could be labelled by genus and species and its scientific processes described, but we dare not stand in awe of the forest in which each tree lives, fearing that we might lose our scientific objectivity. However, as in the forest, the narratives and teachings of Scripture live in beautiful symbiotic relationships with one another rather than in laboratory isolation. Biblical scholarship grounded in faith seeks to stand in awe, beholding the unity, mutual dependence, and breathtaking beauty of the trees set within the living forest of God's revelation.

In telling the story of Israel between the conquest and the monarchy, the author of Judges saw his narrative as symbiotically connected to the story of Genesis. Even

first-time readers of the Bible notice the allusion to the sin of Sodom when reading about the sin of the men of Gibeah in Judges 19 (cf. Gen 19:1–11). In both instances, the men of the city violate the most minimal standards of hospitality by demanding to rape male guests, and in both instances, women are offered up as substitute rape victims. Although in Genesis the two messengers rescued Lot's daughters from victimization, in Judges the men of Gibeah rape a woman to death. By reworking the Sodom story, Judges presents Israel without a king as more wicked than cities justly destroyed by fire from heaven.

While the narrative analogy between Judges 19 and Genesis 19 is quite obvious, many other allusions and analogies exist between the two books.1 In the Abimelech narrative of Judges 9, the author presents Abimelech and his imposter kingdom as a foil to the Abrahamic promise given in Genesis 12.2 Judges makes an immediate connection between the two narratives through a shared setting—the city of Shechem with its great tree or trees—which highlights the larger thematic resonance between the narratives: covenant, kingdom, and presence. In light of the Abrahamic promise in Genesis 12, Judges demonstrates Abimelech's kingdom to be a failed attempt to establish a kingdom in Israel apart from Yahweh. This narrative tree can only be adequately understood when considering it in relation to the forest in which it lives.

The Great Tree in Genesis

In Genesis, the great tree at Shechem echoes Eden and thus points forward to a promised kingdom that will restore humanity's relationship with God. While only mentioned twice, the oak, terebinth, or great tree (אֵלוֹן) at Shechem unites two patriarchal narratives that emphasize the themes of covenant, kingdom, and presence (Gen 12:6; 35:8).

A New Eden

Yahweh walked with Adam amid the arboreal garden in Eden, but Adam sinned and hid "from the face of Yahweh Elohim among the trees of the garden" (Gen 3:8).

1 Multiple literary descriptions of what later authors are doing with earlier Scripture can be accurate and helpful. In general, I appreciate the work of Seth D. Postell in delineating a textually-based methodology for recognizing these narrative analogies, although I do register disagreement with Postell's evaluation of how his methodology relates to typology while also appreciating much of his caution surrounding a Christocentric reading of the Old Testament. See Postell, *The Art of Narrative Analogy: Identifying and Interpreting Parallel Passages in the Bible* (Baker Academic, 2025).

2 A "foil" is "a character whose qualities emphasise another's…by providing a sharp contrast" (Peter Auger, "Foil," in *The Anthem Dictionary of Literary Terms and Theory* (Anthem, 2010).). In this instance, the contrast is between Abimelech and Abraham/the seed of Abraham. In the terminology of Postell, this analogy would be identified as "B < A," in which the target story is worse than the source story. See Postell, *The Art of Narrative Analogy*, 111–24.

As the wickedness of man increased on the earth, Yahweh resolved to destroy humanity but chose Noah to rescue a remnant. After receiving confirmation that Yahweh had again caused trees to grow on the earth (Gen 8:11), Noah disembarked, receiving the commission of a new Adam in a new creation (Gen 8:20–9:17). Like Adam, Noah became a farmer. Like Adam, Noah sinfully took of the fruit of his garden and exposed his nakedness, and like Adam, he died (Gen 9:18–28).

Yet despite Noah's sin, God intended a restoration of his fellowship with humanity. Following the scattering of the nations at Babel, Yahweh chose Abram and promised to establish his kingdom through Abram. Yahweh promised Abram that he would become a great nation in the land Yahweh would show him, that he would be blessed, and that his name would be made great (Gen 12:1–2), and then through the fulfillment of these promises, blessing would extend to all the families of the earth (Gen 12:3). With each element of the promise, Yahweh was pledging to establish a global kingdom through the childless man from Ur. Peter Gentry notes specifically the significance of the promise to make from Abram a גּוֹי גָּדוֹל ("great nation"). While normally we think of the non-Israelite nations as the גּוֹיִם, Gentry explains:

> The basic meaning of *gôy* is an *organized* community of people having *governmental, political,* and *social* structure. The word contrasts with the derogatory term for the other nations, *mišpāhâ*, in Genesis 12. This word refers to an amorphous kin group larger than an extended family and smaller than a tribe.[3]

Yahweh did not merely promise Abram a family or a land but a kingdom that would encompass all peoples. Within the context of Genesis, this global kingdom signifies the promise of a new creation, a new beginning for humanity when they will finally "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion" (Gen 1:28). Therefore, having received the promise, Abram follows Yahweh to the land of Canaan and immediately passes through the land to its geographical center, the city of Shechem. At Shechem, he comes to the "great tree of Moreh," and there "Yahweh appeared to Abram" (Gen 12:6–7; cf. Deut 11:30). Three elements in Genesis 12:6–7 identify the promised land as the new Eden: First, the great tree that alludes to the trees of Eden and possibly even to the tree of life; second, the appearance of Yahweh (possibly the first since Eden depending on what is meant by Enoch's experience of walking with God; Gen 5:22);[4] and third, the priestly service of building

3 Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, Second edition (Crossway, 2018), 280.

4 Wenham adds that Yahweh's appearing foreshadows Sinai (cf. Exod 16:10). See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC (Word, 1987), 279.

an altar, which reflects Adam's priestlike service in the garden (Gen 2:15).[5]

Historically, readers are left with many questions about the "great tree of Moreh." Does אֵלוֹן denote a specific species such as an oak or terebinth, or does it simply indicate a great tree regardless of species? Why was this great tree associated with מוֹרֶה? Does מוֹרֶה mean "teacher" in this instance, does it point to a pagan practice such as divination, or is it a proper name? What sort of pagan rites might have taken place at such a sacred tree and why would a worshiper of Yahweh identify the great tree as an appropriate place of worship?[6] Most of these historical questions can never be answered adequately. Nevertheless, readers may understand the literary significance of the "great tree of Moreh." Wenham points out the consonance between מוֹרֶה and Yahweh's appearing (יֵרֶה), which emphasizes Abram's unique experience of Yahweh's presence at the tree.[7] While the word for tree in Genesis 2–3 is the more general term עֵץ, the thematic significance of Yahweh appearing beside a great tree to a king-priest gives a glimpse of the fulfillment of the promise he gave Abram—a global kingdom of blessing that restores Eden-like fellowship with Yahweh.

A Failed Conquest

Readers encounter the great tree at Shechem again in Genesis 35. The defilement of Dinah and its aftermath threatened to extinguish the promise given to Abraham (Gen 34). Would the family line of Abraham simply be absorbed into the Canaanites with Jacob's children intermarrying with the people of Shechem and becoming "one people" with them (Gen 34:16)? Simeon and Levi, despite the folly of their behavior, rescued the Abrahamic line from being absorbed into the Shechemites. Their actions foreshadowed the conquest of Canaan, but Jacob's response highlighted two reasons why the time was not yet right for the conquest of the land. First, Jacob lamented their numerical deficiency. They were too few to fight the Canaanites (Gen 34:30–31). But secondly, Jacob identified the spiritual deficiency of his family. They were not wholly devoted to Yahweh (Gen 35:1–4).

Following the slaughter of Shechem, God reaffirmed the Abrahamic promise to Jacob by commanding him to go to Bethel and build an altar there. In this reaffirmation, Moses alluded to the earlier altars built by Abraham first at Shechem where Yahweh appeared and then at Bethel where Abraham settled (Gen 12:6–8). Jacob's experience, however, followed an inverse ordering from his grandfather. God had already appeared to him at Bethel during his flight from Esau, and now he must go

5 G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, NSBT (IVP Academic, 2004), 68–98.

6 Wenham, *Genesis* 1–15, 279.

7 Wenham, *Genesis* 1–15, 279.

and build an altar there (Gen 28:10–22).[8] But going to "God's house" (בֵּית־אֵל) to offer priestly worship required purification (cf. Exod 29:4–9), both the physical purification of bathing and changing clothes and the spiritual purification of removing idols and amulets. We read that "Jacob buried these things under the great tree near Shechem" (Gen 35:4). Since this is the site where Yahweh had first appeared to Abraham, Jacob may have seen this act as a means of stripping the objects of their power, but why not break or burn them as we see others doing as an act of repentance (e.g., Exod 32:20; 2 Kings 23:4–15)? Alternatively, due the association of the great tree with the trees of Eden, he may have viewed the depositing of idols as akin to returning the fruit of rebellion to the tree, an act of repentance and renewal of relations with Yahweh as the only true God. Regardless of the significance of the burial, Jacob's actions foreshadow the command of Joshua in the same location to "put away your fathers' gods" (Josh 24:14).[9]

Summary of the Tree in Genesis

Genesis identifies Shechem and particularly the great tree at Shechem as a location where the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise is foreshadowed. At the great tree, Abraham saw God, and Jacob repented of his foreign gods. Through his covenant with this family line, Yahweh promises to re-establish a global kingdom where humanity will dwell with God as his people and experience blessing. To bring about the fulfillment of the promise will require the eradication of the Canaanites and their gods, but first the descendants of Abraham must purify themselves and repent of their own rebellion. Only after the purification of the people, initiated by Jacob's actions at Shechem, can the promise be confirmed and ultimately fulfilled to Israel.

The Background and Setting of the Abimelech Narrative

"In those days there was no king in Israel, and each man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg 21:25). According to Judges, the establishment of a monarch would resolve the downward spiral of sin experienced by post-conquest Israel. Yet the Gideon-Abimelech narrative demonstrates that not any king would do. Only a Deuteronomy 17-type king who is devoted to the law of Yahweh can lead Israel to establish God's global kingdom where God would dwell with his covenant people. A false kingdom built upon a broken covenant could only bring about alienation from and enmity with Yahweh.

8 Note also that Jacob follows the same route as Abram in Genesis 12:8, who departed Shechem to dwell near Bethel.

9 Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1995), 375. Hess connects the raising of the stone witness to Jacob's burial of the idols. See Richard S. Hess, Joshua, TOTC (IVP, 1996), 340.

Gideon's False-Rejection of the Monarchy

Following Gideon's miraculous victory over the Midianites, Israel implores him to establish a dynasty to rule over Israel (Judg 8:22). Gideon's response reflects Israel's own fickle commitment to Yahweh. While he refuses the monarchy, saying "Yahweh will rule over you" (Judg 8:23; cf. 1 Sam 8:7), he nevertheless acts as a pagan king.10 Deuteronomy 17:17 warns that the king of Israel "shall not take many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he take for himself excessive silver and gold." Immediately upon rejecting the kingdom, Gideon sets forth to collect the gold of Israel, confirming his superior rank,11 and like Aaron, to fashion it into an object of worship (Judg 8:24–27; Exod 32:2–4). The form of the idol itself demonstrates the syncretistic nature of Yahweh worship during the time of the judges—a golden ephod.12 The garment of the priests of Yahweh is now turned into an object of worship. Jerubbaal may have contended with Baal, but he embraces idolatry nevertheless (Judg 6:28–32). Furthermore, he engages in the prolific polygamy that marked Ancient Near Eastern monarchy and that Deuteronomy forbade (Judg 8:29–31).

The climactic—or anti-climactic—mark of Gideon's false rejection of monarchy is the naming of his son through a Shechemite concubine— אֲבִימֶלֶךְ or "my father is king." At Shechem, Israel said to Joshua, "We will serve Yahweh, for he is our God" (Josh 24:18), and there under the great tree Joshua erected a stone monument saying, "Behold, this stone shall be a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of Yahweh that he spoke to us" (Josh 24:27). In his own person, Gideon is the embodiment of Israel's faithlessness, saying one thing but doing another, but also like Israel, Gideon's faithlessness will not go unnoticed by Yahweh.

The Tree at Shechem Again

The birth of My-Father-is-King (Abimelech) at Shechem, where Joshua had renewed the covenant with Israel, gives readers the initial indication that the narratives of Gideon and Abimelech speak not just about these specific historical events but ultimately to the entire history of Israel. One might even be tempted to say with Paul, "These things

10 Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, NAC (B&H, 1999), 298.

11 Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 299.

12 Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, WBC (Thomas Nelson, 2009), 222.

are allegorical" (ἁτίνα ἐστιν ἀλληγορουμένα; Gal 4:24).[13] Both Gideon's initial false-rejection of the kingdom and Abimelech's seizure of it demonstrate an Adam-like attempt to rule apart from Yahweh's covenant and presence.

After slaughtering his brothers—an inwardly twisted act of conquest—"all the *baalim* (lords) of Shechem" (כָּל־בַּעֲלֵי שְׁכֶם) made Abimelech king "by the great tree of the propped-up thing at Shechem" (עִם־אֵלוֹן מֵצַב אֲשֶׁר בִּשְׁכֶם; Judg 9:6). Jerubbaal may have contended with Baal, but now the *baalim* or lords of Shechem anoint his illegitimate son king. By describing the leaders of Shechem as בַּעֲלֵי שְׁכֶם, the author utilizes a technical term for covenantal partners, which is used for Abram's allies in Genesis 14:13, while simultaneously emphasizing the unfaithfulness of the Shechemites.[14] While Gideon had told Israel that Yahweh would rule over them, the little *baalim* of Shechem install his son as king instead and even hire his band of rogues with money from Baal-berith's temple.

Most translations describe the location of this event as "the oak of the pillar at Shechem" (ESV; similarly, NIV, CSB). Barry G. Webb, however, translates the phrase as "the oak which had been set up" and speculates that the phrase could refer to a stone monument carved to look like a tree or a real tree planted with a particular significance.[15] The most obvious identification of this tree, however, comes from Joshua 24:26, where Joshua erected a stone of witness "under the great tree" at Shechem. While the verb for "raising" is different between Joshua 24 (קום) and Judges 9 (נצב), the shared location, actions, and themes of the two chapters make the identification quite clear.[16] Rather than translating it "the oak of the pillar," it would be accurate to translate it as "the great tree of the raised [stone]." This seemingly minor detail reminds the reader that all these events occur before a silent witness to Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh.[17]

13 Ardel B. Caneday argues that Paul does not merely mean that the Isaac/Ishmael story may be interpreted as an allegory by future readers without regard to the original author's intention but that both the historical events themselves and their authoritative interpretations in Scripture bear symbolic significance beyond themselves ("Covenant Lineage Allegorically Prefigured: 'Which Things Are Written Allegorically' (Galatians 4:21-31)," SBJT 14, no. 3 (2010): 53–55). To apply the same sort of apostolic hermeneutic to the Abimelech narrative would lead us to read Judges not as relating the bare facts of a random historical personage (Abimelech), loosely connected to other events in the history of Israel yet minimally significant, but to read Judges as relating the story of Abimelech as embedded within the greater drama of the story of Israel, its relationship with Yahweh, and its future hope. Ultimately, to read Scripture "allegorically" like Paul is not to read it unhinged from the author's intention but to read it with an eye to the eschatological significance of all Scripture, which is embedded in the narrative by our promise-making and promise-keeping God, who is the metaphysical source and *telos of all history and narrative*.

14 Theodore J. Lewis, "The Identity and Function of El/Baal Berith," *JBL* 115, no. 3 (1996): 413; Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 310–11.

15 Barry G. Webb, *Judges*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 2012), 271–72.

16 Contra Block who asserts that the pillar would have been for Baal worship. See Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 313. Similarly, Susan Niditch, *Judges*, OTL (Westminster John Knox, 2008), 115.

17 David G. Firth, *Joshua*, EBTC (Lexham, 2021), 398.

A Broken Covenant, a Failed Kingdom, and an Absent God

Jotham's fable (Judg 9:7–21) serves as the interpretive key for the entire series of events, but before examining the fable's interpretation, the history of Abimelech's reign should be reviewed.

A Failed Kingdom

Abimelech ruled as king for three years until God sent an evil spirit to disrupt the alliance between Abimelech and the little *baalim* of Shechem (Judg 9:22). Betraying Abimelech, the *baalim* shift their allegiance to Gaal the son of Ebed, an inebriated fool,[18] but Abimelech, being warned by Zebul the ruler of Shechem, sets out to ambush Gaal and his allies. According to Gaal, the ambush came "from the way of the great tree of divination" (מִדֶּרֶךְ אֵלוֹן מְעוֹנְנִים).[19] This sounds similar to the teacher's tree of Abraham's day, which may have always been rightly called the diviners' tree because of the pagan practices associated with such sacred groves.[20] Yet the degradation of the tree's name in Judges may further signify the degradation of Israel and its own participation in the forbidden practice of divination (Lev 19:26; 20:6; Deut 18:9–14).

Is the diviners' tree the same as the "great tree of the propped-up thing" in Judges 9:6? Some commentators believe these two trees are not the same,[21] but there is little reason not to identify the great tree as the same tree in every instance: the tree where Yahweh appeared to Abraham is the tree where Jacob buried the idols, which is the tree where Joshua erected the stone witness and is the tree where Abimelech was crowned.[22] The change in reference from "the great tree of the raised stone" to the "diviners' tree" allows the author of Judges to emphasize the association of the tree with both Joshua and Abraham. Yet, if we cannot convince "beyond a reasonable doubt" that this great tree is historically one tree, we may nevertheless argue that in terms of literary allusion the idea of a "great tree at Shechem" links all these events together in the grander narrative of Israel's history. Thus, the failure of Abimelech's kingdom is set in juxtaposition to the promise of Yahweh's global kingdom to Abraham.

18 Brandon M. Hurlbert and Alexander T. Kirk, "Drunk in Shechem: Confused Language in Judges 9:28-29 as a Literary Depiction of Inebriated Speech," *CBQ* 87, no. 1 (2025): 39–51. Might even Gaal's name sound like the slurred speech of a drunk attempting to say "Baal?"

19 The expression "the navel of the land" (טַבּוּר הָאָרֶץ) in Judges 9:37 may also signify the spiritual significance of the location from which the attack comes. See Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, AYB (Doubleday, 1974), 178–79.

20 Webb, *Judges*, 285.

21 E.g., Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris, *Judges and Ruth*, TOTC (IVP, 1968), 130; Webb, *Judges*, 285.

22 Few commentators identify all these events as occurring at the same great tree. See Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1990), 377; Firth, *Joshua*, 398.

A Broken Covenant

Following the initial defeat of Gaal and his band, probably thinking the crisis had passed, the people of Shechem again went out to their fields only to be slaughtered by Abimelech and his forces. Apparently, while the peasants attempted to work the fields, the *baalim* sought refuge in "the stronghold of the house of El-berith," which likely is the same structure as "the tower of Shechem" (Judg 9:46).[23] While this could refer to a structure separate from the city, it is likely that these events occurred on the acropolis of Shechem, which has been excavated and shows signs of destruction consistent with Judges 9.[24]

In Judges 8:33, the author tells us that following Gideon's death Israel had made Baal-berith, or Baal of the Covenant, their god. Here in 9:46 the god is identified as El of the Covenant. It is unlikely that the change in nomenclature is insignificant. Some scholars have opted to identify the god as Baal identified by the epithet "god (*el*) of the covenant" while others have argued that the god of Shechem was El who was worshiped as the "lord (*baal*) of the covenant."[25] Lewis argues that the covenant god of Shechem, likely originating as the witness of a political treaty, later developed into the monolatrous El or Elohim of the Israelites and finally into Yahweh who made a covenant with his people.[26] But the purpose of Judges leads us to read this development not in terms of evolution but devolution. The confusion of names and titles reflect the spiritual confusion of Israel and its process of Canaanization.[27] Perhaps a memory of Abraham at Shechem and/or the renewal of the covenant under Joshua and the significance of the witness stone under the great tree came to be fused with the Canaanite gods that Israel whored after, and maybe it is a highlight of the spiritual confusion that the Israelites could not even agree on which false god was the god of the covenant—El or Baal. No matter whom the Shechemites identified as the god of the covenant, Judges makes clear that the Israelites had broken their covenant with Yahweh.

An Absent God

Thus, the kingdom of Abimelech was marked by deep spiritual unfaithfulness and confusion, and Judges emphasizes that the root of the chaos and slaughter of the period came not due to political failures but due to spiritual unfaithfulness.

23 Webb, *Judges*, 290.

24 Lawrence E. Stager, "The Fortress Temple at Shechem and the 'House of El, Lord of the Covenant,'" in *Realia Dei: Essays in Archaeology and Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Edward F. Campbell, Jr. at His Retirement*, ed. P. H. Williams Jr. and T. Hiebert (Scholars, 1999); Lawrence E. Stager, "The Shechem Temple: Where Abimelech Massacred a Thousand," *BAR* 29, no. 4 (2003): 26–35, 66–69.

25 Lewis, "The Identity and Function of El/Baal Berith."

26 Lewis, "The Identity and Function of El/Baal Berith."

27 Webb, *Judges*, 291. See also Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 306.

Throughout the narrative, Yahweh is largely absent. God is only mentioned three times. Each time, he is identified as Elohim, not his covenant name Yahweh, and each time he acts in judgment against Abimelech and the Shechemites (Judg 9:22, 56–57).[28] Unlike the other narratives of Judges, in the Abimelech narrative, the people do not cry out to Yahweh, and Yahweh does not raise up a deliverer.

While Abimelech saw success in his re-conquest of Shechem, in his next campaign against Thebez, he is killed. Within Judges, Abimelech's death repeats the pattern set by the death of Sisera at the hands of Jael—the oppressor's head crushed by a woman using a household tool.[29] But canonically, the skull-crushing deaths of both Sisera and Abimelech mark them out as the seed of the serpent (Judg 4:21–22; 5:24–27; 9:53; Gen 3:15). While sometimes listed as a judge because of his prominence in the narrative, Judges does not view Abimelech as a deliverer but rather as an oppressor like the other pagan nations. While Abimelech may have been Israelite in ethnicity, he lived in rebellion against Yahweh and brought destruction to God's people and to himself as God's judgment for their unfaithfulness.

The Interpretive Key of Jotham's Fable

Jotham's fable is the interpretive key for the entire Abimelech narrative.[30] Considering the significance of the great tree in the setting of the story, readers should not be surprised by the arboreal focus of the fable. Jotham delivers his fable "from the head of Mount Gerizim." The covenant of Israel literally overshadowed the city of Shechem with Gerizim and blessing to the south and Ebal and curse to the north. Considering the content of Jotham's fable, one could argue that Mount Ebal, the mountain of curse, would be the more appropriate location for delivery, but perhaps in this irony lies the significance of Jotham's choice—there is no blessing for a people in rebellion to Yahweh's covenant.[31] Only curse remains. There is no deliverer in the Abimelech narrative.

Prophetic Fable

In the fable, the trees, seeking to anoint a king, offer the kingdom to all the most obvious candidates: the olive tree, the fig tree, and the grapevine. But each refuse because each is satisfied with its own natural position and wealth. Finally, the trees

28 Block, *Judges, Ruth,* 309.

29 Niditch, *Judges,* 118.

30 For a detailed examination of the structure of the fable, see Tomasz Koszarek, "The Structure and Poetic Elements of Jotham's Speech (Judg 9:7g-20)," *Studia Biblica Slovaca* 16, no. 2 (2024): 201–29.

31 Webb, *Judges,* 275.

offer the kingdom to the אָטָד, translated as "the bramble" (ESV, CSB) or "thornbush" (NIV) and possibly identified as the European boxthorn (*Lycium europaeum*).[32] Silviu Tatu, however, argues that the אָטָד refers to a tree from the Ziziphus genus, which would have been quite proficient at giving shade, and thus the offer of the אָטָד to provide shade should not been read as false but parallels the evaluation of the other plants' unique abilities. According to Tatu, Abimelech offers Shechem protection, but by accepting his protection, the leaders put themselves in a dangerous position, exposed to the fire that might come out of the tree.[33] While Tatu's reading remains possible, the ironic, even absurd, tone of the overall narrative favors the bramble or thornbush reading: Abimelech is an imposter king and has nothing but false promises and destruction to offer the people of Shechem.[34]

Kings and kingdoms are often pictured as trees in Scripture. For example, in Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar dreams of himself as a great tree, offering shade to the animals of the earth (Dan 4:1–27). Ezekiel presents the kingdom of Assyria as a cedar where animals find shade (Ezek 31:1–18).[35] The promise of the bramble Abimelech, however, is a false promise. A thornbush may only offer minimal shade. In the end, only judgment will come to those who seek refuge under an imposter tree—a fire so great that even the mighty cedars of Lebanon will be consumed (Judg 9:15).

Prophetic Prefiguration

Jotham, speaking from one of the mounts of covenant renewal, prefigures the office of prophet in Israel as he enforces the covenant and proclaims future judgment.[36] He proclaims that the anointing of Abimelech as king will result in both judgment for the *baalim* of Shechem and for Abimelech himself (Judg 9:20). Judges concludes the narrative by explicitly confirming the fulfillment of Jotham's prophecy: "Thus God returned the

32 אָטָד, Ludwig Köhler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Brill, 1994).

33 Silviu Tatu, "Jotham's Fable and the *Crux Interpretum* in Judges IX," *VT* 56, no. 1 (2006): 105–24.

34 Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 318.In an interesting alternative reading, David Janzen argues that the bramble refers to Gideon and his house since he first was offered the kingship in Judges and that the destruction of Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem result from their mistreatment of Gideon's house. See David Janzen, "Gideon's House as the אטד: A Proposal for Reading Jotham's Fable," *CBQ* 74, no. 3 (2012): 465–75.

35 See also Pss 1; 52:8; Isa 2:12–13; 11:1; Jer 17:; 22:6–7; Ezek 17:1–24; 19:10–14; Hos 14:5–7.

36 Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 315; Koszarek, "The Structure of Jotham's Speech," 226.

evil of Abimelech…And God also made all the evil of the men of Shechem return on their heads, and upon them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal" (Judg 9:56–57).

Israel needs a king who will lead the nation to obey Yahweh's covenant and usher in the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham of a global kingdom where Yahweh dwells with his people, but not any king will do. Abimelech is an imposter, and he only brings curse rather than blessing. Abimelech is no deliverer, but the seed of the serpent whose head must be crushed. Under a broken covenant, every attempt at kingdom will fail because Yahweh not only abandons Israel but opposes Israel.

Conclusion

By highlighting the setting of the Abimelech narrative through a connection with the great tree at Shechem, the author of Judges 9 positions the story as a foil to the Abrahamic promise that was enacted and experienced at the same great tree in Genesis 12. The narrative of Abimelech functions as a microcosm of the history of Israel's relationship to Yahweh. The culmination of Yahweh's initial promise to Abram in Genesis 12 occurs when Yahweh appears to Abram at the great tree, foreshadowing a coming global kingdom where God would dwell with his people like in Eden. When Jacob's sons attempt a failed conquest at Shechem in Genesis 35, Jacob calls his family to abandon their idols and bury them at the foot of the great tree, identifying exclusive commitment to Yahweh as prerequisite to receiving the promised kingdom. In Genesis, the great tree at Shechem echoes Eden and thus points forward to a promised kingdom that will restore humanity's relationship with God. The tree can never truly be considered only as a tree but as a member of the forest.

Judges 9 draws from these Genesis stories to contrast Abimelech's failed attempt at kingship with the promised kingdom to Abraham. Though crowned at the great tree where Yahweh appeared to Abram and where Joshua renewed the covenant with Israel and erected the stone of witness, Abimelech and the little *baalim* of Shechem serve a corrupted deity variously identified as Baal of the Covenant or El of the Covenant. But neither El nor Baal are the true God of the covenant, and despite his name, Abimelech is neither the son of a king nor a true king of Israel because of his alienation from Yahweh, the giver and goal of the promised kingdom. In fulfillment of his brother Jotham's fable, Abimelech proves to be a mere bramble rather than the great tree that a true king of Israel will be.

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FROM OUTSIDE TO INSIDE: EXODUS 33.7-11 AS NARRATIVE PIVOT IN THE TRANSITION FROM DIVINE REMOTENESS TO DIVINE IMMANENCE

GREGG WATSON

Associate Dean, Academic Services & Professor of Old Testament Studies at Gateway Seminary

Introduction

The book of Exodus presents two distinct institutions that share a common name. Both are called "the tent of meeting" (אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד, *ʾohel moʿed*) yet they differ in almost every observable respect: in location, in the spatial relationship between Yahweh and the human participant, in function, in personnel, and in what they communicate about the nature of Israel's relationship with Yahweh.[1] One is erected outside the camp, at a deliberate distance from Israel's community. The other is designed to stand at the center of that community, permanently housing the divine presence within it.[2] The question of how these two institutions relate to one another within the nar-

1 For the two tents and the exegetical challenges they present, see Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 587–91; William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19–40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 2A (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 590–96; and John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3 (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 437–39.

2 On the Tabernacle's position at the center of Israel's camp as a theological statement, see Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 149–65; and Philip Peter Jenson, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 106 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 89–114.

rative structure of Exodus is not simply a technical puzzle for source critics.[3] It is a theological question about the direction and nature of Yahweh's movement toward his people, and about what that movement meant for Israel's covenant life.[4]

This article argues that Exodus 33:7–11, a procedural discourse describing a tent of meeting habitually erected outside Israel's camp, functions within the narrative structure of Exodus 24–40 as a pivotal transitional text. It acts as a narrative hinge between Yahweh's dwelling apart from his people on the cosmic mountain and his intended permanent dwelling among them in the Tabernacle.[5] The passage's spatial logic, in which the human inquirer is hidden within the tent while Yahweh manifests outside it, inverts the spatial arrangement of the intra-camp Tabernacle, and this inversion marks the structural and theological transition from divine remoteness to divine immanence that the larger narrative of Exodus 24–40 is designed to communicate.[6]

Five arguments form the basis of this article. The first establishes the significance of the designation 'mountain of God' for Horeb/Sinai as Yahweh's dwelling place. Second is an examination of the cosmic mountain archetype of Exodus 24 and its relationship to the sacred spatial structure of the Tabernacle. A third considers the instructional discourse in Exodus 25–31 and its repeated statements about the Tabernacle's purpose. The fourth argument is an analysis of the pivotal function of Exodus 32–34 as a transitional section within the larger narrative arc, with particular attention to the procedural discourse of 33:7–11 and its spatial logic. The fifth draws together the theological implications of the transition the narrative enacts.

3 Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 587–91; Propp, Exodus 19–40, 590–96. For the source-critical discussion more broadly, see Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, The Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 717–22.

4 Donald E. Gowan, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 218–20; Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 131–60.

5 This is the linchpin of this article; see the discussion in "The Procedural Discourse of Exodus 33:7–11: Genre and Significance" below. See also L. Michael Morales, *The Tabernacle Pre-Figured: Cosmic Mountain Ideology in Genesis and Exodus*, Biblical Tools and Studies 15 (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 1–15; Martin Ravndal Hauge, *The Descent from the Mountain: Narrative Patterns in Exodus 19–40*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 323 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 17–45. Compare Nissim Amzallag, "Moses' Tent of Meeting—A Theological Interface between Qenite Yahwism and the Israelite Religion," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2019): 298-317. Amzallag suggests that the focal passage, Exod. 33.7-11, signifies a transition of Israel's nascent faith from a Kenite form of worship to a more Israelite formulation. Though his thesis is interesting, it is his treatment of this passage as providing a transition from one status to another that relates to the thesis of this article. Note also that one cannot claim that a Procedural Discourse in every case provides such narrative transitions, just that in this particular case it is the argument that that is its function here.

6 Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 89–114; Haran, Temples and Temple-Service, 149–65.

"The Mountain of God": Horeb/Sinai as Yahweh's Dwelling Place

Any account of the transition that Exodus 24–40 narrates must begin with a clear understanding of the nature of the transition. Before there was a Tabernacle, before there were instructions for its construction, before any divine intention of Yahweh to dwell among Israel in their travels, there was the mountain.

The designation "mountain of God" (הַר הָאֱלֹהִים, *har ha-ʾĕlohîm*) appears with quiet but decisive significance at two points that frame the narrative leading into the Sinai encounter.[7] In Exod. 3:1, when Moses was tending Jethro's flock in the wilderness of Midian, he came to "Horeb, the mountain of God," and it was there, at that specific location, that the angel of Yahweh appeared to him in the burning bush and Yahweh spoke from within the flame.[8] The mountain was already Yahweh's mountain before Israel arrived at it. The chronologically later theophany of Exodus 19 did not consecrate it; rather, the theophany of Exodus 19 happened because the mountain already belonged to Yahweh.[9] The burning bush episode established the mountain as a pre-existing locus of divine presence, a place where Yahweh might characteristically to be found.[10]

The second occurrence confirms this. In Exodus 4:27, when Yahweh instructed Aaron to go and meet Moses, he told him to go "to the wilderness," and Aaron went and met him "at the mountain of God." The mountain was the natural meeting point between the two brothers precisely because it was where Yahweh dwelled, a cosmic fixed point at which the brothers would meet.[11]

This designation carries the full weight of ancient Near Eastern cosmic mountain theology.[12] Throughout the ancient world in Mesopotamian ziggurat traditions, in Ugaritic accounts of Baal's mountain Zaphon, in Egyptian cosmological geogra-

7 This study assumes that Horeb/Sinai, "the mountain of God," has been the place where Elohim (Yahweh!) has "dwelled" during the long years of His apparent absence (see Exod. 12.40-41; cf. Gen. 15.13. Contrast this with Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 47–50; Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 45.

8 Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 71–74; Durham, Exodus, 28–31; Duane A. Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2014), 132–38.

9 Though see U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magness Press, 1967), 31, and T. Desmond Alexander, Exodus, Apollos Old Testament Commentary, vol. 2 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 81. Sarna is more neutral (*Exodus*, 12–13).

10 Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 106–10; Gowan, *Theology in Exodus*, 37–42.

11 Hamilton, *Exodus*, 72–74; Garrett, *Commentary on Exodus*, 175–78.

12 Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 4 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 1–30; Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), 111–37.

phy, the divine mountain served as the *axis mundi*, the point where heaven and earth intersect, where the divine realm was most fully accessible to the human world.[13] The mountain was not merely a place where a god or gods happened to show up; it is where they dwelled. The narrative of Exodus assumes that Sinai/Horeb, "the mountain of Elohim," was the residence of Yahweh, His throne room, the ground-level extension of the heavenly court.[14]

This is the spatial and theological reality that Yahweh's instructions for the Tabernacle in Exodus 25–31 proposed fundamentally to alter. If Horeb is the mountain of God, then the declaration of Exodus 25:8, "let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell in their midst," is not merely an instruction for a worship space. It is a declaration of divine relocation.[15] Yahweh intended to leave his mountain and take up a new residence among a traveling people. The entire narrative arc of Exodus 24–40 is the account of how that relocation was proposed, interrupted, negotiated, and ultimately accomplished.[16]

The Cosmic Mountain as Structural Archetype: Exodus 24

Exodus 24 is one of the most carefully structured passages in the entire Pentateuch, and its spatial architecture is the key to understanding everything that follows it.[17] The chapter presents the Sinai encounter not as a single undifferentiated event but as a precisely graded hierarchy of proximity to the divine presence.[18] It presents a series of concentric zones of access whose structure anticipates and archetypes the spatial organization of the Tabernacle itself.[19]

The chapter's spatial structure can be read in four distinct zones, each with its designated human occupants and each communicating a specific degree proximity to the divine presence.[20]

13 Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 1–30; Morales, *Tabernacle Pre-Figured*, 19–55; John H. Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 178–80.

14 Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 111–37; Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 98–131.

15 Morales, *Tabernacle Pre-Figured*, 183–210; Dan Lioy, *Axis of Glory: A Biblical and Theological Analysis of the Temple Motif in Scripture*, Studies in Biblical Literature 138 (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 45–72.

16 Hauge, *Descent from the Mountain*, 17–45; Gowan, *Theology in Exodus*, 215–25.

17 Thomas B. Dozeman, *God on the Mountain: A Study of Redaction, Theology and Canon in Exodus 19–24*, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 37 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 97–120; Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 260–72.

18 Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 40–88; Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 497–502.

19 Morales, *Tabernacle Pre-Figured*, 183–210; Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service*, 149–65; Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 89–114.

20 Dozeman, *God on the Mountain*, 97–120; Hamilton, *Exodus*, 383–96.

The Boundary for the People

The outermost zone is established not in Exodus 24 but in the preparatory instructions of Exodus 19:23–24, which set the terms for the Sinai theophany. The people were to be bounded so that the mountain was set apart, and any person or animal who touched it would be put to death. The boundary was enforced precisely because the mountain was holy (Yahweh dwelled there!) and the people in their current state could not survive unmediated proximity to that holiness.[21] They were to "stand at a distance" and receive the covenant from below.

This boundary at the mountain's foot corresponds, in the Tabernacle's spatial organization, to the outer court, the area accessible to lay Israelites for the presentation of offerings but admitting them no further into the graduated sacred space.[22] The people can participate in this covenant event but cannot approach the center. They can hear the voice, assent to the covenant, and receive the sprinkled blood, but the mountain above them remains inaccessible.[23]

The Blue Pavement: The Elders' Visionary Encounter

Exodus 24:9–11 describes what is arguably the most astonishing episode in the chapter, and one of the most remarkable in the entire Hebrew Bible. Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders (and, apparently Joshua; cf. 24.13) of Israel ascended beyond the boundary to the foot of the mountain and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement of sapphire stone (so HCSB; Heb. = לִבְנַת הַסַּפִּיר, *liḇnaṯ hassappîr*), like the very heaven for clearness. Almost unexpectedly God did not harm them; they saw God, they ate and drank in his presence but did not die.[24]

The sapphire pavement is a detail of cosmic throne-room significance. Blue lapis lazuli was the color of the heavenly vault in ancient Near Eastern royal iconography; the pavement beneath Yahweh's feet is the floor of heaven itself, the underside of the divine throne room that the elders glimpse from below.[25] They are seeing the base of the cosmic mountain's summit from an intermediate elevation. It is close enough for a visionary glimpse of the divine throne, far enough that what they see is Yahweh's footstool rather than his face.[26]

21 Childs, *Book of Exodus,* 363–72; Sarna, *Exodus*, 103–5; Durham, *Exodus*, 260–65.

22 Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service*, 149–65; Jenson, *Graded Holiness,* 89–114.

23 Alexander, *Exodus*, 459–65; Garrett, *Commentary on Exodus,* 484–90

24 Propp, *Exodus* 19–40, 303–8; Hamilton, *Exodus*, 393–96; Sarna, *Exodus*, 152–53.

25 Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 112; Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Exodus,* Exodus 24:10; Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 111–37.

26 Morales, *Tabernacle Pre-Figured,* 209–210; Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sa-*

In the Tabernacle's spatial organization, this intermediate zone corresponds to the Holy Place, the area accessible to the Aaronic priests for their daily service, where the menorah, the table of showbread, and the incense altar are maintained.[27] The priests can enter and serve; they cannot pass beyond the veil into the innermost chamber. The elders can see; they cannot fully behold.[28]

The Cloud: Moses and the Summit

Exodus 24:12–18 describes the final ascent that separates Mosaic access from all other human access. Moses alone was called to ascend to the summit and receive the stone tablets. Joshua accompanied him partway (the text notes his presence in verse 13) but when Moses entered the cloud on the seventh day, Joshua did not follow. The cloud was the boundary between the two. Joshua waited at an intermediate point, faithful and close but excluded from the summit encounter. Moses entered the cloud into Yahweh's presence and remained there for forty days and forty nights, receiving the extended instructions of Exodus 25–31.[29]

Joshua's position here is worth pausing over because it recurs with structural precision in the extra-camp tent of Exodus 33:11. In both texts Joshua is closer to the divine encounter than any other human being except Moses; in both texts he is specifically noted as present but not a recipient of divine speech. He is the faithful threshold guardian, both inside the cloud's vicinity on the mountain, inside the extra-camp tent itself, yet categorically distinguished from Moses by his non-participation in the face-to-face conversation. The recurrence of this precise characterization across the two texts is a deliberate literary pattern that invites the reader to read the extra-camp tent's encounter structure as a deliberate echo of the mountain archetype.[30]

The cloud at the mountain's summit corresponds, in the Tabernacle's spatial organization, to the Holy of Holies, which is the innermost chamber accessible to Aaron alone, once a year, through the elaborate procedures of Yom Kippur.[31] As the cloud is the medium through which

baoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies, Coniectanea Biblica Old Testament 18 (Lund: Gleerup, 1982), 80–115.

27 Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service*, 149–65; Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 89–114; Israel Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1–45.

28 While there is not space to do so here, it is tempting to flesh out this connection by positing that references in Exodus 25-31 to "the tent of meeting" likely correspond to the Holy Place, as the comments around these references correspond more directly to the Holy Place than with the Holy of Holies or the tent of meeting that was positioned outside the camp.

29 Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 504–9; Durham, *Exodus*, 340–44; Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 307–13.

30 Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 47–62; Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 23–42.

31 Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 89–114; Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service*, 175–88; Knohl, *Sanctuary*

Yahweh speaks to Moses at the summit, the space above the *kapporet* (הַכַּפֹּרֶת) between the cherubim is the location from which Yahweh speaks to Moses within the Tabernacle (Exodus 25:22; Numbers 7:89).[32] The summit cloud and the Tabernacle's innermost chamber are the two archetypal representations of the same spatial reality: the place of maximum divine presence, accessible in this moment to Moses alone among living human beings.

The structural parallel between the mountain's zones of access and the Tabernacle's zones of holiness is not accidental.[33] The Tabernacle is, in architectural form, what the mountain is in natural form: a graduated sacred space in which Yahweh's presence is most fully concentrated at the interior center, mediated through concentric zones of increasing holiness, and accessible only to those whose status and preparation correspond to the zone they enter.[34] The mountain is the archetype; the Tabernacle is its portable institutional realization.[35]

The Instructional Discourse of Exodus 25–31: Pattern and Purpose

Exodus 25–31 is the longest continuous instructional discourse in the book of Exodus, and its genre is theologically significant.[36] This is not narrative describing events that have occurred, but divine instruction for something intended to occur. The Tabernacle exists in Exodus 25–31 as a divine intention and architectural specification before it exists as a physical reality, and the nature of that intention is declared explicitly at two levels: in the references to a heavenly pattern that the construction must follow, and in Yahweh's stated purpose for the sanctuary as a place of permanent divine indwelling.[37]

of Silence, 1–45.

32 Sarna, *Exodus*, 160–62; Hamilton, *Exodus*, 439–44; Mettinger, *Dethronement of Sabaoth*, 80–115.

33 Morales, *Tabernacle Pre-Figured*, 183–210; Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 40–88; Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service*, 149–65.

34 Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 89–114; Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service*, 149–65; Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 529–37.

35 Morales, *Tabernacle Pre-Figured*, 183–210; Lioy, *Axis of Glory*, 45–72; Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 111–37.

36 Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 529–37; Durham, *Exodus*, 350–57; Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 353–62.

37 Victor (Avigdor) Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House: Temple Building in the Bible in Light of Mesopotamian and Northwest Semitic Writings*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 115 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 23–67; Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service*, 149–65.

The Heavenly Pattern

Three times within the instructional discourse, Yahweh specified that the Tabernacle and its furnishings were to be constructed according to a pattern (תַּבְנִית, *tabnit*) that Moses had been shown on the mountain. The references appear in Exodus 25:9, 25:40, and 26:30, with the first and most programmatic stating, "Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it."

The significance of the *tabnit*-language has been widely discussed.[38] At minimum it indicates that the earthly Tabernacle is intended as a faithful reproduction of a heavenly original.[39] It describes what Moses is building on the ground as corresponding to a divine reality already existing in the heavenly realm. The Tabernacle is not an innovation but a realization of the portable, earthly instantiation of the heavenly sanctuary that already exists as Yahweh's celestial dwelling.[40] This is consistent with the cosmic mountain theology established in Exodus 3 and 24. Yahweh already has a dwelling place and the mountain is its earthly extension, and the heavenly sanctuary is its ultimate reality.[41] The Tabernacle is the means by which that heavenly-earthly connection, previously localized on the mountain, becomes portable and therefore able to accompany Israel through the wilderness.[42]

The Declared Purpose: Dwelling among the People

Alongside the pattern references, the instructional discourse is punctuated by explicit statements of the Tabernacle's theological purpose. The foundational declaration comes in Exodus 25:8: "And let them make me a sanctuary (מִקְדָּשׁ, *miqdoš*), that I may dwell in their midst." The verb used for "dwell" is the Hebrew verb שָׁכַן (*sākan*), is the root from which מִשְׁכָּן (*mishkan* "dwelling place," the alternative name for the Tabernacle) derives.[43] The Tabernacle is literally the *miškān* because it is the place where Yahweh "*šākēn*s," where he takes up residence. The language is residential and permanent, not occasional or visitational.[44]

38 Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 536–40; Sarna, *Exodus*, 158–60; Propp, *Exodus* 19–40, 366–68.

39 Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House*, 23–67; Mettinger, *Dethronement of Sabaoth*, 80–115.

40 Morales, *Tabernacle Pre-Figured*, 183–210; Lioy, *Axis of Glory*, 45–72; Tremper Longman III, *Immanuel in Our Place: Seeing Christ in Israel's Worship*, The Gospel According to the Old Testament (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2001), 25–48.

41 Clifford, *Cosmic Mountain*, 98–131; Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 111–37.

42 Myung Soo Suh, *The Tabernacle in the Narrative History of Israel from the Exodus to the Conquest*, Studies in Biblical Literature 50 (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 1–45; Morales, Tabernacle Pre-Figured, 183–210.

43 Durham, *Exodus*, 353–57; Sarna, *Exodus*, 156–58; Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 536–40.

44 Gowan, *Theology in Exodus*, 215–20; Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 131–60; W. Ross Blackburn, *The*

The same purpose is reiterated at several points throughout the discourse. Exodus 29:42–46 is particularly explicit, declaring that the tent of meeting will be the place where Yahweh meets with Israel and with the priests, and culminating in the purpose statement, "[45]*I will dwell* (וְקִדַּשְׁתִּי, *vᵉqidaštî*) among the people of Israel and will be their God. [46]And they shall know that I am Yahweh their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt *that I might dwell among them*" (note the final purpose clause in v. 46.).[45] The exodus event itself, then is interpreted as having divine indwelling as its purpose. Israel was redeemed from Egypt not merely to be free but so that Yahweh could dwell among them.[46] The Tabernacle is the fulfillment of the exodus's own purpose.[47] The entire exodus event took place to lay the groundwork for this moment.

This declared purpose, Yahweh dwelling in the midst of his people permanently and residentially is the theological goal toward which the entire narrative of Exodus 19–40 moves.[48] Everything that follows in Exodus 32–40 must be read in light of this declared intention and in terms of whether it advances, obstructs, or finally accomplishes it.

The Pivotal Section: Exodus 32–34 and the Crisis of Divine Presence

Into the smooth narrative flow between the instructional discourse of Exodus 25–31 to the construction account of Exodus 35–40, the section of Exodus 32–34 inserts itself with considerable narrative force.[49] This narrative sequence—the golden calf, the broken covenant, Moses's intercession, the renewed covenant, and the extraordinary theophanic encounter of Exodus 34—intervenes between the specification of what the Tabernacle should be and the account of its actual construction. This structural positioning is not accidental. Exodus 32–34 is the crisis that interrupts the divine relocation, and it is the site of

God Who Makes Himself Known: The Missionary Heart of the Book of Exodus, New Studies in Biblical Theology 28 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 97–124.

45 Hamilton, *Exodus*, 499–504; Propp, *Exodus* 19–40, 471–76; Alexander, *Exodus*, 577–82.

46 Blackburn, *God Who Makes Himself Known*, 97–124; Gowan, *Theology in Exodus*, 215–20; L. Michael Morales, *Exodus Old and New: A Biblical Theology of Redemption*, The Essential Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020), 67–95.

47 Morales, *Exodus Old and New*, 67–95; Bartholomew, *The God Who Acts in History*, 47–78; Blackburn, *God Who Makes Himself Known*, 97–124.

48 Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 131–60; Gowan, *Theology in Exodus*, 215–20; Hauge, *Descent from the Mountain*, 17–45.

49 R. W. L. Moberly, At the Mountain of God: Story and Theology in Exodus 32–34, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 22 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), 14, 38-39; Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 555–62.

the theological negotiation that makes the relocation ultimately possible.[50]

The Breach and Its Consequence: Exodus 32:1–6 and 33:1–6

The golden calf episode of Exodus 32 represents a fundamental breach of the covenant relationship at the precise moment when Yahweh's dwelling among His people, its most intimate expression, is in the making.[51] The people's demand for gods to go before them (32:1) is not merely impatience with Moses's delayed return; it is a rejection of the invisible, aniconic, covenant Yahweh in favor of a visible, manageable divine presence they can control.[52] In the theological logic of the narrative, this rejection strikes directly at the Tabernacle project: if Israel cannot be trusted with the covenant relationship that the Tabernacle presupposes, the project of divine indwelling cannot proceed.[53]

The consequence is stated with theological precision in Exodus 33:1–6. Yahweh would still fulfill his promise to bring Israel to the land. He would send an angel before them, but he himself will not go up in their midst. The exact language of 33:3 is arresting: "I will not go up among you, for you are a stiff-necked people, lest I consume you on the way."[54] Yahweh's presence in Israel's midst would be dangerous precisely because of their rebellious character. His holiness and their sinfulness could not coexist at close proximity without destruction.[55] The divine indwelling intended for the Tabernacle's has at this point in the narrative been withdrawn from the table. Yahweh would accompany Israel through an angelic intermediary, but he would not take up residence among them.[56]

This withdrawal is the narrative crisis that Exodus 32–34 exists to resolve. Moses's intercession in 33:12–23, where he argued from Yahweh's own character and the covenant relationship to secure the promise of divine accompaniment,

50 Moberly, *At the Mountain of God*, 1–45; Karla R. Suomala, *Moses and God in Dialogue: Exodus 32–34 in Postbiblical Literature*, Studies in Biblical Literature 61 (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 1–30; Michael Widmer, *Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer*, Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 1–35.

51 Moberly, *At the Mountain of God*, 46–90; Durham, *Exodus*, 418–28; Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 555–62.

52 Sarna, *Exodus*, 203–7; Hamilton, *Exodus*, 557–66; Garrett, *Commentary on Exodus*, 579–88.

53 Moberly, *At the Mountain of God*, 46–90; Gowan, *Theology in Exodus*, 215–25; Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 555–62.

54 Propp, *Exodus* 19–40, 580–86; Durham, *Exodus*, 441–46; Alexander, *Exodus*, 633–38.

55 Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 40–88; Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 131–60; Gowan, *Theology in Exodus*, 215–25.

56 Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 584–92; Moberly, *At the Mountain of God*, 46–90; Widmer, *Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer*, 35–80.

and the covenant renewal of Exodus 34 are the theological work by which the conditions for the Tabernacle's realization are restored.[57] The section is structurally pivotal precisely because it is the obstacle through which the narrative must pass before the Tabernacle can be built and Yahweh can fill it.[58]

The Procedural Discourse of Exodus 33:7–11: Genre and Significance

It is within this crisis between Yahweh's withdrawal of the indwelling promise and Moses's intercession to restore it that the brief procedural discourse of Exodus 33:7–11 appears. It appears, as I noted at the outset, intrusively. The narrative has been building toward the theological crisis of whether Yahweh will accompany Israel at all; suddenly a description of a habitual tent-pitching practice interrupts the dramatic forward movement.[59]

The genre of the passage is the key to its meaning. The verbs throughout Exodus 33:7–11 are in forms indicating habitual, repeated, customary action, not a one-time event narrated in sequence, but a regularly occurring practice described procedurally.[60] The table below gives includes the verbs as they appear in the Hebrew text of the passage. The verbal and clausal sequences are common indicators of a procedural discourse.[61]

This short pericope flows as follows: Moses would take the tent and pitch it outside the camp; he would call it the tent of meeting; anyone seeking Yahweh would go out to it; the cloud would descend and stand at the entrance; Yahweh would speak with Moses face-to-face as a man speaks with his friend; Joshua would not depart from the tent. This is procedural discourse, the description of an established practice whose temporal extent reaches both before and after the narrative moment into which it is inserted.[62]

57 Widmer, *Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer,* 35–80; Moberly, *At the Mountain of God*, 91–145; Suomala, *Moses and God in Dialogue*, 1–30.

58 Moberly, *At the Mountain of God*, 91–145; Hauge, *Descent from the Mountain*, 95–130; Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 584–92.

59 Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 590–96; Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 587–91; Durham, *Exodus*, 437–39.

60 For the verbal forms and their aspectual significance in this passage, see Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 468–98, and John A. Cook, *Time and the Biblical Hebrew Verb,* Linguistic Studies in Ancient West Semitic 7 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 187–220.

61 Robert E. Longacre and Andrew C. Bowling, *Understanding Biblical Hebrew Verb Forms: Distribution and Function across Genres*, Publications in Linguistics 151 (Dallas: SIL International, 2015), 264-273, esp. 271-273.

62 Longacre and Bowling, *Understanding Biblical Hebrew Verb -Forms*, 623-627; Waltke and O'Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* 468–98.

Procedural Clause Progession in Exodus 33:7-11

3.7	וּמֹשֶׁה֙ יִקַּ֣ח אֶת־הָאֹ֔הֶל	Moses used to take	יִקַּח	Habitual past (yiqtol)
	וְנָטָ֥ה לֹ֖ו	and would pitch it	וְנָטָה	Sequential habitual (veqatal)
	וְקָרָ֣א לֹ֑ו אֹ֖הֶל מֹועֵ֥ד	and he would call it	וְקָרָא	Sequential habitual (veqatal)
	וְהָיָ֗ה כָּל־מְבַקֵּ֛שׁ יְהוָ֖ה	and it was anyone who was seeking	וְהָיָה מְבַקֵּשׁ	Sequential habitual (veqatal); Characterizing (הָיָה + ptc)
	יֵצֵ֣א	he would go out	יֵצֵא	Habitual past (yiqtol)
	וְהָיָ֗ה כְּצֵאת֙ מֹשֶׁ֔ה	and whenever going out	וְהָיָה	Sequential habitual (וְהָיָה + inf)
	יָקוּמ֣וּ	all the people would rise	יָקוּמוּ	Habitual past (yiqtol)
	וְנִצְּב֣וּ	and they would stand	וְנִצְּבוּ	Sequential habitual (veqatal)
	וְהִבִּ֣יטוּ	and they would gaze	וְהִבִּיטוּ	Sequential habitual (veqatal)
3.9	וְהָיָ֗ה כְּבֹא֙ מֹשֶׁ֔ה הָאֹ֖הֱלָה	and whenever he would enter	וְהָיָה כְּבֹא	Sequential habitual (וְהָיָה + inf)
	יֵרֵ֣ד	the pillar of cloud would descend	יֵרֵד	Habitual past (yiqtol)
	וְעָמַ֣ד	and would stand	וְעָמַד	Sequential habitual (veqatal)
	וְדִבֶּ֥ר	and would speak with Moses	וְדִבֶּר	Sequential habitual (veqatal)
3.10	וְרָאָ֣ה	the people would see	וְרָאָה	Sequential habitual (veqatal)
	עֹמֵ֖ד	(cloud) standing at the door of the tent	עֹמֵד	Durative/descriptive (ptc)
	וְקָ֣ם	all the people would arise	וְקָם	Sequential habitual (veqatal)
	וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוּ֣וּ	would bow down	וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ	Sequential habitual (veqatal)
3.11	וְדִבֶּ֥ר	Yahweh would speak	וְדִבֶּר	Sequential habitual (veqatal)
	כַּאֲשֶׁ֥ר יְדַבֵּ֖ר אִ֑ישׁ	as a man speaks	כַּאֲשֶׁר יְדַבֵּר	comparative (yiqtol)
	וְשָׁ֥ב	Moses would return to the camp	וְשָׁב	Sequential habitual (veqatal)
	יְהוֹשֻׁ֛עַ ... לֹ֥א יָמִ֖ישׁ	Joshua would not depart	לֹא יָמִישׁ	Habitual negative (לֹא + yiqtol)

The implication is significant for the passage's interpretive function. The extra-camp tent is not a new institution created in response to the golden calf crisis.[63] It is an existing practice, predating the Sinai sojourn and continuing through it, now introduced into the narrative at this precise juncture because its spatial and theological logic illuminates the transition the narrative is enacting.[64] The narrator in-

63 Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 587–91; Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 590–96; Moberly, *At the Mountain of God*, 46–90.

64 Hauge, *Descent from the Mountain*, 95–130; Morales, *Tabernacle Pre-Figured*, 183–210.

serts the description of the extra-camp tent here not because it was established here, but because its characteristics, what it reveals about where Yahweh is and how the human participant relates to his presence, provide the clearest possible contrast with the intra-camp Tabernacle that the narrative is moving toward.[65]

The Spatial Logic of the Extra-Camp Tent: Inversion and Its Significance

The spatial arrangement of the extra-camp tent encounter is, as suggested at the outset, almost exactly the inverse of the Tabernacle's spatial arrangement. This inversion is the passage's most important contribution to the narrative's theological argument.[66]

At the extra-camp tent, Moses would enter the tent from outside the camp and so was within the tent's enclosed space. Yahweh, meanwhile, would manifest outside in the cloud-pillar descending and standing at the entrance to the tent. Yahweh was external to the enclosed space while the human participant was internal.[67] The one who entered was hidden within the tent inside a structure that placed a physical boundary between the inquirer and the divine presence manifesting outside. Moses was inside; Yahweh was at the door.

This spatial arrangement has a precise parallel in the episode that immediately follows in Exodus 33:12–23. Moses asked to see Yahweh's glory, and Yahweh responded by placing Moses in the cleft of a rock, covering him with his hand while his glory passed by, and then removing his hand so that Moses saw Yahweh's back but not his face.[68] In both cases, the extra-camp tent and the rock cleft, the human participant was enclosed and protected from the full force of the divine presence so that the human was hidden; Yahweh's presence was outside, passing by or stationing itself at the entrance. This is the spatial logic of the era of divine remoteness embedded in the narrative of Exodus; the human being who encounters Yahweh does so from within a protective enclosure while the divine presence remains external.[69] In all cases, whether in the Holy of Holies, at the tent of meeting outside the camp, or from within the cleft of the rock, Yahweh's glory and therefore His presence is always to the greatest extent hidden so as not to cause harm to those who observe it. Language

65 Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative,* 47–62; J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 75–100.

66 Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 89–114; Morales, *Tabernacle Pre-Figured,* 183–210; Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service*, 149–65.

67 Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 590–96; Hamilton, *Exodus*, 573–78; Durham, *Exodus*, 437–42.

68 Moberly, *At the Mountain of God*, 91–145; Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 595–604; Mettinger, *Dethronement of Sabaoth*, 80–115.

69 Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 131–60; Morales, *Tabernacle Pre-Figured*, 183–210; Gowan, *Theology in Exodus*, 215–25.

stating that Yahweh met face-to-face with Moses is almost exclusive unique to them (cf. Josh. 5.13-15).[70]

The Tabernacle inverts this arrangement precisely and completely. In the Tabernacle, it was Yahweh who is within, enthroned in the innermost chamber of the Holy of Holies, speaking from above the *kapporet* between the cherubim, dwelling in the most interior point of the sanctuary's graduated sacred space.[71] The human participant, whether priest, high priest, or Moses himself, approached from outside, moving inward through the concentric zones of holiness toward the divine presence at the center.[72] In the Tabernacle, Yahweh was hidden within and the human approaches from without. The spatial arrangement has been exactly reversed.

This inversion is the clearest structural indicator of the theological transition the narrative of Exodus 24–40 is communicating.[73] The extra-camp tent, with its externally manifesting divine presence and its humanly enclosed participant, represents the spatial logic of the period when Yahweh dwells apart from his people, on the mountain, or at the margins of the camp, accessible through prophetic encounter but not resident among the community.[74] The Tabernacle, with its internally resident divine presence and its human approach from without, represents the spatial logic of the period when Yahweh dwells among his people, when the mountain's presence has been brought, so to speak, inside the camp and installed at its center.[75]

The extra-camp tent of Exodus 33:7–11 stands at the hinge between these two spatial logics. It describes the mode of divine encounter that has characterized the relationship up to this point — the mode appropriate to the era of divine remoteness — at the precise moment when the narrative is negotiating the transition to the mode that will characterize the relationship from this point forward.[76] Its appearance at this juncture in Exodus 33 is therefore not an intrusion that interrupts the narrative but a pivot that marks the transition the narrative is accomplishing.[77]

70 Though not as explicit, this access is also attributable in Josh. 1.1, 3.7, 4.1, 5.9, 6.2, 8.1; see also Deut. 34.9 and Num. 27.18-23.

71 Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service*, 149–65; Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 89–114; Mettinger, *Dethronement of Sabaoth*, 80–115.

72 Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 89–114; Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service*, 149–65; Knohl, *Sanctuary of Silence*, 1–45.

73 Morales, *Tabernacle Pre-Figured*, 183–210; Hauge, *Descent from the Mountain*, 95–130; Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 131–60.

74 Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 131–60; Gowan, *Theology in Exodus*, 215–25; Blackburn, *God Who Makes Himself Known*, 97–124.

75 Morales, *Tabernacle Pre-Figured*, 183–210; Lioy, *Axis of Glory*, 45–72; Suh, *Tabernacle in the Narrative History of Israel*, 1–45.

76 Hauge, *Descent from the Mountain*, 95–130; Moberly, *At the Mountain of God*, 46–90; Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 584–92.

77 Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 47–62; Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 75–100; Hauge,

The Completion of the Transition: Exodus 34–40

The remaining chapters of Exodus trace the narrative arc from the restored possibility of divine indwelling, which was secured through Moses's intercession and the covenant renewal of Exodus 34, to its actual realization in the construction and dedication of the Tabernacle in Exodus 35–40.

Exodus 34: The Covenant Renewal as Theological Foundation

The covenant renewal encounter of Exodus 34 is the theological pivot on which the transition from remoteness to immanence turns. Moses ascended the mountain again, but this time Yahweh descended to him in the cloud, rather than Moses entering the cloud from below as in Exodus 24.[78] This shift in the direction of divine movement is significant: the descending pattern that characterizes the cloud's appearance at the extra-camp tent entrance (Yahweh coming down to meet Moses) is now reproduced on the mountain itself. Yahweh's movement is consistently downward, toward Israel, throughout the transition section.[79]

The theological center of the encounter is the divine self-declaration of Exodus 34:6–7. It is Yahweh's proclamation of his own character as merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin.[80] This proclamation is the answer to the question Exodus 32–33 has raised: how can a holy God dwell among a people capable of such catastrophic apostasy? The answer is not legal but characteristic: Yahweh can dwell among Israel not because they have been rendered holy enough to host his presence, but because his own character includes the steadfast love and forgiveness capable of sustaining the relationship despite their failures.[81] The divine character revealed in Exodus 34:6–7 is the theological foundation on which the Tabernacle rests.[82]

Exodus 35–40: Construction, Dedication, and Indwelling

The construction account of Exodus 35–39 mirrors the instructional discourse of Exodus 25–31 with deliberate precision.[83] The same elements appear, though now de-

Descent from the Mountain, 95–130.

78 Moberly, *At the Mountain of God*, 91–145; Propp, *Exodus 19–40,* 603–12; Childs, *Book of Exodus,* 604–12.

79 Hauge, *Descent from the Mountain*, 131–60; Morales, *Tabernacle Pre-Figured*, 183–210.

80 Moberly, *At the Mountain of God,* 91–145; Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 604–12; Sarna, *Exodus,* 215–18.

81 Widmer, *Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer*, 80–130; Gowan, *Theology in Exodus,* 229–38; Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 131–60.

82 Moberly, *At the Mountain of God*, 91–145; Gowan, *Theology in Exodus,* 229–38; Blackburn, *God Who Makes Himself Known*, 97–124.

83 Childs, *Book of Exodus,* 625–36; Durham, *Exodus*, 484–98; Propp, *Exodus 19–40,* 644–58; Daniel

scribed as accomplished rather than commanded. The structural parallelism is itself a theological statement: what Yahweh instructed has been faithfully executed. Israel has responded to the divine instruction with the obedience that the covenant relationship requires.[84]

The climax of the entire narrative comes in Exodus 40:34–38. Moses erected the completed Tabernacle, and Yahweh's glory filled it.[85] The cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of Yahweh filled the Tabernacle. Moses could not enter because the cloud rested upon it and the glory filled it. The pillar of cloud that had descended to stand at the entrance of the extra-camp tent, external, visitational, momentary, now rests permanently over and within the Tabernacle.[86] The pattern of divine presence has changed: from dwelling on the mountain apart from Israel, to meeting Moses at the tent's entrance at the camp's margin, to filling the sanctuary at the camp's center.[87]

The final verses of Exodus (40:36–38) describe the new mode of divine accompaniment: when the cloud would lift from the Tabernacle, Israel was to set out; when the cloud settled, Israel set up camp.[88] Yahweh's presence was now directly and continuously tied to Israel's movement through the wilderness. He did not remain on the mountain while they traveled; he did not wait at the camp's margin to be consulted. He traveled with them, his presence visible over the Tabernacle by day in cloud and by night in fire.[89] The relocation from mountain to midst of Israel is complete.

Theological Synthesis: From Remote to Immanent

The narrative arc I have traced from the mountain of God in Exodus 3, through the cosmic mountain encounter of Exodus 24, through the crisis and pivot of Exodus 32–34, to the glory filling the Tabernacle in Exodus 40, communicates a single, directional theological movement: Yahweh's progressive approach to his people, cul-

C. Timmer, *Creation, Tabernacle, and Sabbath: The Sabbath Frame of Exodus 31:12–17; 35:1–3* in Exegetical and Theological Perspective, Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments 227 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 87–130.

84 Alexander, *Exodus*, 695–702; Hamilton, *Exodus*, 621–28; Sarna, *Exodus*, 226–28.

85 Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 636–44; Durham, *Exodus*, 498–504; Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 710–18.

86 Morales, *Tabernacle Pre-Figured*, 183–210; Suh, *Tabernacle in the Narrative History of Israel*, 1–45; Mettinger, *Dethronement of Sabaoth*, 80–115.

87 Hauge, *Descent from the Mountain*, 131–60; Morales, *Exodus Old and New*, 67–95; Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 131–60.

88 Sarna, *Exodus*, 243–45; Hamilton, *Exodus*, 682–86; Alexander, *Exodus*, 728–32.

89 Blackburn, *God Who Makes Himself Known*, 97–124; Gowan, *Theology in Exodus*, 239–45; Morales, *Exodus Old and New*, 67–95.

minating in his taking up permanent residence in their midst.[90]

The extra-camp tent of meeting in Exodus 33:7–11 is the most precise single indicator of where the narrative stands at its midpoint. It describes, with procedural clarity, the spatial logic of the era that is ending, the era in which the human participant is enclosed within a protective structure while Yahweh manifests externally.[91] Every element of that spatial logic is about to be reversed. The tent will be replaced by the Tabernacle. The camp's margin will be replaced by the camp's center. The external divine presence will become the internal divine resident. The enclosed, protected human inquirer will become the approaching worshiper who moves inward toward the divine presence at the sanctuary's heart.[92]

The inversion the narrative accomplishes is not merely spatial. It is relational and covenantal.[93] The transition from extra-camp tent to intra-camp Tabernacle enacts the transition from a relationship in which Yahweh is encountered at a distance, through prophetic inquiry and occasional theophany, to a relationship in which Yahweh's presence is continuously and institutionally available within the covenant community's common life.[94] The Tabernacle does not replace the prophetic encounter, the face-to-face conversation between Yahweh and Moses continues in the Tabernacle's context (Numbers 7:89). Rather, it embeds that encounter within a structure that makes Yahweh's presence available to the whole community, not only to Moses at the camp's edge.[95]

This is the theological claim that the narrative of Exodus 24–40 is making through its structure, its spatial imagery, and its carefully positioned procedural discourse. The narrative strives to show that Yahweh's intention from the beginning of the covenant relationship was to dwell not above his people on an inaccessible mountain. Neither was it His intention to dwell at the margins of their community accessible only to the prophetic mediator. His overarching purpose in the Exodus event and in bringing them to Mt. Sinai was to dwell

90 Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 106–60; Gowan, *Theology in Exodus*, 215–45; Morales, *Exodus Old and New*, 67–95; Craig G. Bartholomew, *The God Who Acts in History: The Significance of Sinai* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 47–78.

91 Morales, *Tabernacle Pre-Figured,* 183–210; Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 89–114; Hauge, *Descent from the Mountain*, 95–130.

92 Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 89–114; Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service*, 149–65; Longman, *Immanuel in Our Place,* 25–48.

93 Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 131–60; Gowan, *Theology in Exodus*, 215–25; Blackburn, *God Who Makes Himself Known*, 97–124.

94 Morales, *Exodus Old and New,* 67–95; Bartholomew, *God Who Acts in History*, 47–78; Suh, *Tabernacle in the Narrative History of Israel*, 1–45.

95 Childs, *Book of Exodus,* 636–44; Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service*, 149–65; Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 131–60.

among the people, to be present with the whole community.

Exodus 33:7–11 is the pivot on which this narrative turns. It is the last clear picture of the era of divine remoteness, inserted at the precise moment when that era is being negotiated to a close. Its spatial inversion of the Tabernacle arrangement is the text's own announcement that a transition is underway, and the direction of the change is unmistakably toward Yahweh drawing near to dwell among His people, Israel.

Conclusion

The two tents of meeting in Exodus, the one outside the camp, the other within it, are not a historical puzzle that can be dissolved by separating their underlying sources. The juxtaposition of the two is a theological statement to be understood by assessing them with the canon as a whole. The extra-camp tent describes how Moses and Israel encountered Yahweh before the construction of the Tabernacle: it was a protective enclosure, with the divine presence manifesting outside, at the margins of the community, in the mode of prophetic inquiry and occasional theophany. The intra-camp Tabernacle describes how Moses and Israel encounter Yahweh after the transition: approaching the divine presence from without, moving inward through graduated zones of holiness toward the interior where Yahweh is enthroned, in the mode of cultic maintenance and covenantal residence.

The narrative structure of Exodus 24–40, from the cosmic mountain archetype of Exodus 24, through the instructional discourse of Exodus 25–31, through the crisis and pivot of Exodus 32–34, to the construction and dedication of Exodus 35–40, is the account of the transition between these two modes of divine presence. And at the center of that transition, inserted with deliberate narrative precision at the hinge point between the crisis that threatened to end the project and the intercession that restored it, stands Exodus 33:7–11: the procedural description of the extra-camp tent, with its inverted spatial logic, functioning as the narrative's own announcement that the era of divine remoteness is ending and the era of divine immanence is about to begin.

The God who dwelt on the mountain, who was encountered at the tent entrance, who hid Moses in the rock cleft while his glory passed by is the God who declares his intention to be found, from this point forward, not above and apart but within and among. "I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God" (Exodus 29:45). Exodus 33:7–11 is the narrative moment at which that declaration begins to be made good.

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SOME SINS ARE WORSE THAN OTHERS: GRADATION OF SIN AS A COROLLARY TO PROGRESSIVE SANCTIFICATION

MARK BRADLEY

Mark Bradley is Director of the Pacific Northwest Campus and
Associate Professor of Leadership Formation at Gateway Seminary.

I arrived on the field for my second and longest pastorate in the midst of the worst scandal in the church's history. The day before, a male member of the church had been arrested for sexual assault against two underage boys who were also members of the church and whose parents were prominent members and friends of his. The perpetrator was a local police officer who moonlighted as a sheriff's deputy doing river patrols. Multiple instances of sexual contact had occurred on the patrol boat.

I was skeptical about the authenticity of the perpetrator's remorse and repentance, so in my first visit with him I expressed alarm at the seriousness of his sinful crimes. As I was emphasizing to him how grave his sins were, he broke in: "I'm confused by what you're saying. You're talking like what I've done is worse than other sins."

"Yes, that is what I'm saying."

He said, "But isn't it true that sin is sin and no sin is worse than any other sin?"

I responded, "No, that's not true for matters of morality. Some sins are definitely worse."

He explained that he had battled against his lust and sought to put aside his fantasies, but the desires and fantasies per-

sisted and intensified. Here's the tragic turning point. After a period of ineffectual resistance to the sinful thoughts, he reasoned that since he couldn't seem to find deliverance and *since no sin is worse than any other sin*, he might as well indulge in acting out his fantasies by grooming some boys into sexual contact. His faulty premise led to disastrous results. Notice that he perceived the comparative difference in pleasure but not in sinfulness.

This personal—and painful—pastoral recollection illustrates how critical this issue is. The case of that police officer is worse than many and is told here to shock the reader into attention. However, his rationale (the false equivalency of all sin) is common among evangelicals. If we do not correct this, untold others will be vulnerable to increasing sinfulness and its effects on themselves and others. Understanding that some sins are worse than others helps prevent a decline into worse and more harmful sins. Just as Christians seek to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18), we must also guard against the risk of going "from bad to worse" (2 Tim. 3:13) and descending into "ever-increasing wickedness" (Rom. 6:19).[1]

This article has two theological aims and two behavioral aims. The first theological aim is to correct the errant ethical teaching that "sin is sin, and no sin is worse than any other sin," defending instead the biblical concept of the gradation of sin. The second theological aim is to demonstrate how the potential to progress to worse sins is the antithetical corollary to the Christian doctrine of progressive sanctification.

The two behavioral aims are as follows. First, that we ourselves will be better protected from this illogic that could deceive us to proceed to worse sins and bring greater guilt and harm upon ourselves and others. Second, to motivate and equip us to teach and counsel others so that believers, and the people they may harm, will be dissuaded and protected from worse, more harmful sins.[2]

1 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the NIV.

2 These behavioral intents conform somewhat to the first two of three categories of moral theology identified by O. M. T. O'Donovan, who points out that "*deliberative questions* faced by individuals or societies . . . often present themselves in three forms: (a) asking about the conduct of the individual believer who has to make a decision for himself (the agent perspective); (b) asking about how a believer or the church may advise others who have particular decisions to make (the counseling perspective); (c) asking about the form of an appropriate social rule that might govern practice (the legislative perspective)." O. M. T. O'Donovan, "Moral Theology," in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, 2nd ed., ed. Martin Davie, Tim Grass, Stephen R. Holmes, John McDowell, and T. A. Noble (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 596 (emphasis original).

The Biblical Case that Some Sins Are Worse Than Others

The error this article seeks to correct is sometimes expressed as follows: "Sin is sin. No sin is worse than any other sin. All sins are equal in God's eyes."[3] What makes this error insidious is that there is something that seems correct about it. It is true that with reference to salvation, the comparative severity of sins is inconsequential. Any and all sins are disastrous in relation to our perfectly holy and just God.[4] The unbelieving ingrate, gossip, miser, and murderer are alike in their need of a Savior.[5] Any sin, however minor it may seem, separates us from God, justifies our eternal condemnation, and necessitates the atoning sacrifice of Christ on our behalf.

The error occurs when the statement "Sin is sin" is amended to "All sins are equal" and is applied to ethics and morality.[6] This is a false equivalence. There are myriad of different sins and they are different in many ways, including motivation, attitude, intentionality, overtness, indulgence, repetition, habitual practice, involvement of others, scope of damage, innocence of the victim, number of victims, responsibility to know better, abuse of authority, defensiveness, covering up, organization or programming of the sin, profiting from the sin, temporal or eternal consequences, and so on.[7]

Someone will object, "What about James 2:10, which says, 'whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it;' does that not imply that all sins are equal?" No, it stresses that all commandments are important. It is another way of stating the point above, that any sin—or the transgression of any

3 This error may have roots in the "Stoic paradox of the equality of all faults" and was represented in early Christianity by Pelagius, whose point of view was that "all sins are equal, inasmuch as all equally express the will to disobey God's precept, and thus every attempt to classify sin according to the human standard of their relative gravity loses all meaning." Pier Franco Beatrice, "Sin," in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, ed. Angelo Di Berardino, trans. Erik A. Koenke, vol. 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 595. Roger E. Olson testifies to the prevalence of this error among evangelicals, including most students in his seminary theology courses. *Questions to All Your Answers: The Journey from Folk Religion to Examined Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 139–40.

4 Wayne Grudem, *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Christian Moral Reasoning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 139. Part of the doctrine of salvation is that sin—as expressed in any particular sin—is an offense to God and separates us from him.

5 Apart from faith in Christ, the wrath of God abides on each one (John 3:36; Eph. 2:3). By God's loving grace through faith in Christ our Savior, each may have eternal life (John 3:16; 5:24; 1 John 5:11–13).

6 James McClendon explains, "Ethics and morality are related as theory and practice; thus 'ethics' is the study (or systematization) of morals, while 'morals' (or 'morality') means the actual conduct of people viewed with concern for right and wrong, good and evil, virtue and vice." James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 47.

7 Mark Jones details various factors relevant to the ranking of sins, drawing on insights from the Puritan James Fisher. Mark Jones, *Knowing Sin: Seeing a Neglected Doctrine through the Eyes of the Puritans* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2022), 179–82.

point in the law—makes one a guilty sinner.[8]

Scripture supports the doctrine of gradation of sin in three ways. First, it specifies different classifications of sins; second, it describes some sins or sinners as comparatively worse than others; and third, it warns against the risk of progressing into increasingly worse sinfulness.

Scripture Classifies Sins Differently

In John's first epistle, he writes the following: "If you see any brother or sister commit a sin that does not lead to death, you should pray and God will give them life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that you should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death" (5:16–17). Here are two classifications of sin—deadly and non-deadly. Some sins are worse (leading to death) than others (that do not lead to death).[9]

Each of the synoptic Gospels includes the teaching of Jesus about the unpardonable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. In Mark 3:28–29, Jesus asserts, "Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin."[10]

8 Peter Davids points out, "one speaks of breaking *the* law, not a law . . . an attitude toward the law and the authority behind it is revealed in any transgression." Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 117 (emphasis original).

9 See Peter Jones for a list of eight possible identifications of the sin unto death offered by scholars. Peter Rhea Jones, *1, 2, & 3 John*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, ed. R. Scott Nash (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2009), 231. Robert Yarbrough identifies "the traditional popular proposition" that the sin unto death is "blasphemy of the Holy Spirit." Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 307–08. He then nuances that position, stating that "the sin unto death will amount to specific manifestations of unregenerate conduct for which 'blasphemy against the Spirit' serves as an umbrella rubric" (308). Howard Marshall suggests that the sins that lead to death are probably identified in this epistle as "disbelief in Jesus Christ, failure to keep God's commands, and lack of love for their brothers." I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 248. Colin Kruse narrows this further with attention to the context of 1 John: "The sin that leads to death is probably the sin of the secessionists, in particular their denial that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh and that his death is necessary for salvation." Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 194. In support of this view, he quotes Tim Ward, "Sin 'Not unto Death' and Sin 'Unto Death' in 1 John 5:16," *Churchman* 109 (1995): 236.

10 William Lane explains that "in this historical context, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit denotes the conscious and deliberate rejection of the saving power and grace of God released through Jesus' word and acts." William L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse,

The Pentateuch refers to "crying sins," such as Cain's murder of Abel: "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground" (Gen. 4:10).[11] "Crying sins" are "sins that are especially grievous: sins committed against helpless, defenseless, or innocent people."[12]

Numbers 15:22–31 distinguishes between intentional and unintentional sins. In verses 28 and 30 we read, "The priest is to make atonement before the LORD for the one who erred by sinning unintentionally, . . . but anyone who sins defiantly [lit. 'with a high hand'], whether native-born or foreigner, blasphemes the LORD and must be cut off from the people of Israel." As Jacob Milgrom observes, "The essence of this sin is that it is committed flauntingly."[13] Peter Enns, commenting on Exod. 21:12–14, points out that there "is a distinction between intentional, premeditated killing and unintentional, accidental killing."[14] A similar distinction is between sins committed in ignorance versus

F. F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 145. See O. E. Evans, "The Unforgivable Sin," *Expository Times* 68 (1957): 240–44; and G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin*, Studies in Dogmatics, trans. Philip C. Holtrop (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 323–53. John Nolland says what makes this sin "unforgivable is that it excludes people from participating in what God is doing in Jesus, and thus from the 'forgiveness project.'" John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 505. R. T. France adds that "the juxtaposition of τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον with πνεῦμα ἀκάθαρτον (v. 30) suggests that this allegation involves a total perversion of the truth and a repudiation of the rule of God." R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 177. Robert Stein suggests that "the 'blasphemy of the Holy Spirit,' 'the sin unto death' (1 John 5:16–17), and 'sins of a high hand' (Num. 15:30–31; Deut. 17:12) may all be different expressions of the deliberate rejection of God and his work that prohibits the possibility of repentance and faith." Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 187.

11 This expression is also found in Gen. 19:13 (against Sodom and Gomorrah); Exod. 3:7–10 (against Egypt) and Deut. 24:14–15 (a poor laborer against his oppressive employer).

12 Thomas H. McCall, *Against God and Nature: The Doctrine of Sin,* Foundations of Evangelical Theology, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 246.

13 Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 125. Milgrom explains the background of this metaphor in statues of ancient Near Eastern gods depicted with an outstretched hand, as well as Yahweh's deliverance of Israel "by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (Deut. 4:34; 5:15; 26:8). Timothy Ashley asserts, "This one sins in an open-eyed and rebellious way, knowing full well what he or she is doing." Timothy Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R. K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 288. See McCall, *Against God and Nature*, 248–50.

14 Peter Enns, *Exodus*, NIV Application Commentary, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 445. The general rule is the punishment of death for killing someone. However, if the killing was unintentional, there is a provision (later elaborated as including cities of refuge) to spare the unintentional killer. Having explained that mitigating circumstance, the Law reiterates that if there is intent, particularly scheming in advance, no refuge is possible, not even the Lord's altar (Exod. 21:14). So, when violence results in death, there is a distinction made in the intentionality. When violence does not result in death, then "the one who struck the blow will not be held liable," but restitution is required:

sins committed knowingly. Jesus himself declares that the latter will be punished more harshly (Luke 12:47–48).

Scripture Describes Some Sins or Sinners as Comparatively Worse

In this section, we will review Scriptures that describe various kinds of sins that bring various consequences or require different means of atonement, thus implying degrees of severity of the sins. In addition, this section will highlight passages that explicitly use comparative language regarding sins and sinners.

The Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20:22–23:33) includes case law distinguishing between various sinful acts, with corresponding variations in the punishment or required sacrifices or restitution. For example, if someone steals an ox or sheep and slaughters or sells it (so that owner cannot regain it), the perpetrator must pay back five-fold for the ox and four-fold for the sheep (Exod. 22:1). However, if the stolen livestock is recovered alive, the thief "must pay back double" (Exod. 22:4). So, here we see degrees of restitution for different circumstances involved in theft. However, for other sins (e.g., striking someone to kill them; kidnapping; cursing or attacking one's parents) the penalty is as severe as death (Exod. 21:12–17).

The law of retaliation recognizes degrees of offense with corresponding degrees of punishment or restitution. "If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him" (Lev. 24:19–20 ESV).[15] J. A. Motyer comments that "this [law of retaliation] is often misused (as if 'an eye for an eye' was an expression of ancient savagery), but it is actually a poetic and dramatic demand that the punishment should match the crime, no more *and* no less."[16] It is not necessary to understand this in terms of literal retribution. William Johnstone writes, "The precept enunciates a basic principle of retributive and restorative justice: that punishment should be of equivalent severity to the crime

"The guilty party must pay the injured person for any loss of time and see that the victim is completely healed" (Exod. 21:19). These laws are far from exhaustive and do not appear to have been used as a penal code by judges. They are given in the context of covenant. As William Johnstone explains, "They mark, so to say, the application of 'common sense' for conflict resolution within the framework of community solidarity, without recourse to formal legal processes." William Johnstone, *Exodus 20–40,* Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, ed. R. Scott Nash (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2014), 69.

15 In Exod. 21:23–25 the list is longer: "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise." See Deut. 19:21.

16 J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus,* The Bible Speaks Today, ed. J. A. Motyer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 240 (emphasis original).

committed and that the victim should receive equivalent restitution."[17] Jacob Weingreen explains, "The principle embodied in this formula is that anyone who unwittingly inflicts a loss upon another person must provide *commensurate* compensation."[18] The text trusts the reader to understand that the loss of a life is worse than the loss of an eye, which is worse than a bruise. Youth sometimes play a game called "Would you rather . . .?" The questions often pit two nearly equivalent choices against each other, whether desirable (e.g., ice cream vs. candy) or undesirable (e.g., flunk a class vs. not make the team). If we asked, "Would you rather someone slugs you in the arm or pokes your eye out?" the answer would be too obvious to fit the game.

The sacrificial system explained in Leviticus prescribes different sacrifices for different kinds of sins. Leviticus details the proper occasions for whole burnt offerings, sin offerings, guilt offerings, and so on, for various individual sins, while also prescribing the annual Day of Atonement with its sacrifices for the sins of the community as a whole. Some sins are addressed through these offerings and sacrifices, but others require restitution, being "cut off from the people," or the death penalty. Intentionality is taken into consideration. As John Hartley notes, "The texts assume gradations of sin . . . The distinction between purification offerings, which were for sins of error, and reparation offerings, which were for accidental violations of the sacred and for restitutable offenses, further witnesses to a gradation in the kinds of sins . . . Thus the law recognizes lesser and greater sins."[19]

The book of Kings describes multiple instances of evil or sinfulness or provoked divine anger using comparative language. "You [King Jeroboam] behaved more wickedly than all who were before you" (1 Kings 14:9 CSB). "Judah did evil in the eyes of the LORD. By the sins they committed they stirred up his jealous anger more than those who were before them had done" (1 Kings 14:22). "Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him" (1 Kings 16:30). "Manasseh led them astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the LORD had destroyed before the Israelites" (2 Kings 21:9). The text also charges Manasseh for causing Judah to sin (2 Kings 21:16). Peter Leithart points out that this represented a new nadir for the kings of Judah. Some twenty times the book of Kings indicts northern kings who "made Israel sin," but "no king 'makes

17 Johnstone, *Exodus 20–40*, 105.

18 Jacob Weingreen, "The Concepts of Retaliation and Compensation in Biblical Law," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 76, section C, 1 (1976): 5–6 (emphasis added).

19 John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 4 (Dallas: Word, 1992), lxx.

Judah sin' . . .—until Manasseh."[20] The Lord also says Manasseh "has done more evil than the Amorites who preceded him" (v. 11).

Ezekiel 16 is a judgment speech against Jerusalem, which is compared unfavorably to her "sisters," the wicked cities of Samaria and Sodom: "You soon became more depraved than they" (v. 47). "Samaria did not commit half the sins you did. You have done more detestable things than they, and have made your sisters seem righteous by all these things you have done . . . Because your sins were more vile than theirs, they appear more righteous than you." (vv. 51–52). Daniel Block provides a diagram that plots these cities on a continuum between righteousness and evil, showing that Samaria and Sodom are depicted as quite evil, but Jerusalem is even farther toward the evil end of the spectrum.[21] Clearly, according to this prophetic passage, some sins are worse than others in the eyes of the Lord.

According to the Apostle John, Jesus himself uses comparative language in his statement to Pilate that "the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin" (John 19:11).[22] The Jewish high priest bears the greater guilt because he of all people should have recognized and received the long-awaited Messiah rather than instigating his execution.

Jesus says in Mark 12:40 that the scribes who want deferential treatment and "devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers . . . will receive the greater condemnation" (ESV).

When Jesus is asked, "Which is the greatest commandment?" he names two (Mark 12:28–31; parallel Matt. 22:34–40). The comparative greatness of those commandments implies the comparative gravity of transgressing them.

In Matt. 23:23 Jesus pronounces woes on the scribes and Pharisees for tithing spices while neglecting "the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former." He castigates them for not distinguishing between the "weightier" and the "trifling."[23]

Gary Anderson's monograph, *Sin: A History*, highlights the idea of sin as debt.[24] Obviously, one can be in debt to

20 Peter J. Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, ed. R. R. Reno (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 264.

21 Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel Chapters 1–24*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R. K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 510.

22 Although Pilate earned the disgrace he bears for delivering Jesus over to crucifixion, he also declared three times that he found no grounds for charging Jesus (John 18:38; 19:4, 6) and "sought to release him" (John 19:12 ESV).

23 Gottlob Schrenk, "βάρος, βαρύς, βαρέω," *TDNT*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 558.

24 Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

varying degrees. In Luke 7:36–50, Jesus tells Simon the Pharisee a brief parable about two debtors, one who owed much and one who owed little, both of whom had their debts forgiven. Jesus asks Simon which debtor will love the creditor more? "Simon replied, 'I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.' 'You have judged correctly,' Jesus said" (v. 43).[25]

James warns, "Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1). Just as individuals with more light are more accountable, so it is for groups of people as represented by cities. In Matt. 11:20–24, "Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed" (v. 20), pronouncing woes on them and declaring that "it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you" (v. 24). Darrell Bock comments, "Cities that reject these messengers will have a more severe judgment, because more and greater revelation has come to them, making their sin worse."[26]

Scripture Describes Some Sins or Sinners as Progressively Worse

Having established classifications of sins and their comparative severity, we now proceed to a logical consequence of these truths: since some sins are worse than others, it is possible to devolve from lesser to greater sins or from lesser to greater degrees of the same category of sin.

The book of Judges reports Israel's cycles of rebellion. Judges 2:19 is germane to this study: "But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestor." Block notes that "the successive generations became increasingly degenerate."[27] "Israel is depicted as . . . spiraling downward into worse and worse apostasy."[28] Block concludes, "The common repetitive view of this period must be modified. Not only do the patterns of evil repeat themselves; the treacherous behavior of the Israelites intensifies."[29]

The Psalter opens with this declaration:

> "How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
>
> Nor stand in the path of sinners,
>
> Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!" (Ps. 1:1 NASB)

25 Anderson, *Sin*, 112.

26 Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 2, *9:51–24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 1002.

27 Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, New American Commentary, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 6 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 131.

28 Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 132.

29 Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 132.

Allen Ross points out that "there is a threefold trilogy of ascending intensity."[30] The three terms for the worldly people ("wicked," "sinners," and "scoffers"), the three verbs ("walk," "stand," and "sit"), and the three nouns in the prepositional phrases ("counsel," "path," and "seat") "correspond to this pattern of intensification."[31]

In Rom. 6:19, Paul affirms gradations of sin, and more specifically, intensification of lawlessness. He commands, "Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness." The phrase "to ever-increasing wickedness" is τῇ ἀνομίᾳ εἰς τὴν ἀνομίαν. The CSB translates it "to greater and greater lawlessness," while the ESV renders it "to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness." James Dunn says the phrase carries "the implication of progressive deterioration, sin begetting sin."[32]

In 2 Timothy, Paul uses the vocabulary of advance or progress related to increasing ungodliness or evil. He predicts, "Evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (3:13). The phrase "will go from bad to worse" is from the Greek "προκόψουσιν ἐπὶ τὸ χεῖρον" (literally, "will progress to the worse").[33] Paul uses the same verb προκόπτω ("proceed," "advance," or "progress") in 2:16: "they will make further progress in ungodliness" (NASB footnote).[34] So, Scripture teaches

30 Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms,* vol. 1, *1–41*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2011), 185. See E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible Explained and Illustrated* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), 429.

31 Ross, *Psalms*, vol. 1, 187.

32 James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 38A (Dallas: Word, 1988), 346. Patrick McCormick writes, "Sin, like addiction, seems to involve a progressive enslavement to our compulsions. The sinner continues to suffer from the illusion that the 'liberty' to rebel is authentic human freedom, thinking it better to reign in hell than serve in heaven." *Sin as Addiction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 161.

33 This is exactly how the Lexham English Bible translates it. The Orthodox Jewish Bible renders it "will progress to their abysmal worst."

34 This Greek word for progress is commonly used for positive moral and spiritual growth in secular writings such as Seneca's letters and in the New Testament. For its use in Seneca's letters, see Abraham J. Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook*, Library of Early Christianity, vol. 4 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 43–46. In the New Testament, this is the word used to tell how Jesus "increased in wisdom and stature" (Luke 2:52 ESV) and of Paul recalling how he "was advancing in Judaism" (Gal. 1:14). It is the word Paul uses to speak of how his imprisonment "has actually served to advance the gospel" (Phil. 1:12) and to express his confidence that he would remain and continue with his fellow believers for their "progress and joy in the faith" (Phil. 1:25). Although προκόπτω is neutral—capable of being used for positive or negative purposes—it is more commonly employed positively. In 2 Timothy, therefore, commentators see some irony in its use regarding the heretical teachers Paul is opposing. Gustav Stählin suggests that Paul's use of the word three times in such a short passage (from 2 Tim. 2:16 to 3:13) may have been intended to counter "the claim of heretics that they were progressive theologians." Gustav Stählin, "προκοπή, προκόπτω," *TDNT*, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 716. See George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text,* New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 413; William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, vol. 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 526, 561; and Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*,

that some people progress into worse ungodliness. John Owen warns that indwelling sin in Christians, if left alone, "will ultimately lead us to commit major, scandalous, and soul-destroying evil acts."[35] Owen continues: "Once [sin] gains a foothold in someone it constantly presses further onward to increasing degrees of depravity."[36] That is, unless we kill it.

Such is the biblical case for gradations of sin, a doctrine widely acknowledged by Judeo-Christian theologians. The Jewish rabbinic tradition recognized it.[37] So has Roman Catholicism.[38] Modern Protestant and evangelical theologians supporting gradations of sin include Herman Bavinck, Emil Brunner, Louis Berkof, Reinhold Niebuhr, Berkouwer, Wayne Grudem, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Cornelius Plantinga Jr., Norman Geisler, and Thomas McCall.[39] Let us turn now to the second aim of this article.

New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 523–24; 579. It is best to understand the heretical teachers as the subject of the verb. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 526; Towner, *Timothy and Titus*, 523.

35 John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*, trans. and adapted by Aaron M. Renn (New York: TradLife Press, 2019 [orig. pub. 1656]), 29.

36 Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*, 30.

37 Louis Jacobs explains that the rabbis noted differences in severity between sins of commission and omission (the former usually being worse). They also divide sins into light and severe, the most serious being murder, idolatry, and adultery and incest. In addition, they assess inciting others to sin as worse than personally committing the same sin. Louis Jacobs, "Sin," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 14 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Jerusalem, n.d.), 1591–92.

38 For example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), 911. Under the subheading, "Comparative Gravity of Sin," I. McGuiness writes, "Not all sins are equal in their gravity. This is the teaching of the Scriptures (Jn 19.11; Ez 16.44–56; Jer 7.26; Lam 4.6) and of all Catholic theologians." I. McGuiness, "Sin (Theology of)," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 13 (Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1967), 243. On the use of penitentials in the Catholic sacrament of penance, see the following: L. Bieler, "Penitentials," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 11 (Washington: The Catholic University of America, 1967), 86–87; Patrick J. Geary, "Penance," *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*, ed. Norman F. Cantor, vol. 2 (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000), 1109–10; Gildas, "The Preface of Gildas on Penance" in *Celtic Spirituality*, trans. Oliver Davies, The Classics of Western Spirituality: A Library of the Great Spiritual Masters, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 227–29; Cummean. "The Penitential of Cummean," in *Celtic Spirituality*, trans. Oliver Davies, The Classics of Western Spirituality: A Library of the Great Spiritual Masters, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 230–45.

39 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006 [Dutch original, 1898]), 145–57. Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1939), 153–55. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 251–52. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, vol. 1, *Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), 219–27. Berkouwer provides a chapter on "The Gravity and Gradation of Sin." Berkouwer, Sin, 285–322. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 501–4; Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, 139–41. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 239. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), devotes a chapter to "The Progress of Corruption" (52–77). Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Minneapolis: Beth-

Progressive Sanctification and the Avoidance of Progressive Sinfulness

How should we apply this biblical doctrine of gradations of sins? It relates to sanctification—the process by which believers become more holy. Our greater clarity on gradations of sin fits well with the Reformed Evangelical view of sanctification, which understands it to be a gradual process of becoming holy that is most essentially God's work, but which also calls for Christian cooperation, effort, discipline, and struggle. Bruce Demarest explains and advocates this position, and other evangelicals concur.[40] Whereas our justification occurs instantaneously—in a moment—our sanctification is an ongoing, lifelong process.[41] Furthermore, one is either justified or not; there are no degrees of justification. However, there are degrees of sanctification; it is progressive.[42] The verbs in the phrases "grow (αὐξάνατε) in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18), "perfecting (ἐπιτελοῦντες) holiness out of reverence for God" (2 Cor. 7:1), and "those who are being sanctified (ἁγιαζομένους)" (Heb. 10:14 ESV) are all in the Greek present tense, which can indicate continuous, ongoing action. Degrees of sanctification or progressive sanctification are the other side of the coin from degrees of sinfulness or progressive sinfulness. Should we progress in sinfulness when we are called to progress in holiness? May it never be!

This is especially relevant for ministers, because we are to be exemplary in character and conduct (Phil. 3:17; 1 Tim. 4:11; 1 Pet. 5:3). Richard Baxter exhorts his fellow pastors, "Take heed to yourselves, for you have a depraved nature, and sinful inclinations, as well as others."[43]

any House, 2004), 105. McCall, *Against God and Nature*, 245–58. See also Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Fallen: A Theology of Sin, Theology in Community*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 79, 84, 96, 101, 148–49, 172–75, 199–200, 217, 244, 256, 263, 272.

40 Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), 401–29. On pages 385–401 he surveys seven other interpretations. See Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988); Melvin E. Dieter, et al., *Five Views on Sanctification*, rev. ed., Counterpoints: Bible and Theology, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image: Biblical and Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 75–81; Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, 280; Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014); and Christopher W. Morgan, *Christian Theology: The Biblical Story and Our Faith* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), 371–76.

41 Demarest, *Cross and Salvation*, 401; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 899.

42 Demarest, *Cross and Salvation*, 401; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 899.

43 Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, ed. William Brown (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth

God has begun the work of sanctification in us, and he will most assuredly complete it (Rom. 8:29; Phil. 1:6; 1 Thess. 5:23–24). Without his effectual work, there could be no progress. However, we believers participate in this process. The indicative of God's spiritual provision of new life is paramount, but it does not exclude the imperative of Christian activity. Kenneth Boa provides a list of biblical passages that show "the interrelationship of the human and the divine in the outworking of the Christian life."[44] Donald Bloesch explains that believers are justified but also are still sinners. Therefore, "the Christian life is a striving towards victory rather than a matured possession of victory. The life of faith is a life of conflict and struggle."[45] Herman Ridderbos agrees, stating that Paul "describes the life of believers time and again from the double viewpoint of battling on the basis of victory and of gaining the victory on the basis of the battle."[46] We labor and strive, but it is with his strength that powerfully works within us (Col. 1:29). We are to be obedient and work out our salvation, but "with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Phil. 2:12–13). God's "divine power," the Apostle Peter writes, "has given us everything we need for a godly life," enabling us to escape "the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Pet. 1:3–4). Because of this, we are to "make every effort" to add one virtue to another in a chain from faith through love (2 Pet. 1:5–8). God's intent is that we will "possess these qualities in increasing measure" (2 Pet. 1:8).

What is the relationship between God's work and our responsibility in this growth in moral excellence? As Thomas Schreiner states, "The indicative of God's gift precedes and undergirds the imperative that calls for human exertion."[47] Douglas Moo agrees: "We must make room in our understanding of sanctification for both the divine and the human side. We must insist both that it is God, by his Spirit, who makes us holy *and* that it is we, ourselves, who

Trust, 1974 [orig. pub. 1656]), 73.

44 Boa lists the following: "John 14:15–17; 15:4–11, 26–27; Romans 12:1–8, 17–21; 15:30–32; 1 Corinthians 15:10; 2 Corinthians 2:14; 3:1–6; 6:16–7:1; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 6:10–20; Philippians 4:13; Colossians 1:9–12, 28–29; 1 Thessalonians 5:22–24; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–17; Hebrews 4:14–16; 10:19–25; James 4:7–10; 1 Peter 1:22–25; 4:11; 5:6–10; 2 Peter 1:1–11; 1 John 2:3–6." Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 76.

45 Donald G. Bloesch, *The Christian Life and Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 123.

46 Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 267. See Grant Osborne, who writes that "it is more likely that the contrast between the life under the flesh in [Rom.] 7:14–25 and life under the Spirit in 8:1–17 is not the unsaved vs. the saved but the Christian trusting in the flesh vs. the Christian living in the Spirit." Grant R. Osborne, *Romans*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series, ed. Grant R. Osbourne (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 182.

47 Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, New American Commentary, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 37 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 296.

have the job of becoming holy."[48] Jerry Bridges explains it this way:

> Progressive sanctification very much involves our activity. But it is an activity that must be carried out in dependence on the Holy Spirit. It is not a partnership with the Spirit in the sense that we each—the believer and the Holy Spirit—do our respective tasks. Rather, we work as He enables us to work. His work lies behind all our work and makes our work possible.[49]

Demarest highlights the negative and positive aspects of progressive sanctification, which supports the antithetical correlation of gradations of sin and progressive sanctification.[50] In Rom. 6:19 the former offering of the parts of ourselves as slaves of lawlessness resulting in further lawlessness is contrasted with the exhortation to "now offer them as slaves to righteousness, which leads to sanctification." The two halves of this formulaic sentence are antithetical to each other. Just as the first clause speaks of progressive intensification in lawlessness, the parallel second clause "refers to the process of becoming more and more holy."[51] Paul is warning about the former and promoting the latter. There is a negative component matched by an antithetically parallel positive component. Far be it from us to "make further progress in ungodliness" (2 Tim. 2:16 NASB footnote) or "progress to the worse" (2 Tim. 3:13 Lexham English Bible) when we should be progressing in holiness. C. S. Lewis says that choice by choice one becomes either "a heavenly creature" or "a hellish creature."[52] Schreiner concurs: "Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the

48 Douglas J. Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, NIV Application Commentary, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 57–58 (emphasis original). See Gene L. Green, *Jude & 2 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 191, who writes, "Diligence in moral ascendancy is the author's antidote for the moral decline addressed in this correspondence."

49 Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace: Living Confidently in God's Unfailing Love* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991), 115. See Michael Allen, *Sanctification*, New Studies in Dogmatics, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 227–55.

50 Demarest, *Cross and Salvation*, 408–9. See David L. Smith, *With Willful Intent: A Theology of Sin* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1994), 399: "As we become progressively adept at remaining yielded to the Spirit, we become progressively free of sin. To the degree that we do so, we win the victory over sin in our lives." Paul Ramsey writes, "One primary principle of Christian social ethics has been traditionally formulated as 'the restraint and remedy of sin.' This essential aspect of Christian social policy is no less important because it is negative." Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), 327–37. Erickson agrees: "The believer has a role [in sanctification] as well, entailing both removal of sinfulness and development of holiness." Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 900. See also Morgan: "Sanctification involves pursuing holiness out of love for Christ. It also involves negatives: daily turning away from sin out of that same love for Christ." Morgan, *Christian Theology*, 376.

51 Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 335. See Douglas J. Moo, "Sin in Paul," in *Fallen: A Theology of Sin*, *Theology in Community*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 130.

52 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 86–87.

other."[53] Wayne Grudem warns that "as a result of willful sin, we will slide backward in our sanctification . . . becoming increasingly enslaved to . . . sin."[54]

We should follow the apostolic example and teaching to apply the negative and positive simultaneously. The following string of quotations reveals the prevalence of this New Testament concept. "Forgetting what is behind" (the negative) and "and straining toward what is ahead," we can "press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called [us] heavenward in Christ Jesus" (the positive) (Phil. 3:13–14). We should consider ourselves dead to sin (negative) and alive to God in Christ Jesus (positive) (Rom. 6:11). We must stop presenting the parts of our bodies to sin as instruments of unrighteousness (negative) but instead present our parts to God as instruments of righteousness (positive) (Rom. 6:12–13). We can stop being obedient as slaves to sin and keep being obedient to righteousness (Rom. 6:16). "Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus" (Heb. 12:1–2). We must keep on repenting and keep on believing the good news (Mark 1:15). We are to put aside vices while we also put on virtues (Col. 3:8, 12). We can put to death the deeds of the body and really live (Rom. 8:13). We must not sow to the flesh and reap corruption but instead sow to the Spirit and reap eternal life (Gal. 6:8). We should not set our minds on the things of the flesh but on the things of the Spirit (Rom. 8:5–7). "Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God" (2 Cor. 7:1). We must "resist the devil" and "draw near to God" (James 4:7–8 ESV). We are not to be conformed to the desires of our former ignorance, but as the One who called us is holy, we also are to be holy in all our conduct (1 Pet. 1:14–15). We should walk by the Spirit so we will not carry out the desires of the flesh (Gal. 5:16). We "who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (Gal. 5:24–25). We must stop loving the world and instead love God (1 John 2:15–16). We must stop being conformed to the world and instead be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2). If we want to be authentic disciples, we must keep on denying ourselves as we keep on following Christ (Luke 9:23). As we lose our lives, we will find our lives in Christ (Matt. 10:39; 16:25; Mark 8:35; John 12:25). All these exhortations and imperatives are consistent with God's negative and

53 Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 338. See C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1, *Introduction and Commentary on Romans I–VIII*, International Critical Commentary, ed. Christopher M. Tuckett, Stuart Weeks, and Jacqueline Vayntrub (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 327; Moo, Romans, 421.

54 Grudem, *Christian Ethics*, 143.

positive work on our behalf: he has crucified our old self with Christ and made us alive with Christ (Rom. 6:6; Eph. 2:5).

Lewis makes the practical application to our lives, expressing it both positively and negatively. He writes:

> Good and evil both increase at compound interest. That is why the little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the capture of a strategic point from which, a few months later, you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of. [Conversely], an apparently trivial indulgence in lust or anger today is the loss of a ridge or railway line or bridgehead from which the enemy may launch an attack otherwise impossible.[55]

In her book *Glittering Vices*, Rebecca DeYoung warns that "both virtues and vices are habits that can eventually become 'natural' to us . . . If cultivating virtue and avoiding vice is the key to moral formation, then we need to know first of all what the particular virtues and vices are."[56]

Conclusion

This article began with the cautionary tale of a man who progressed from fantasies about underage boys to manipulating them into homosexual acts. This resulted in his incarceration and was spiritually and emotionally harmful to those boys, their families, our church, and our community. That was an extreme case, and if we can disciple people in ways to prevent such twisted progression into worse sins, we should. However, this article is not only motivated by that case. It is also motivated by my own lifelong struggle against various sins. I assume your experience is similar to mine. As Lewis asserts, we who struggle against sin are actually much more expert about it than those who blithely give in to it and indulge in it.[57]

This article demonstrates three ways Scripture teaches gradation of sins: 1) it describes classifications of sins; 2) it describes some sins or sinners as comparatively worse than others; and 3) it warns against the risk of progressing into worse sinfulness.

Clarity on gradations of sin motivates believers to avoid progress in sinfulness as they also progress in sanctification. The effortful obedience of believers cooperates with the sanctifying work of God to attain greater degrees of moral excellence. The ethical teachings of Je-

55 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 117.

56 Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020), 9–10.

57 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 94.

sus and New Testament authors support the antithetical correlation of progressive sanctification and gradation of sin. This prompts believers to join God in two simultaneous endeavors: avoidance of sin and growth in righteousness.

For practical application, let us use the familiar sin of lust as our example. Failures in this arena have wreaked havoc on the church and her witness. Dorothy Sayers tells of a young man who said to her, "I did not know there were seven deadly sins: please tell me the names of the other six?"[58] Apparently one of them was self-evident, and she assumes we can all guess which one that is. Focusing on this one category of sin—the lust continuum—will illustrate that part of "the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:13 ESV) is how it "presses on to some farther degrees in the same kind."[59]

As believers called out of progress in sinfulness and into progress in sanctification, we should be guided by an awareness of the comparative sinfulness of various thoughts, actions, and practices on the lust continuum. To objectify another human being we see for our own mental sexual enjoyment is a sin of lust. To seek out still images designed to excite that lust is worse. To seek out pornographic video is worse. Going to a live strip club and buying a lap dance from a dancer is worse. Hiring a prostitute is worse. Raping someone is worse. Kidnapping someone and making them your sex slave is worse.

Consider a different progression. Entertaining sexual fantasies about a married acquaintance is a sin. Flirting with that person to explore their interest is a worse sin. Attempting a sexual advance with them is worse. Physically committing adultery with them is worse. Habitually seducing a series of people into adulterous affairs is worse yet. Believers with moral clarity on the gradations of sins like lust will have greater motivation not to progress into worse ungodliness. Conversely, those who flatten out every manifestation of sins like lust to equal severity are susceptible to a worsening of sinful indulgence. This in turn leads to more dire consequences such as fractured relationships, divorce, devastated children, a decrease in ministry effectiveness or opportunity, reproach on the church and the name of Christ, and variations in intensity regarding pathways for repentance, restoration, and restitution. Could it be that ministry leaders who commit adultery are unclear about the gradations of worse and worse sins that culminate in that scandalous act? It should not be so.

The world—and even some of our Christian friends—will not understand our

58 Dorothy Sayers, *Letters to a Post-Christian World: A Selection of Essays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 138.

59 John Owen, *Overcoming Sin and Temptation,* ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 53.

commitment to sexual purity (or other attempts at progress in holiness). They may think we are unrealistic or prudish. So be it. We can stand firm and be strong in the strength of the Lord (Eph. 6:10, 13–14). Let us "come out from them and be separate" (2 Cor. 6:17).

By labeling some expressions of lust as more sinful than others, are we excusing or recommending the lesser sins of lust? Certainly not! That is the point of Matt. 5:27–28—that any lust, even in our hearts, is sin, and must be resisted and overcome. Therefore, not only do we not commit adultery, but we do not flirt. Not only do we not watch live strippers, but we take measures to avoid provocative sensual images on our electronic devices. Not only do we not go looking for arousing images, but we cultivate the practice of "bouncing our eyes" away from lustfully tempting images we encounter.[60] Why would we seek to live this way? Because Scripture says, "Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul," (1 Pet. 2:11) and because some sins are worse than others, and because "lesser sticks set the great ones on fire."[61]

We could sketch out gradations of other sins on their own continuums, such as anger/violence, or greed/theft. However, we should not presume to think we could perfectly rank every variation in order, nor should we trust ourselves to do so. If we attempt that, we will find ourselves descending down another sin continuum—one of pride, aggravated by a judgmental attitude. Let us seek to maintain a pure motive in our application of the truth of the gradation of sin: to guard against our own real risk of sliding deeper into worse sins, which flouts God's program of sanctifying us. From that humble perspective, we will be able to help others who need a word of instruction or admonition about their sins. Planks are bigger than specks of sawdust, but Jesus does not want us to let either remain in our eyes or the eyes of fellow believers (Matt. 7:3–5). Also, the human component of sanctification cannot proceed successfully in isolation; we need one another. "Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:15 ESV). Each of us is prone to subjective blind spots. We need spiritual intimacy with other believers that includes loving truth-telling aimed at progress in sanctification.

Being "holier than thou" should not be our claim or goal. Our goal should be to be holier a year from now than we are today. It is by God's grace that any of

60 Stephen Arterburn and Fred Stoeker, *Every Man's Battle: Winning the War on Sexual Temptation One Victory at a Time* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2000), 125–32. See Randy Alcorn, *The Purity Principle: God's Guardrails on Life's Dangerous Roads*, LifeChange Books (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 2003).

61 Thomas Manton, *Temptation of Christ* (Fearn, Ross-Shire, UK: Christian Focus, 1996, 164. Manton (1620–1677) was an English Puritan clergyman.

us is holier—and less sinful—today than we were ten years ago. But each of us still has a long way to go. We can be "confident of this, that he who began a good work in [us] will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6). Let us radically depend on God to continue that work, and let us also exert ourselves to that same end, by his power, which mightily works within us (Col. 1:29).

H. A. G. Houghton. *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion to the Sixth Edition of the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2025. 648 pages. €32.00. $89.95. Hardback.

With the recent release of the United Bible Society's (UBS) 6th edition of the *Greek New Testament* (spring, 2026) comes this new Textual Commentary by Hugh (H.A.G.) Houghton, professor of New Testament Textual Scholarship at the University of Birmingham, England. Users of the United Bible Society's *Greek New Testament* are familiar with the text-critical apparatus and its well-known system of rating the level of certainty of the original text. Since its first edition in 1971, Bruce M. Metzger's *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft) and its subsequent second edition (1994) have been the mainstay for offering explanations of textual decisions through the 4th revised edition (1993) of the UBS's *Greek New Testament*. Metzger's *Textual Commentary* was framed as the result of the editorial committee explaining why this or that reading was chosen and, to some degree, defending the editorial text. Some of Metzger's explanations are brief, others quite extensive. Some consider variants not listed in the UBS at all, and his comments on the text of the gospels runs 222 pages while Acts occupies another 224.

Houghton's work is quite different from Metzger's in several respects. As a textual commentary, Houghton's remarks are based only on the UBS6 variation units, with a conscious effort to be consistent in length for each unit. Rather than using the editorial text as his base, Houghton often begins with the majority text and considers each alternative in turn however, explaining the basis on which the editorial text is chosen. Furthermore, Houghton's commentary utilizes scholarly conventions in the field that have changed markedly since Metzger's initial work. The use of geographical "text types" for dating material, for example, turns out to have too many exceptions to be useful, and so each manuscript is now considered on its own age and characteristics. More attention is now given to who is responsible for variations in readings, such as the notion of a scribe working independently, rather than the role of an editor or marginal notation, and research subsequent to Metzger has shown that theological motivations for textual variations plays less of a role than once thought.

The most innovative aspect of Houghton's commentary is its ability to service the needs of scholars while being simultaneously beneficial to non-specialists. Houghton makes abundantly clear that he aims to explain the apparatus to readers who are not experts in textual criticism. He does so in a manner that describes the current

state of scholarship in each variation unit. For Houghton, textual criticism is not *only* about establishing the earliest attainable text, but also about how and why the biblical text has changed over the course of its transmission. In part, Houghton does this in his introduction, where he describes the text of the New Testament (pp. 4*–11*) and then proceeds to explain the "principles of textual criticism" (pp. 11*–30*). Some of this is familiar for those trained in traditional methods,[1] while some newer methods of digitized collating manuscripts using the "Coherence Based Genealogical Method"[2] are introduced. All the pertinent aspects are explained with clarity while directing readers to a selection of the essential secondary sources.[3] Many features of the commentary are consciously designed to serve a wider readership: all Greek variants are translated and a glossary of select terms is placed at the back of the book. Readers will appreciate that Houghton's commentary is keyed to the editorial text of the UBS6 and follows its revised sequence of books (gospels, Acts, catholic epistles, Pauline letters + Hebrews, Revelation). He provides a concise list of principal Greek manuscripts at the front of the volume as well as an overview of the text at the beginning of each book, in addition to an up-to-date bibliography and notes.

All explanations of variations are reasoned through carefully, and generally along the lines of reasoned eclecticism, so that the reader is able to gain a sense of the methods by which textual decisions are made. Those with mastery of Greek and technical skills will find what they need, while those with little or no language skills can use the book to great profit. From conversation with Houghton, this author has learned that he is very interested for more non-specialists with interests in the Bible to become familiar with how it comes together. One can imagine, for example, an interested non-specialist curious as to why her Bible has a footnote at the end of Mark 16:8 with a remark about some manuscripts ending the gospel here, whereas others continue. Turning to Houghton's commentary, she finds, among other things, an explanation that the "Short Ending" is attested by the two oldest surviving manuscripts, Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus, where the gospel ends abruptly "for they were afraid" (16:8). Houghton explains that "[i]n both cases, this is clearly the end of the text, marked with a *coronis*" (p. 114). Turning to the glossary, one finds that "coronis" is "A decoration to mark the end of a work" (p. 564), and the matter becomes more clear.

1 The starting point is often Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration,* 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

2 The standard introduction to this method is Tommy Wasserman and Peter J. Gerry, *A New Approach to Textual Criticism: An Introduction to the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method* (Atlanta: SBL, 2017). A fine, concise article is Peter Gurry, "How Your Greek NT is Changing: A Simple Introduction to the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method (CBGM)," *JETS* 59.4 (2016): 675–89.

3 The author has benefitted greatly from the methodological essays in Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes. *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research. Essays on the Status Quaestionis,* 2nd ed., New Testament Tools, Studies, and Documents 42 (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

The volume is printed the same color and size as that of Metzger, and it would be difficult to imagine a volume more useful for expert and non-specialist alike. It is a fine tool, not simply to give one answers, but to help one think through the issues of evaluating textual problems and what they entail. It is an important successor to Metzger's fine work, and in several ways an important replacement. As such, it is a most welcome addition to my own library and and highly recommended.

Daniel M. Gurtner, Gateway Seminary, Ontario, CA.

Chris Chun, ed. The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller, Volume 10, *On Universalism and Particular Redemption,* Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Brill, 2025. Pp. I-XIII, 1-194, $126.99 hardcover.

The recent scholarly renaissance in research on the influential Baptist theologian and minister, Andrew Fuller, has culminated in the publication of the first critical edition of Fuller's complete works with Michael Haykin serving as the General Editor. Gateway Seminary's church historian, Chris Chun, has recently completed Volume 10 of this series that is projected to be at least 17 volumes or more. *Apologetic Works 6: On Universalism and Particular Redemption*, collects several of Fuller's most critical theological conversations that deal, in different ways, with Fuller's defense of and contributions to classical Christian soteriology. The material reproduced in this volume represents aspects of Fuller's most mature and carefully reasoned theological reflection. It gives substance to why C. H. Spurgeon was moved to describe Fuller as the "greatest theologian" of his time.

The volume is divided into two major sections. The first deals with Fuller's polemic against Universalism and the second with Fuller's theological reflections concerning the proper nature and character of the Atonement.

The first section, "Letters to Mr. Vidler on Universal Salvation," reproduces an increasingly tempestuous correspondence between Fuller and his acquaintance William Vidler. As a consequence of the Enlightenment's acidic rationality aspects of Universalism, Socinianism, and Unitarianism found their way not only into parts of the Church of England but several non-conforming churches as well. Fuller saw this development as representing a grave danger to the church. "Letters" is a somewhat overlooked but fascinating conversation Fuller undertook with Vidler as Vidler's views migrated from the generic Calvinism of his youth towards both Universalism and Unitarianism. Fuller engaged what he saw as this alarming trajectory with intellectual acumen and passionate intensity. Chun chronicles how the correspondence begins with Fuller's evident pastoral concern for Vidler personally and escalates as he assesses Vidler to have succumbed to the process of being drawn into the destructive "whirlpool of Socinianism." In his introduction, Chun chooses to document not only Vidler's own biography, but also others—such as Elhanan Winchester and Richard Wright—who were instrumental in Vidler's acceptance of Universalism.

Fuller's conversation with Vidler consists of eight letters Fuller wrote to Vidler roughly between the years of 1793 and 1801. In his introduction, Chun selects portions from the fourteen letters Vidler wrote back to Fuller in order to fill in the other side of this two-way correspondence. Chun also cre-

ates a helpful table that visually displays side by side the major developments and publications in the careers of both Vidler and Fuller so that the debate between them can be seen against the actual setting in which it unfolds. Chun guides the reader through the correspondence by highlighting the character of each letter—for example, some letters are identified as dealing primarily with hermeneutical and exegetical issues, another is designated as arguing against universalism, and he stipulates that the last letter is dedicated specifically to building the case for particularism.

The second section, consisting of "Six Letters from AF to R. Jr. 1803" and a set of imaginative dialogical constructions Fuller dubs simply as "Three Conversations on imputation, substitution and particular redemption," presents the reader with some of Fuller's most widely researched and carefully analyzed theological reflections on the atonement proper. According to Chun, in these dual contributions on the character and nature of the atonement Fuller's "theological depth, sophistication and subtlety are on full display." If "Letters to Mr. Vidler" represent Fuller's polemic against what he saw as dangers coming from the theological "left," "Six Letters and Three Conversations" embody Fuller's defense and apologetic of the orthodoxy of his own views from a questioning of them coming from the theological "right." Abraham Booth was a friend of Fuller's who journeyed from an Arminian position to a fervently held classically reformed perspective. With all the ardor of a convert, Booth feared that Fuller, under the influence of the "new lights" from America, had compromised his earlier positions and may now be espousing "governmental" or even "Grotian" views on the atonement. "Six Letters" is a correspondence written to John Ryland Jr, a mutual friend of both Booth and Fuller. Rather than evaluating the "accuracy" of Fuller's interpretation, Chun wisely opts to alert the reader instead to five key "themes" critical to Fuller's defense of his position:

> 1) the "as if" language in the doctrine of imputation and in John Calvin's theology in relation to the question of whether "imputation" should be understood in a literal or a figurative sense; 2) the notion that Christ suffered God's wrath without being punished; 3) Fuller's idea that Christ's death was sufficient for all but is applied only to the elect; 4) the concept of "transfer" in the imputation of sins to Christ, as well as Christ's righteousness to believers; and finally 5) the distance Fuller places between himself and Richard Baxter, and Fuller's alignment with John Owen and Jonathan Edwards. (Chris Chun, "Editor's Introduction," p. 49)

The second part of the second section of this volume presents a fictional conversation between three avatars—"Peter" (clearly a stand in for Booth), "James" (representing Fuller), and a mediating presence "John" (personifying Ryland). While use of this fictional dramatic convention to explicate theological nuance was hardly unique to Fuller, "Three Conversations" is, nonetheless, a creative and effective evo-

cation of Fuller's mature theological perspective on the atonement. Chun contributes to state-of-the-art Fuller scholarship by reporting on a previously untranslated and overlooked 1823 Welsh bilingual publication of "Three Conversations" whose introduction includes one of the earliest commentaries on the Booth/Fuller debate. He includes a brief translated excerpt from that monograph that affirms Fuller's belief in the necessity and appropriateness of some degree of "figurative" interpretation with respect to the "commercial" metaphor when applied to the atonement. Fuller explicitly distances himself from Tobias Crisp's insistence on some kind of "ontological" identification of Christ with sin. Just as Chun pauses to discuss several figures that had been influential in Vidler's theological development, he similarly gives the reader guidance into some of the major influences on Fuller's theological development—namely, Richard Baxter, John Owen, and Jonathan Edwards.

I had the privilege of seeing an early version of Dr. Chun's volume and am pleased to report that the final version displays the same historical objectivity, narrative interest, and incisive analysis as did that original draft. In his introduction, Chun successfully balances an interesting narrative with rigorous technical information reserved largely to the footnotes. In other words, Chun succeeds in incorporating scholarly detail along with attention to the attendant critical apparatus and references to relevant scholarship while at the same time keeping his introduction interesting and even captivating. In short, Chun has produced a commentary that is at one and the same time scholarly, responsive, readable, and engaging.

This volume in particular, along with the series in general, will, at a minimum, be the definitive resource for Fuller scholarship for generations to come and, more likely, in perpetuity. Anyone interested in Fuller's work will find this volume not only a mandatory read but an invaluable vein to mine. Haykin and Chun have produced a work that should be a part of any significant theological library in the English-speaking world.

John Shouse, Gateway Seminary, Ontario, CA.

Alexander Negrov I., and Ronald E. Riggio. *Leadership in Ukraine: Studies During Wartime*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025, 176 pp., $95.00, Hardcover.

Alexander I. Negrov (PhD, University of Pretoria) is a theologian and leadership scholar who hails from Ukraine and resides in Washington State. He is president and founder of Hodos Institute, a cross-cultural research and training organization with operations in the United States and Ukraine. Since the publication of *Leadership in Ukraine*, the Eastern European Institute of Theology, in Lviv, has designated him a Senior Research Fellow. Ronald E. Riggio (PhD, University of California, Riverside) is a leadership scholar and organizational psychologist serving as Henry R. Kravis Professor of Leadership and Organizational Psychology at Claremont McKenna College in Claremont, California. This collaborative endeavor contributes an intriguing collection of mostly qualitative research exploring Ukrainian perspectives on leadership amid Russia's protracted military campaign.

The authors appear to concentrate their appeal to Western scholars on the hope that this book "will be useful to those who dedicate their efforts to standing with Ukrainians in the years to come" (p. 3). More than a general survey of leadership trends in Ukraine, most of the aggregated studies showcase the perspectives of a minority demographic in the country's religious tapestry: evangelical Christians. This unique angle renders the publication keenly attractive to academics researching in the field of Christian leadership. Negrov and Riggio proffer a clarion thesis: that war—and more narrowly Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that commenced on February 24, 2022—has yielded an observable impact on perspectives regarding leadership in Ukraine. They substantiate this assertion using a series of research initiatives that prioritize phenomenological and ethnographic methodologies to better understand the lived experiences of individuals and the shared experiences of groups.

The content is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 traces the historical and cultural origins of the present crisis and outlines the competing Russian and Ukrainian narratives that preceded Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. The authors begin to answer the question *What does leadership in wartime look like?* by laying solid groundwork for their determination that Ukrainian preferences have noticeably shifted from a historic penchant for strong, charismatic leaders to an affinity for "distributed leadership structures" that increasingly normalize shared leadership (p. 14). That groundwork continues in chapter 2 through excerpts of interviews with seasoned organizational leaders and college students—many of them self-identifying as Christians—that were conducted from 2015 to 2017.

Chapter 3 investigates the perspectives of Ukrainian Christian adolescents from September 2018 until March 2019 through an approach involving a mixture of qualitative (interviews and survey groups) and quantitative (surveys) methods. Along the way, another prominent claim of the book emerges: the authors' evidence contradicts some unfavorable assumptions commonly held by Ukrainian adults about young people in their society. Chapter 4 suggests some general conclusions about leadership in Ukraine through interviews with forty-five Ukrainian organizational and community leaders from March 2022 to May 2022. The writers use this opportunity to propose conceptualizations of exemplary leadership by reviewing several contemporary models: transformational leadership, Leader-Member Exchange theory, servant leadership, and authentic leadership. The way the authors define exemplary leadership proves critical to their overall case as this concept resurfaces regularly in the succeeding chapters.

Chapter 5 responds to a gap of understanding regarding "how Ukrainians forced into displacement exhibit leadership within the context of war," utilizing the results of 130 online surveys completed from April 2022 to August 2022 by Ukrainian Christian war refugees spread across twenty-four countries (p. 78). The collected data contribute to a trauma-sensitive theology of leadership. Chapter 6 compiles insights from a diverse group of 257 participants gathered during various learning events between September 2022 and February 2023. Chapter 7 gleans the input of sixty organizational leaders, sixty percent of whom hold graduate degrees. Final conclusions are articulated in chapter 8, among which is the finding that "leadership in Ukraine is evolving into a more inclusive, participatory model…characterized by adaptability, emotional and psychological support, and a deep sense of responsibility toward the nation and its people" (p. 146).

The authors establish an unapologetically pro-Ukrainian stance from the opening pages and maintain that interpretive posture unwaveringly throughout the book's characterization of data, as well as the associated findings and conclusions. The authors do not mask their solidarity with the Ukrainian people, and they convey a sincere "hope that many Ukrainians will eventually not only withstand the trauma of war but also grow and thrive through that trauma" (p. 15). Beyond a vague sentiment of good will, this research could be described as an "active engagement" in the ongoing "information war" by contributing an intellectual, pro-Ukrainian counternarrative to Russia's strategic messaging crusade (pp. 64, 102).

Current Ukrainian perceptions on leadership during large-scale combat operations against a larger regional aggressor—especially the experiences of evangelical Christians—is the distinct emphasis of this monograph. As such, the authors' advocacy for shared leadership and dismissal of "the outdated idea of top-down, authoritarian leadership" would have benefitted from the inclusion of research exploring the leadership perceptions of servicemembers from the Armed Forces of Ukraine (p.

130). Without the inclusion of Ukrainian active duty and veteran voices speaking directly to the need for command-and-control expressions of leadership in certain contexts, arguments against both the prevalence and potential value of such brands of leadership seem less than fully orbed. Engaging any combination of commissioned and voluntary Ukrainian military chaplains might have more comprehensively corroborated the shift in leadership perspectives and constituted a natural point of convergence between the field of leadership and the Christian community.

The authors provide a limited treatment of contemporary leadership theories without clear explanation as to why they highlight certain theories and omit others. The selected leadership theories they introduce are not examined critically but seem to be accompanied by a tacit assumption of theological compatibility with Christian orthodoxy, despite those theories lacking any meaningful Christology and even including elements that many Christ-followers find anthropologically problematic. Given the level of attention that this research gives to the evangelical Christian community in Ukraine and dispersed abroad, the researchers' findings would have been even more helpful if delivered with additional consideration to the intersection of Christian theology and popular leadership theory.

All in all, *Leadership in Ukraine* offers a valuable contribution to the field of Christian leadership by probing a lingering conflict that has captured global interest. While framed for an academic audience, Negrov and Riggio's volume deserves examination by a broader audience. Chief among these are ministry practitioners who will find themselves invited to inquire about the leadership trends among the various groups in their area of influence—especially those negotiating crises of various types.

Jason Palmer, Goodwater Church, Whitefish, MT.

Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A. G. Haykin. *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement*. Second edition. Brentwood, Tennessee: B & H Academic, 2025. 539 pages. $47.99.

Textbook revisions, along with other forms of refreshing texts, do not often get reviews. Reviewers have little incentive to revisit these works. Publishers have little financial incentive since textbook adoption tends to be sticky. However, these revisions can impact how a teacher assigns readings or how future historians assess the historiography. Campell's review in *Criswell Theological Review*, Duesing's review in *Midwestern Journal of Theology*, and Rathel's review in *Baptist Quarterly* agree on the core details of the first edition; their disagreements in the first edition are about teaching preferences. Each praises the book's readability for those unfamiliar with Baptists and acknowledge the brevity of the discussion of Anabaptism. Another feature related to readability is the editorial decision not to footnote the text, but to have a works cited section. For readability, my agreement on the various points of historiographic emphasis, and price point, I have used the first edition since 2017.

The chapters mostly follow the same titles as the first edition. The authors moved "Baptist Identity and Distinctives" to the beginning of the book. They renamed "Developments into the 21st Century" as "Recent Developments in Baptist Story." They added a new conclusion. Finally, they added a glossary and an abbreviation list to the back matter. All these changes are welcome updates that improve accessibility to the reader. If a professor prefers an inductive teaching approach, the introductory chapter could still be read at the end of a course, but defining what a Baptist is can help move the reader along.

The Table of Contents level analysis doesn't tell the story of the update. First, the first edition chose feathered edges on cropped ovals for the pictures, which made the images hard to read. All the pictures are now a normal block shape, and some have been replaced with better images. Chapter 1 Question 5 is now two questions. Chapter 13 no longer includes the section on global Baptist movements, which is now Chapter 14. The authors introduced additional content in Chapters 13 and 14, including women in ministry, race, sexual abuse, trends toward post-denominationalism, and expanding beyond Australia to Oceania in Chapter 14. Relevant questions have been updated, relocated, and created to support the additional content. Nine of the chapters have an updated bibliography. As a librarian, the updated bibliography makes me happy.

In the closing paragraph of "Living Under the Cross," there is a copyediting issue. "This defense of British slavery and its at-

tendant barbarities seriously skewed the Scriptures, as we shall see in chapter 4." (page 102 in 2025; page 58 in 2015) The chapter ordering update means that the first edition refers to "Renewal and Advance." The second edition would refer to "The Age of Reason and Revival." The chapter "The Age of Reason and Revival" does not discuss slavery in Great Britain. This oversight can happen to any author who uses signposting and chooses to revise their book.

The revisions are similar in aim and instruction to the revision of Bebbington's *Baptists Through the Centuries*¸ which is the nearest serious competitor textbook. The price point for both ebook and physical copy is cheaper for *The Baptist Story*. The decision for perfect binding makes the print edition more accessible. This trend toward perfect binding cuts costs at the expense of the book's long-term usability. B&H is not the only publisher that has made this decision. The only recent Baptist History textbook with a sewn binding in my collection is *The Story of Baptists in United States* by Durso and Durso. (Durso and Durso is also 20 years old at this point.) After the first printing, Oxford made the same decision with *Baptists in America* by Kidd and Hankins. This reduced durability trend does not encourage students to reference their textbooks in future ministry. Therefore, there is no other option in the market that is not subject to this same critique.

This observation regarding the broader landscape and *The Baptist Story's* function as a reference tool shows a gap in the field. McBeth's *Baptist Heritage* is 39 years old. Brackney's *Genetic History* is out of print. Garrett's *Baptist Theology* is print on demand. I see nothing in the market that would function as an elective higher-level Master's Baptist Studies course text or Ph.D. seminar volume. It is unfair to judge this textbook for not being a book they did not intend to write. The critique would be as fitting as complaining about how few Presbyterians are mentioned in *The Baptist Story*. Yet, the gap in the market remains.

The Baptist Story, 2nd edition, is an enjoyable narrative of the Baptist tradition. Joseph Early, Jr.'s *Readings in Baptist History* continues to be a fitting supplementary primary source anthology. The addition of a glossary and updated questions provides good tools for developing quizzes and other assessments.

Jonathan McCormick, Gateway Seminary
Ontario, CA.

Kyle Beshears. *40 Questions about Mormonism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2026, 348 pages, $26.99, paperback. Ebook available.

The 40 Questions series from Kregel Academic, with more than 30 titles in the series, includes works dealing with every issue from hermeneutics to Bible translation to eschatology to world religions. One of the newest volumes, *40 Questions about Mormonism*, stands then in a long line of works devoted to answering, well, 40 questions dealing with the given topic of the particular volume. With a Ph.D. focused on Latter-day Saint history from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and personal experience working with Latter-day Saints, Kyle Beshears is well-equipped to write the volume.

Beshears breaks the volume into five parts: "Studying Mormonism," "The Story of Mormonism," "Authority in Mormonism," "The Beliefs of Mormonism," and "Approaching Mormonism." Part one, "Studying Mormonism," is focused on why Christians should study Mormonism and includes a concise history of how Christians have approached Latter-day Saints. Chapter one asks why Christians should study Latter-day Saints and, in summary form, Beshears answers, "Because we are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves, and it's hard to love someone without taking the time to get to know them. Only then may we move forward together" (23). Thus, the author argues we should study Latter-day Saints to get to know them for the purpose of moving forward together. Chapters two and three work through varying ways Christians have approached Latter-day Saints historically, and Beshears briefly surveys reasons ranging from avoiding foolishness to exposing false religion to evangelizing those caught up in counterfeit Christianity. Ultimately, Beshears argues Christians should concern themselves with "obedience to the Great Commandment" (23) as the fundamental reason for engaging Latter-day Saints.

Part two, "The Story of Mormonism," provides a short history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with three chapters devoted to some aspect of the life of Joseph Smith, two chapters dealing with the Latter-day Saint movement to the Intermountain West, and other chapters on the great apostasy, various groups within the larger Mormon movement, and the American nature (or not) of the tradition. Though very concise due to page limit constraints, this part of the book is a mostly straightforward presentation of the history of Latter-day Saint history and does not generally differ from other historical presentations.

Part three, "Authority in Mormonism," aims at both canonical and contemporary authority in Latter-day Saint theology and practice. Beginning with the Latter-day Saint understanding of the Bible and progressing through the history and storyline

of the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine & Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price, this part ends with a concise discussion of the priesthood, a vital aspect of Latter-day Saint theology, especially (although it is not discussed) when continuing revelation is taken into consideration.

Part four, "The Beliefs of Mormonism," focuses on what Beshears terms "key doctrines" and "unique doctrines." Those key doctrines include Theology Proper, Christology, Pneumatology, anthropology, soteriology, and ecclesiology whereas the unique doctrines range from eternal progression, modern temples, baptism for the dead, and the Latter-day Saint health code. As this part of the book unfolds, Beshears works through what amounts to a compare/contrast style of explanation, especially in those beliefs in the "Key Doctrines" subheading.

Finally, part five, "Approaching Mormonism," is Beshear's discussion of and preferred for talking to Latter-day Saints. Except for the introductory part on the why and how of studying Latter-day Saints, this is the shortest of the five parts. He begins by discussing concerns Latter-day Saints have about Christianity, moves to whether Christians should pray about the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon, and ends with a two-part discussion about dialogue between Christians and Latter-day Saints.

Having studied The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at the undergraduate, graduate, doctoral, and post-doctoral levels for 30 years; having worked to share the message of Christ personally with Latter-day Saints throughout the same time period; having trained others to do the same; and having lived in Utah as a full-time Christian missionary for six years, I am a self-professed Mormon nerd. Anytime a new book or article is published in Mormon studies, whether from a Mormon or non-Mormon perspective, I read it. So, when I heard of Beshears's work I was intrigued to read it (and maybe more so than others because we are both Ph.D. graduates of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary with major doctoral professors in common).

Before embarking on a critical interaction of the book, it is important to know of divergent Christian paths when it comes to the study of and interaction with Latter-day Saints. In his excellent 2025 Ph.D. dissertation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Benjamin Sutton catalogs those approaches and summarizes them into two categories, counter-cult and relational, and then proposes his own approach, what he terms "gospel-centric." I wholeheartedly agree with Sutton's gospel-centric methodology and could not disagree more with the relational approach. Nonetheless Beshears stands firmly and unquestionably in the relational category.

Though there are positives throughout the book, like the succinct summaries of Latter-day Saint history, explanations of events in Joseph Smith's life, and basic outlines of Latter-day Saint beliefs, the negatives far outweigh the positives such that this book should not be recommended to any reader who does not have a strong understanding of both Latter-day Saint studies and historic, orthodox, evangelical Christianity

because one could easily be led to believe that Latter-day Saints are Christians, just not traditional ones. Unfortunately, this line of thought emerges as early as the second sentence of the Introduction when the phrase "traditional Christian" is first found. Although seemingly innocuous at first glance, within Latter-day Saint studies this phrase is often used to compare "traditional Christians" with "Latter-day Saint Christians." To be fair, Beshears never uses "Latter-day Saint Christians," but the phrase "traditional Christians" assumes there are other types of Christians in the world, and with 300+ pages of information on Latter-day Saints to follow without information to the contrary being presented, the inference is easily drawn. Indeed, even the final part of the book in which Beshears offers his instruction to "traditional Christians" as they interact with Latter-day Saints, nowhere is explicit gospel proclamation said to be needed because Latter-day Saints are not Christians. Rather, dialogue for mutual understanding is the proposed route forward.

Moreover, the tone of the book tends more toward an apologetic for accepting Latter-day Saints into the Christian world rather than an explanation of Latter-day Saint beliefs with the goal of informed gospel proclamation in mind. For example, Beshears argues Joseph Smith's claims are not accepted by Christians because of how he went about asserting his claims rather than the information within the claims themselves (52). Similarly, in a question about Latter-day Saint theology proper, Beshears's first sentence is, "Traditional Christians and Latter-day Saints share many of the same convictions about God" (171). This statement is misleading at best. While similar terms are used by Christians and Latter-day Saints about the nature of deity, there is a fundamental, unbridgeable divide between the God of Christianity and the deity of Latter-day Saints. The divide is indeed so wide between the two faith traditions simply on the nature of deity that the two stand fundamentally opposed. In perhaps the worst example, Latter-day Saint theology is said to be heterodox (174) rather than heretical. Heterodoxy is not conforming with accepted orthodoxy whereas heresy stands opposed to orthodoxy. Put simply, Latter-day Saint theology is not heterodox, it is heresy. It is opposed to Christian orthodoxy. Joseph Smith himself made the same claim about Christianity. He claims Christ told him, "those professors were all corrupt; that: 'they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men'" (Joseph Smith – History 1:19).

Christians are commanded to share the gospel with all unbelievers, not dialogue with them for mutual understanding. While it is true that we must be loving in our gospel presentations, we cannot use the Great Commandment to override the Great Commission. When we forsake the explicit Great Commission, we have lost our way.

Travis S. Kerns, Three Rivers Baptist Association, Taylors, SC.



Gateway Seminary
3210 East Guasti Road
Ontario, California 91761